



Ugni-blanc grapes

LETTER FROM FRANCE / COURRIER DE FRANCE

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Hello Everyone / *Bonjour à tous !*

Come for a wine-tasting picnic with us! How could we resist, especially when we learned that the picnic would be with a group of friends at a vineyard (*un vignoble*) in the *Côtes de Gascogne*? It is always interesting to know where good local wines can be found, and to make the expedition with our French friends was a special attraction. It turns out that the *Domaine de Malartic* extends



invitations each year during the Whitsun (*Pentecôte*) weekend to family groups to bring picnics (*picque-niques*) in order to share 'un moment authentique chez un vigneron' (an authentic time with a winemaker). The *Domaine* provides their wines to accompany the picnic. The *vignerons* in question are the Périssé family who for five generations have operated the *Domaine de Malartic* in *Sarragachies*. The map shows the region of the *Côtes de Gascogne* shaded in green, with the location of the vineyard indicated by the star; it is about an hour and half's drive from our house in *Gerde*.

We were delighted by the attractive 17th century mansion house, and the warm welcome by the *vignerons* Bernard and Danièle Périssé. We found tables already set up in the courtyard, with a bar along one side, and displays of local delicacies. The latter included a demonstration by Isabelle of *croustades* – wonderful fruit tarts with crispy, light-as-a-feather pastry. We were amazed when Isabelle prepared the pastry in front of us. It eventually completely covered the table top!



A walking tour of the vineyards led by Bernard was promised, but before we set off, we learned a bit of the background of *Domaine de Malartic*. It has been in the Périssé family since 1900, and was initially centred on the production of *Armagnac*, the most ancient *eau-de-vie* in France which is distilled from white wine and aged in oak barrels. They also produce *Floc*, a delicious marriage of fresh grape juice and young *Armagnac*. Since 2001, the

Domaine has added the production of wines (white, rosé and red) of the *Côtes de Gascogne*.

We admired the wine storehouse (*chai*) for the *Armagnac* with its oak barrels (*futs*) situated near to the mansion house. Possibly less romantic, but VERY impressive was the new *chai* with its enormous stainless steel vats (*cuves*). There is a third *chai* in the process of being constructed. It seems that we are not alone in loving their wine!



A group of about 30 of us then set off for a walk of around two km to explore some of the vineyards. This is a gently hilly countryside dominating the *Adour* River (yes the same one which passes *Gerde*), so there were a few braes to climb and slopes



to descend. We paused initially to visit a charming small church which had been built in the same period as the *Domaine*. You can see it at the end of the rows of vines in this photo. We were really fortunate to have the proprietor himself, Bernard, to lead the tour. He was a font of knowledge about the different varieties of grapes (*cépages*) and the characteristics of the soil (*terroir*), and encouraged lively discussions. Wine and *Armagnac* are something about which French people feel quite passionate!

We learned that the decision about which grape to cultivate depends fundamentally on the type of the soil. In the *Domaine de Malartic* and much of the *Côtes de Gascogne*, the *terroir* is a blend of sand and clay (known locally as *boulbènes*). I asked the daughter-in-law of Bernard who was next to me how many different grape varieties are cultivated in their *Domaine*, and was rather taken aback when she got to 12 without even pausing! She finally decided that it must be about 15. The *cépages* include the *Ugni-blanc* (see the photo at the beginning), *Colombard*, *Gros* and *Petit Mansengs*, and *Sauvignon Blanc* for white wines. The *rosé* and red wines are made from *Tannat*, *Cabernet Franc*, *Cabernet Sauvignon* and *Merlot*.



VERY young Tannat grapes



I had noticed that there were a number of small lochans near the vineyards, and had supposed that they were for raising fish (as often is done in France). However, I learned that the water was required for the irrigation of the vines. They are a lovely feature of the countryside. As we neared the mansion house toward the end of our walking tour, we realised that we were quite thirsty and well ready for an *apero*.



We were offered a wonderful choice of all the wines and *Flocs* produced by the *Domaine*. Personally I found the dry white wine (delightfully fresh and fruity) and the *rosé* wine (a lovely bouquet, and well-rounded and fruity) particularly attractive. The red wines were fine too. There was also a lightly fizzy (*moustillant*) wine that smelled of roses, and then left a taste of raspberries in your mouth. Wow! Do have a look at their website for more information about the wines on offer (www.domainedemalartic.com). There is also a very good site about Gascony wines in general (www.vins-cotes-gascogne.fr).

It was then time to migrate to our table (a long one to accommodate our group of 11 people). Each of us had taken contributions to the picnic feast, and it was wonderful. The *Domaine* provided their wines (at no charge) to accompany the food. There was also a taste of *Armagnac* to finish! I truly cannot think of a better way of spending a day among friends in such happy and congenial surroundings! We are already looking forward to the *Pentecôte* weekend in 2016, as I suspect that we may make this an annual event.

Greetings to all / *Amitiés à tous!*

Linda

Together with Douglas, Maddy and Magnus ...

