

With a feel for biodynamics

La Clape is one of France's most historic wine regions, and Château d'Anglès is one of the most prominent producers in the area. Claes Löfgren met the Fabre family, who currently manage and refine the vineyards using biodynamic methods.

Text & photo | Claes Lofgren

Château d'Anglès wines have been a welcome addition to our temporary range in recent years, with one bargain after another. Exciting wines made from unusual grape varieties at affordable prices are truly a wine lover's dream.

The winery has a long history, which since 2002 has been in the hands of the Fabre couple. After a 20-year career as a winemaker at Château Lafite Rothschild in Bordeaux, Eric Fabre wanted to move to the sunshine of southern France. Both Eric and his wife Christine have wine in their blood and knew what they were looking for. It was the Mourvèdre grape that attracted them most. Eric was drawn to this slightly unruly grape with its spicy, warm style and the tannins provided by its thick skin.

Bandol in Provence initially seemed like the obvious choice, but the vineyards there were far too expensive. Languedoc therefore became an alternative, and the Fabre couple settled in Narbonne, where the search for something suitable began.

The historic area around La Clape mountain was the final choice, where Château d'Anglès, with a history dating back to the 1700s, was for sale. In 2002, all the paperwork was finalized, and Eric Fabre began renovating the vineyard and the old castle. They are surrounded by a large, protected natural area that attracts many visitors.

The Mourvèdre grape is king and the green Bourboulenc queen in La Clape, which gives the wines their distinctive character. This is truly historic land; the Greeks were the first to cultivate wine here, but the Roman army, led by Julius Caesar, had Narbonne as its largest city after Rome. They arrived along the historic Via Domitia road in 112 BC and built Narbonne as a port city, as the sea stretched all the way to the coast at that time.

Caesar ordered large-scale wine cultivation to satisfy the thirsty soldiers. They brought grapes with them from the east, including bourboulenc, which is also known as malvasia. The grape is found in Provence and the southern Rhône, but it is in La Clape that it thrives best.

The white AOC La Clape wines must contain at least 40 percent bourboulenc and 20 percent grenache blanc, which is then complemented with marsanne and rousanne in varying degrees. The reds must consist of grenache and one other grape variety. These are mainly Mourvèdre, which was abundant in the vineyard at Château d'Anglès, and Syrah. Eric Fabre was very pleased with his investment.

La Clape has a special place in Languedoc. With its chalky soil and marine sediments, it is an ideal growing place for grapes. The proximity to the sea with its cool winds gives the grapes balance and elegance. The soil is characterized by the fact that the area was an island until 600 years ago when the sea receded. The landscape is dominated by rugged cliffs, including the 214-meter-high Pech-Redon, mixed with garrigue and low conifers. Lagoons with flamingos lie like a string of pearls. For one of the smallest AOCs in Languedoc, with a total of 778 hectares, La Clape has a high reputation, thanks in no small part to the major investments made here by giant producer Gerard Bertrand.

The wines from Château d'Anglès received good reviews and an increasingly broad customer base. A milestone came in 2010 when his son Vianney joined the company. After studying wine in Bordeaux and business school in Paris, he worked for five years in the export department of Champagne Bollinger, traveling around the world. With this experience under his belt, exports for Ch. d'Anglès really took off. The biggest difference was probably the switch to organic farming. His father Eric had already started moving in that direction, but now they were going all in. The transition took a couple of years, and today they are biodynamic farmers with Demeter certification.

Vianney took over as head winemaker in 2017, and his passion for biodynamic methods is very clear. He composts, does all the dynamization for the homeopathic treatments, and proudly

shows off the facility he built himself. The certification also imposes a number of requirements in the wine cellar, where sulfur levels are regulated and only natural yeast is allowed. Some years there are problems with powdery mildew when the neighbors spray like crazy, but they are at a safe distance. At Ch. d'Anglès, they use a combination of herbal teas and a little copper as a defense.

Herbal teas help prevent disease, strengthen the vines, and limit the need for treatments, explains Vianney. Regenerative farming methods are now also part of the toolbox, which means no plowing, something Vianney sees as particularly important. Instead, cover crops are sown between the rows and a flock of sheep grazes in the vineyard. The advantage is that the soil does not dry out and moisture reaches the roots. There is less erosion and greenhouse gases remain in the soil.

"Many people think the vineyard looks overgrown," says Vianney, 'but we need to change people's perception that a 'clean' vineyard is a good vineyard!

All this costs money, in addition to all the extra work, so it's important to get a decent price for the 200,000 bottles they produce.

They expanded their acreage by 10 hectares a few years ago when they gained access to a protected area a little higher up in the hills. The conditions here are slightly different, with the vines surrounded by forest and the land at a slightly higher altitude. There is also an underground watercourse that makes the soil fertile. It's a little difficult to work on as it's located in the middle of a protected national park with some roads closed off, but Vianney thinks it's well worth the effort.

He also has a method for analyzing the leaves and sap of the vines. He believes this provides more information than analyzing the soil. The increasing risk of drought has led them to invest in an irrigation system that can be used in emergencies. A natural additive is an invention of their own, which Vianney mixes himself and adds via the system.

The biodynamic teas are sprayed as usual in small doses.

Sweden is a good market for Château d'Anglès. For a couple of years now, their Grand Vin has been a regular feature on the temporary range, and now it looks like we will be able to try their Classique Rouge Methode Naturell without added sulfur. We will also be able to get to know both the rosé and the white wines better, which we are looking forward to.

When I check in with Vianney about this year's harvest, he sounds very pleased. A cold spring hindered flowering somewhat, so the volume is a little lower than normal, but a warm summer that was not too hot produced very good grapes. As they only use natural yeast, fermentation was a little slow at times. They were able to regulate this with a pied de cuve, a method where you start the natural fermentation in certain tanks and then share it with those that ferment slowly.

A personal reflection is how Château d'Anglès represents the new France. It combines old traditions with modern innovation, resulting in brilliant wines that are accessible to everyone. Wine should cost money, but it shouldn't be expensive. Languedoc has historically been an inexhaustible source of simple and inexpensive wines, mostly cobbled together in large cooperatives. There have been exceptions, but they have been hard to find and usually didn't make it to the cold Nordic countries. Here we see a producer who favors us wine lovers with normal wallets.

Captions

Vianney Fabre in the middle of the vineyard where he likes to use biodynamic methods.

1. The proximity to the sea provides cool winds that cool the grapes.
2. The main building where Eric and Christine Fabre live.
3. Mourvèdre is the Fabre family's favorite grape.
4. New labels have adorned the bottles for a few years now.

1. The main building is surrounded by vineyards and the rolling hills leading up to La Clape mountain.
2. Vianney built the facility where he makes the biodynamic preparations himself.
3. The old concrete tanks have been renovated and are still in use.