

Castelas Olivery, Provence – Gayle Sheridan



Background

Lionel and I visited Provence in August as we had never been there but were attracted by the Peter Mayle stories, etc about the olive growing region. On one of our excursions we visited the Castelas Olivery in the Vallée des Baux de Provence at the foot of the Alpilles hill range, and the co-owner, Catherine Hugues, generously took us on a tour and was happy to answer our (many) questions.

Castelas falls under the ***appellation d'origine contrôlée (AOC)***, which translates as "controlled designation of origin". This is the French certification granted to certain French geographical indications for wines, cheeses, butters, and other agricultural products based on the concept of terroir. The origins of AOC date back to the 15th century, it guarantees that all AOC products will hold to a rigorous set of clearly defined standards (which are tested annually). The AOC products are produced in a consistent and traditional manner with ingredients from specifically classified producers in designated geographical areas.

History



One tree - four stems

The Castelas olive grove has been established around 300 years but in 1956 all of the trees were frosted and died. They were cut off at the base and re-grew around 4 stems each. These were unable to be harvested significantly for 10 years. Catherine mentioned the difficulty in harvesting the trees because of this structure. The Castelas or castle olivery was built by Catherine and her husband Jean-Benoît in 2002, based on a winery structure. We were impressed with the compact but very efficient layout.

Olive Grove



The olive grove comprises 45 hectares with typical planting of 6 x 4 metres. We calculated this to be approx 20,000 trees. Because of the wind (La Mistral) the trees are kept low, no more than 3 metres in height and pruned heavily to keep them compact. The main varieties planted are Grossane, Aglandau, Salonenque and Verdale. Provence requires that the number of trees must be maintained as per the original establishment. This means only replacement plantings, which are taken as 1 metre branches from existing trees. We noted there were NO birds.

Harvesting

Harvest is carried out in middle of October to mid December latest because of the cold weather and threat of frost. We saw a video of harvest where the workers were in short sleeves. Harvest is by mechanical tree shaker, bearing in mind that each tree effectively has four trunks, making this time consuming. The olives are collected on nets on the ground and emptied into 300kg pallets which are pressed within 6 hours. Castelas invested in a leaf removing machine and no attempt is made to remove leaves, etc in the field because of the efficiency of the machine. The olives then go into a washer and on to the crusher. The press is a Peralisi with two malaxers and two centrifuges. Each batch is tested for free fatty acid and also undergoes sensory assessment to ensure they meet the AOC characteristics for the region. The waste is mixed with additives to create compost, which is used back out in the olive grove.



Leaf Removal Machine



Catherine Hugues

Production

Castelas produces 60-70,000 litres per annum with an average yield of 20%. We calculated that at 3 litres per tree, thus equated to 15kg per tree. There are all styles of packaging from 200, 500, 750 mL and 1 litre bottles and cans to 3 litre bag in box.

We tasted their three main varieties. The standard 'green label' tasted of almond and artichoke with peppery finish whilst the organic was milder and less peppery. The third was the Fruité Noir, where the fruit is left for several days until it starts to ferment. This is seen as a local specialty. There was a range of flavoured oils and Castelas also has table olives and cosmetics made for resale. Their shop also stocks a special range of their own pottery dishes and oil jars with pourers.

Sales



The grove shop accounts for a lot of sales with repeat business from visitors from other areas of France and Europe. They have website sales of all products. Castelas also has sales directly into supermarkets in major cities in France. Pricing in the shop was from 15 euro's for 500 mL to 50 euro's for 3 litres. This was consistent with other local oil we saw for sale in the villages. Whilst in Paris we visited several small supermarkets and noted the dominance of cheap Spanish oils, which was disappointing. We also visited a market where there was a stall selling Koroneiki oil from Greece.

Pictured above is our Tour Guide on the left in the Castelas shop. She was in Christchurch in the February 2011 earthquake, in the shower and the house collapsed around her trapping her in the bathroom!

Conclusions

The issues for olive growers in France are the same as for New Zealand – weather, crop load, sales channels and the competition from cheap imports. When eating out we certainly could distinguish when quality local oil was used compared to inferior products.

Some of the statistics we are quoted on European crop loads in New Zealand are certainly overstated (e.g. 30 kg per tree) when looking at Provence. If only New Zealand could get to 15kg consistently per tree, that would be a great position.

Of course we brought some Provence EVOOs, both for ourselves and the Olives New Zealand Tasting Course in September. Lovingly and protectively wrapped in my suitcase, I thought it was going to be confiscated by Customs in Beijing! After x-raying my bag the official said to Lionel “You are hiding something in this bag?” He wanted to see the oil pouring can we had brought plus the cans of oil, and was most suspicious about the latter. Took quite a bit of gesturing, given his limited English and our total lack of Chinese, to get the message across it was a food item!

Provence was a great experience and I would recommend it as a great place to visit.