

Wine FTW

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About wine and me (Louise): what we get up to together. People, projects, places and pictures. Mainly Languedoc, sometimes elsewhere.

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PIWI WINES: WEIRD BUT NOT (YET) WONDERFUL

Some of the most unusual wines I've tasted recently are these, from Languedoc's [Domaine la Colombette](#).



This is how it happened: I knew of François and Vincent Pugibet (they're a father and son team), their maverick ways and a certain willingness to push the envelope (they have championed [lower alcohol wine](#) and [screw caps](#), which is a big deal in France, where tradition reigns supreme). I had also read an article about their experimental plantings and research into fungus-resistant grape varieties with the laudable aim of reducing pesticide use (Domaine la Colombette is officially certified organic, so this objective seems logical enough).

However, I'd never learned more about that subject or tasted wines made from such vines, so when I "met" one of their team on twitter (say "yay!" for social media and hurrah for @LaColombette), I jumped at the offer of a meeting to find out more

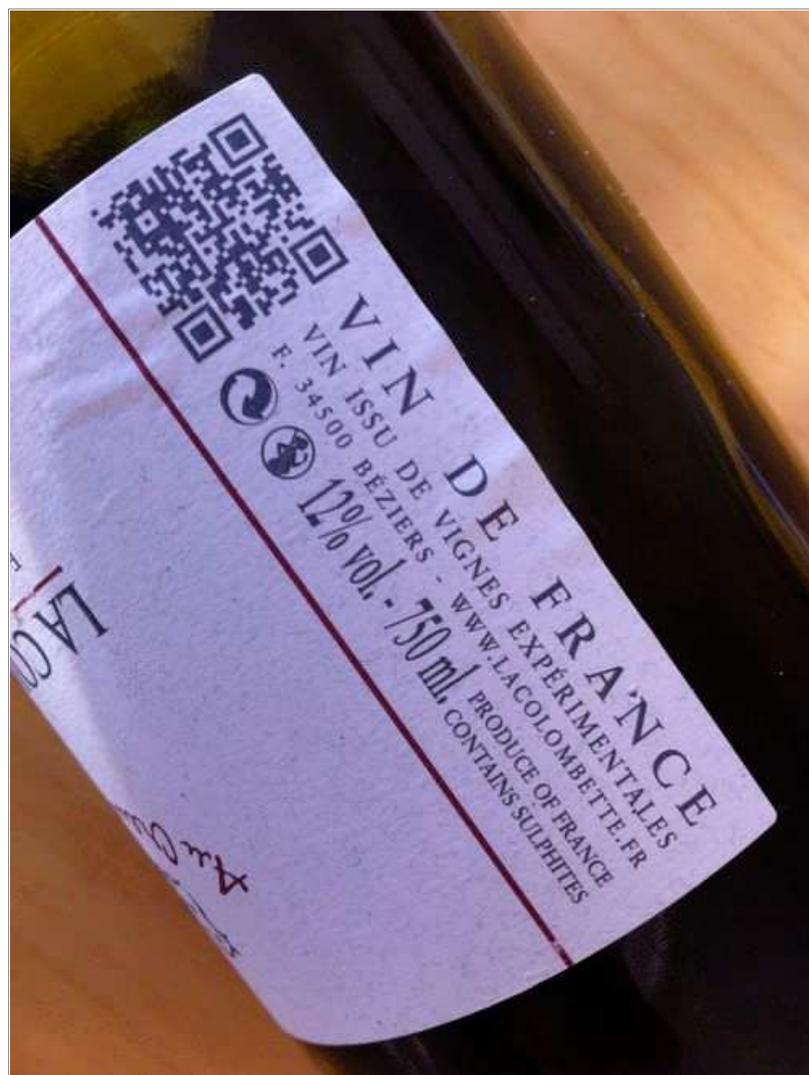
Ne manquez jamais un seul billet! ✕

It turns out that in early 2013 the Pugibets launched their Au Creux du Nid ("at the red and a white wine made from [PIWI vines](#) (PIWI is the short form for the German which means fungus-resistant grape varieties. PIWI is snappier and sounds more ap

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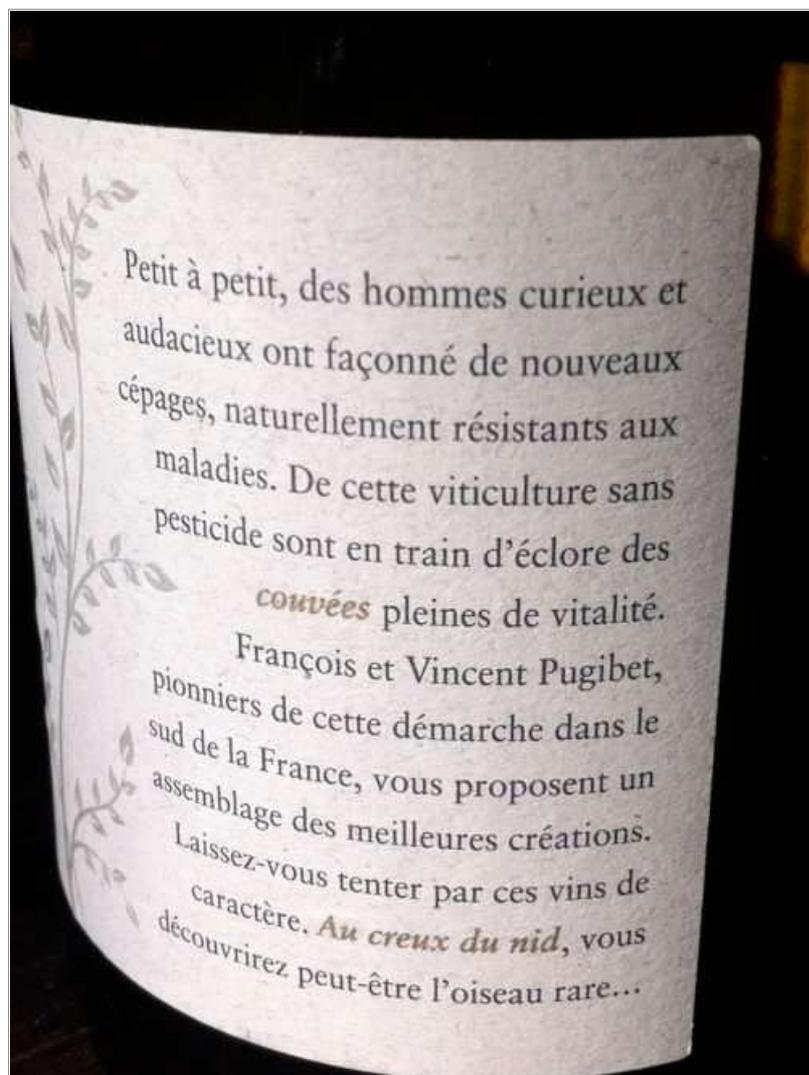
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hectares of said vines (the largest project of its kind in Europe) which they've been farming for five years, and 2012 was their first harvest.



