



Cahors on the up

The home of malbec is being transformed as the robust 'black wines' are given a more refined edge

Some sites seem so well suited to viticulture, it is as if God himself had planted vines there. It was this thought that sprang to mind as I stood on the remote sun-baked plateau that surrounds Château de Haute-Serre, in the far south-east of the Cahors *appellation*. As far from the banks of the River Lot as it is possible to be in Cahors, at an altitude of 300 metres, these vineyards are also its highest, strewn with limestone boulders, through which the indigenous malbec vines push skyward.

In the Middle Ages, the heyday of the Cahors vineyards, the chateau was owned by the Abbey of Lagarde Dieu, which farmed 1,000 hectares of vineyards. Today, 60 hectares of mostly malbec vines are planted on the best sites, around which saffron crocuses grow in winter. A thousand oak trees have been planted to encourage the growth of the black truffles for which the nearby village of Lalbenque is renowned. The chateau itself is built from local limestone: elegant in its solidity and beautifully restored; this is the residence of *vignerons* Bertrand and Christine Vigouroux.

In 2008, the family opened a '*bistronomique*' restaurant, La Table de Haute-Serre, within the cellar, and this

year it earned the Michelin Guide's *Bib Gourmand* for good-value fine dining. It was here that I met Bertrand to learn more about the estate. "Haute-Serre always makes the silkiest of wines," he explained, noting my appreciation for the deeply coloured red that filled my glass. "It's the complex clay limestone soils combined with the altitude that give the wines their elegance."

Bertrand talks passionately about the history of Cahors wines. Planted by the Romans in ancient Gaul, the vineyards expanded rapidly from the 12th century, with the marriage of Eleanor of Aquitaine to Henry Plantagenet. Trade with England boomed, reaching its peak in 1310 when half of all wine shipped from the port of Bordeaux was Cahors – nicknamed 'black wine', after its deep colour.

Despite the emerging success of the Bordeaux vineyard, and *bordelais* efforts to impose heavy taxes on wines carried downstream to the port, Cahors continued to prosper. 'Black wine' was used to enrich the lighter wines of



Dominic Rippon has many years' experience in the wine trade, both in the UK and France, and now runs the wine merchant business Strictly Wine.

Bordeaux, as its robust structure helped the blends to withstand long sea voyages in barrel.

Cahors flourished until the late 19th century, when the phylloxera vine epidemic wiped out the majority of its vineyards. A few years later, Germain Vigouroux set up a wine merchant business in Cahors, selling what remained of the region's production to local restaurants. In 1971, 100 years after the arrival of phylloxera, Vigouroux's grandson Georges bought and began to replant the vineyards at Château de Haute-Serre, handing the reins to his son

Bertrand 20 years later.

Until the 1990s, Bertrand told me, Cahors had a reputation for producing rather rustic wines: 90 per cent were sold in France and 90 per cent of exports went to Canada – thanks in large part to Georges' efforts in developing this market. Following in his father's restless footsteps, Bertrand travelled to Argentina in the early 2000s, to learn from winemakers in the malbec grape's adopted New World heartland. He returned full of ideas; convinced that,

PHOTOGRAPHS: DOMINIC RIPPON



LEFT: Château de Mercuès in the Cahors appellation; **ABOVE:** The Haute-Serre domaine; **RIGHT:** Vigneron Bertrand Vigouroux in the Table de Haute-Serre restaurant



in order to have a bright future in a global market, Cahors malbec needed to develop more refined flavours.

After lunch, I took the road north towards the town of Cahors, to discover the jewel in the crown of the Vigouroux holdings: Château de Mercuès. The turreted chateau perches high above the River Lot, showing off its restored medieval grandeur. This was the residence of the powerful bishops of Cahors until the early 20th century, when the church was separated from the French state, and the chateau became the latter's property. Georges Vigouroux bought the property in 1983, transforming it into a luxury hotel and restaurant, and restoring its vineyards.

Each bedroom is decorated in keeping with a different era to which the chateau has borne witness. My Louis XIV suite

is nestled at the base of one of the four turrets, with windows opening high above the river, offering breathtaking views.

I joined estate director Yann Potet in the Michelin-starred restaurant for a six-course dinner based around local Lalbenque black truffles. Each course was accompanied by a different wine from Château de Mercuès – the equals of their sister chateau in quality, with power in reserve where the latter's wines are more often defined by their finesse.

We began with the 1988 vintage: a Cahors made in what Yann described as 'the old style' from earlier picked grapes that received no softening 'malolactic' fermentation. It would have been a difficult wine to drink in its youth, but was delicious after nearly 30 years in bottle. The 2000 provided contrast: a richer, spicy, more voluptuous wine.

The 2010 vintage of the estate's malbec 6666 blend was a surprisingly fresh foil for roasted sweetbreads with truffle purée, but the pièce de résistance came in the top blend, 'Icône W.O.W.' 2011. Meticulously crafted, this wine comes from hyper-dense malbec plantings on the terraces above Cahors, from which only the best bunches are hand-harvested.

The result combines freshness and delicacy with all the brooding muscle and dark fruits of which the finest malbec is capable. Proof, if any were needed, that Cahors is able to produce not simply France's best malbec, but among the finest red wines in the world. 🍷

- Discover the Vigouroux family estates: g-vigouroux.fr
- Visit Cahors: tourisme-cahors.fr/

6 of the best wines from Châteaux de Mercuès and de Haute-Serre

Château de Haute-Serre 'Albesco' Chardonnay, IGP Pays du Lot

A genuine surprise, this wine shows that the area surrounding Cahors can produce delicious white wines, as well as reds.

A barrel-fermented explosion of minerals and ripe apple fruit, 'Albesco' lays down a challenge to whites from southern Burgundy. €16.

Château de Mercuès Cahors 'Grand Vin Seigneur'

Malbec is blended with a little merlot, giving an impressively

structured wine with fresh red fruits, spice and vanilla flavours. A classy, oak-aged bottle that can be drunk young; a good value insight into the estate's prestige range. From €15.50.

Château de Haute-Serre Cahors 'Géron Dadine'

This is my own *coup de coeur*. Made only from malbec and aged for 18 months in oak, it shows dark fruit and beguiling spice aromas. The palate is beautifully sappy, with grainy tannins: a perfect match for *entrecôte charolais*. €30.

Château de Mercuès Cahors 'Malbec 6666'

Vines are planted with an unusually high density – 6,666 plants per hectare – increasing the wine's concentration and complexity of flavour. Aromas are of blackberry, dark chocolate and liquorice; reflected in soft plummy flavours and a svelte mouth feel. From €29.

Château de Mercuès Cahors 'Icône W.O.W.'

This emblematic *cuvée* is made without compromise; the

result of rigorous bunch selection within the best parcels of vines. Oak-aged for two years before bottling, it is supremely fresh and velvety, with the ability to age for decades. From €120.

Château de Haute-Serre Cahors 'Icône W.O.W.'

No less powerful or ageworthy than the similarly named wine from Château de Mercuès, this blend throws the characteristic Haute-Serre elegance into the mix, offering ripe black fruits and a long, spicy aftertaste. Price on application.