

FITOU

In order for the wheel to turn, for life to be lived, impurities are needed, and the impurities of impurities in the soil, too, as is known, if it is to be fertile. Dissension, diversity, the grain of salt and mustard are needed...

DOMAINE DE ROUDENE, BERNADETTE ET JEAN-PIERRE FAIXO, Fitou

In Occitan "fita" means border or frontier and Fitou sat on the border of France and Catalonia. The climate is Mediterranean with long hot summers and mild winters. The dry winds of the Pyrenees, like the Tramontana, help to make this region one of the driest in France. This is a land of magically shaped mountains, ravines, tablelands where shrubs scented with thyme and lavender grow, and the dizzy medieval citadels preside over an extraordinary countryside. Fitou, like other appellations, has a wonderful variety of landscapes, climbing from the sea and lagoons to the white schistous escarpments and the limestone plug of Mont Tauch. The wines show potential, although have yet to garner the critical plaudits of Minervois and Corbières, for example. Gnarled Carignan and wizened Grenache rule the cépage roost here, with Syrah and a tad of Mourvèdre adding spike and length to the typical blend. Syrah is gaining ground in the hills; it contributes a flowery note with hints of red fruits and juniper. The AOC area includes wines from selected parcels of the communes Fitou, Cascatel, Caves-de-Treilles, La Palme, Leucate, Paziols, Treilles, Tuchan en Villeneuve-des-Corbières.

Domaine de Roudène, located in the pretty village of Paziols, is divided into small parcels. Jean-Pierre is trying to rationalise the estate by inducing other growers to exchange bits of land for his own, but as Paul Strang writes: "in a country where the ownership of a particular plot has a symbolic importance beyond the quality of the purpose to which it is put, progress is slow".

Two superb wines from this consistent estate. The baby wine is from grapes grown on the terraces of argilo-calcaire and is a blend of Carignan (50%), Grenache (30%) and Syrah (20%). Everything is done traditionally; harvest is by hand when grapes have reached full phenolic maturity whilst a long cuvaison of twenty-one days and pigeage helps to extract all the aromatic components. The wine is bright and purple with blueish tints, with a fine complex nose of confit fruits, red and black berries suffused with peppery spices and notes of bay and clove. The feel of the wine in the mouth is fresh and lively and the tannins are fine and supple. The premier wine is from Grenache (40%), Carignan (30%) and Syrah (30%) grown on schistous terroir. Yields are low here (30hl/ha) and the richness of the wine can easily support 12 months ageing in new French barriques. And for food? Terrine of wild hare, persillade of cepes, boned baked shoulder of lamb, saltimbocca etc.

2005 FITOU, CUVÉE JEAN DE PILA

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In Praise of Limestone – WH Auden

... Mark these rounded slopes
With their surface fragrance of thyme and beneath
A secret system of caves and conduits
That spurt everywhere with a chuckle
Each filling a private pool for its fish and carving
Its own little ravine whose cliffs entertain
The butterfly and lizard...