A quick note about PIWIs: if I've understood correctly, they came about by crossing European grape varieties and American fungus-resistant varieties. The result is what is commonly called hybrids; first planted in France from 1880 to 1935, the idea was to combine the American varieties' resistance to diseases and phylloxera with the quality of their European counterparts.

Now, I know only a little about vines generally, and even less about hybrids specifically (forgive me, I'm a PR person, not an ampelographer) but I'm keen to learn, and I'd rather taste the weird/new/different than the same old, same old, any day. Whenever something gets people worked up, I prick up my ears and try to figure out why that is. From reading a few hybrid-related posts from the internet wine community, it seems that PIWIs and their like do indeed raise some issues.



One of the criticisms often made relates to hybrids' organoleptic qualities (ie. they don't make very nice wine, according to their detractors). And in Europe you're not allowed to make AOC wines from hybrids, although the Germans "try to sneak around that rule" (not my words but those of a Facebook commentator) by officially declaring their local hybrids as *Vitis Vinifera* (a point that seemed to annoy a number of people I spoke to). Oh, those Germans.

Unhelpfully, there is a lot of murkiness around the status of hybrids across Europe, with a lack of rock-solid regulations that effectively creates a convenient loophole for those who wish to wiggle through.

So far, so intriguing. Having spent a fair amount of time reading up on the subject and trying to understand it (I struggled with O level biology, so this was a big ask for me), the question I kept coming back to was, I wonder what these wines actually taste like?

To my delight, the Colombette people (who seem sincerely committed to their [PIWI project](#), and I salute their willingness to think outside the box) kindly gave me two bottles, a red and a white.



The labels state that this is Vin de France (it has to be, as the grapes used are not officially accepted for either AOP or IGP wines) and “vin issu de vignes experimentales” - that last bit made me irrationally excited (hey, I was going to be drinking Frankenstein-wine!). For those who like detail, the Au Creux du Nid varieties are Cabernet blanc, Cabernet jura, Cal 6-04 and Cal 1-14, the four most viable varieties of the 28 which make up the project launched by the Pugibets in 2008.

So, that evening as I started supper prep, I twisted off the screw cap and poured myself a generous glass of red. Swirl, sniff. Smelled pleasant enough, although not distinctive or pronounced: a hint of raspberry, perhaps. Swirl, sniff again, slurp. Light bodied, medium acidity, some sharp red fruit, perhaps raspberries or red currants? Reminiscent of a young, cheaply-made Gamay. A bit Beaujolais Nouveau (and no, that’s not meant to be a compliment).

I wasn’t bowled over but I could imagine others drinking it: it was what you’d call call fit for purpose, rather than utterly delicious. I tried it chilled with a slice of saucisson sec which made it more palatable, but a week later, the bottle was still standing, three-quarters full, on the kitchen counter. It had failed the acid test (ie. leave an open bottle of wine in my kitchen: 9 times out of 10, it’s gone in 48 hours). So I gave up and poured it down the sink.



The white was similarly “correcte sans plus” as the French would say (ok but nothing special). The nose was light with hints of citrus and tinned peaches, and it tasted that way too: the canned fruit notes weren’t actually unpleasant per se, and served well-chilled, it was drinkable - like the kind of wine you’d get offered in a run-of-the-mill pub in a provincial UK town. Both wines come in at 12% abv, so if you were inclined to glug them with reckless abandon, you’d get drunk more slowly. I guess that’s a point in their favour. Kind of.

But to be fair, it’s very early days for such a ground-breaking project. Vincent Pugibet started investigating the potential of Swiss and German PIWIs in 2005 when he met some of those pioneering the research, before setting up his own experimentation programme in 2008.

Since 2011 he has been crossing PIWI vines amongst themselves and with varieties such as Grenache, Syrah and Cabernet Sauvignon to see what gives the best results. He is quoted as saying “this is a long-term project, we will need at least ten years to get the plants that meet our objectives,” with the primary criteria being resistance to mildew and oïdium; yield and viti-vinicultural potential come further down the list.

So I’d say... so far, so good. I’ll be keeping my eyes open for more developments on this front, for sure, and again, I applaud thinking outside the box, pushing boundaries and the like. But meanwhile, when I crave pure pleasure, I’m more likely to go the GSM route rather than reach for the PIWI.

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