

## A new Cru, Minervois la Livinière

By [Rosemary George MW](#), 04/03

It was one of those magical days of autumn, all the more appreciated for the grey skies and rain left behind in London. This was the Minervois at its most seductive; the vines were changing colour, with brilliant splashes of red and yellow in the November sunshine, and the pretty little village of La Livinière nestled amongst the vineyards. We were enjoying a fine view and Maurice Piccinini was in full voice, speaking as fluently as ever, despite his advancing years. His subject was one close to his heart, the new cru of La Livinière.

He warmed to his subject, explaining how Minervois - a small appellation in the middle of a vast sea of vin de table - was created as recently as 1985. Within a couple of years, Piccinini and a handful of fellow growers had realised that the appellation was all very well, but that they needed to do more if the full potential of their wonderful terroir was to be achieved. They came up with the idea of a cru; a wine that was even better, with even stricter production criteria.

Maurice explained how people had taken little pride in their wine; many did not bother to declare their appellation, but preferred to work for larger yields of inferior vin de table. They needed motivation, and this is what Piccinini and other like-minded producers set out to achieve. The first discussions took place in 1987, but as bureaucracy moves slowly and the negotiations involved the cumbersome machinery of the INAO, Minervois la Livinière was finally recognized as a cru in 1997.

From our position on a terrace above La Livinière we had a splendid overview of the vineyards, which cover two terraces, a lower and a higher plateau, not just in La Livinière itself, but also the adjoining villages of Azillanet, Siran, Cessero, Félines-Minervois and Azille. The geology is based on the limestone

and clay of the Petit Causse, the cliffs that run at an altitude of about 140 metres at the foot of the Montagne Noir. A precise delimitation of the vineyards has been carried out, with about 2600 hectares qualifying for Minervois la Livinière, although much less is actually sold as cru wine: in 2000 five village cooperatives and 30 producers made wine from just 200 hectares of vineyards. For now the cru represents a tiny part of most producer's output.

The criteria for production of the new cru echo the improvements taking place all over the Midi, with an emphasis on the so-called cépages améliorateurs, or improving grape varieties. Syrah, Mourvèdre and Grenache Noir get the nod, at the expense of Carignan, Cinsaut and Alicante Bouschet. The latter is recognisable from its autumn colours of deep red, but is now allowed only for inferior vins de pays or vin de table.

Carignan still has its protagonists, especially when the vines are 50 or more years old. However as Daniel Domergue of Clos Centeilles observed: "if you can make good wine with

Carignan, consider how much better you can do with something else". He, on the other hand, enthuses about the quality of Cinsaut. His Capitelle de Centeilles is pure Cinsaut and he says: "It must have a low yield, with really ripe grapes, and needs a long cuvaision; nor must you put it in wood, or else it loses its fruit. It is also has the advantage of withstanding drought conditions with the sobriety of a camel crossing the desert without a drop of water!"

Syrah and Mourvèdre must account for a minimum of 40% of the blend in La Livinière, whilst Carignan and Cinsaut must account for no more than 40%. Grenache Noir can make up the balance. You may produce a pure Syrah, but are not allowed to say so the label. Whilst Syrah and Grenache grow stunningly well in the wild hills, Mourvèdre is more problematic, reacting badly to the ravages of the north wind and rarely ripening really well.

However, the essence of Minervois la Livinière, as in so many Midi appellations, is the blend; a marriage of different grape varieties that adds subtle nuance of flavour to the whole. Natural alcohol level must reach a minimum of 12% without enrichment (so no chaptalisation) and maximum yield is a modest 45 hl/ha. Ageing may be in barrel or vat, and unlike basic Minervois, the wine must be bottled at source, so cannot be sent off to a négociant elsewhere in France.

There are strict tasting criteria to be met before a wine may be sold as Minervois la Livinière; not everyone is guaranteed acceptance of their wine. An energetic syndicat for this small cru is headed by Patricia Domergue of Clos

Centeilles. She has just taken over responsibilities, and one senses a firm determination behind her genial front, with great ambitions for her cru. The syndicat is also trying to achieve some sense of cohesion, with a distinctive logo on the capsule. Again not everyone is prepared to accept another blind tasting for this privilege; even amongst a small group of producers, a sense of unity can be difficult to achieve with so many ideas, personalities and opinions.