



FORGING HIS own path

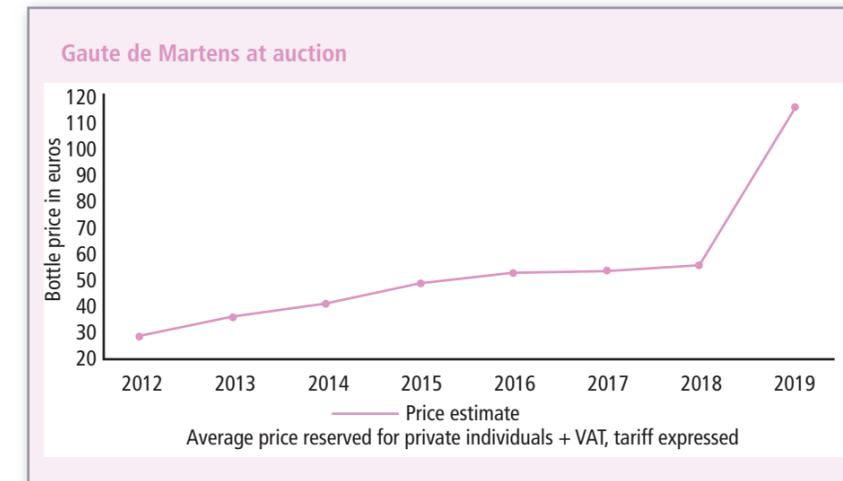
A star has emerged in the Southern Rhône. The critically acclaimed Gourt de Mautens estate has burst on the scene, garnering attention for the terroirs of Rasteau, and has prices to match the top names of Châteauneuf-du-Pape

THERE IS something magical about listening to Jérôme Bressy speak about his wines. He exudes an infectious enthusiasm, even over the phone. It's probably no surprise, then, that his estate has attracted a cult following in recent years. The story of Gourt de Mautens began in much the same way as many others in the Rasteau region of the Rhône. For decades, the Bressy family would sell their grapes to the local co-operative. In 1989, out of concern for grape quality, his father converted the domaine to organic

farming. Jérôme Bressy subsequently left the co-operative and in 1996, at only 23 years of age, and produced his first vintage in an old converted hanger on the family's property.

Fast-forward another 23 years, and Gourt de Mautens is Rasteau's top producer, in a region with a growing number of movers and shakers. Yet for many years, the Southern Rhône was known solely for Châteauneuf-du-Pape and rustic Côtes-du-Rhône produced by the bucketload. This began to change in

1971, when the village Gigondas was elevated to 'cru' status. Other villages followed, Rasteau being granted AOP status as late as 2010. South-east of the Vaucluse, and basking in the Mediterranean sun, the vineyards of Rasteau cover a succession of south-facing canyons with clay soils. Jérôme Bressy's estate now spans 15 hectares, a combination of parcels planted on terraces, hillsides, banks and plateaux. Gourt means "a place where water flows", and Mautens a "storm or bad



weather"; here, the water flows when there is a storm, so even in very dry years, roots have access to moisture retained in the subsoils. These vines are between 40 and 100 years old, and given Bressy's integrated approach to viticulture, are surrounded by olive and fruit trees. He is fervent in his belief of the benefits of diversity: a wide range of grapes are 'co-planted', including many native varieties that have all but disappeared from the region. When a vine is replaced, massal selections of varieties are used.

This winemaker is extreme in his perfectionism, and over the years has ceaselessly fine-tuned his work in vineyard and cellar. The vines were converted to goblet training in 2007, which naturally gives incredibly low yields, producing loose bunches of thick-skinned fruit that are less susceptible to disease. Along with Emmanuel Reynaud of Château Rayas, he is the last in the region to harvest – last year the domaine finished harvesting on 4 November – which brings a great deal of risk.

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According to Bressy, this is only possible thanks to the mammoth work carried out beforehand in the vineyard, and such late harvesting confers a new dimension to the grapes. The varieties are sorted three times before entering the cellar. Spontaneous fermentations can last up to a year, and the wines are matured for years in large old barrels. Bressy makes zero additions to the juice except a little sulphur after malolactic fermentation and before bottling.

DRIVING FORCE

This vigneron's fastidious work and unrelenting quest to produce the "greatest fine wine possible" has acted as a significant driving force for the village of Rasteau and its terroirs, yet somewhat ironically, since 2010, he hasn't had the right to release his wines with this appellation. The *cahier des charges* for this new AOP stipulates that no more than 15% of the blend can be made up of indigenous, 'lesser' varieties, whereas Bressy's red contains around 40%. Rather than forcing his wines to conform, he relabeled his expressions as IGP Vaucluse. Despite their declassification, wine enthusiasts are increasingly clamouring to get a taste of this overachiever. The wines of Gourt de Mautens are exemplars of purity, complexity and finesse - underpinned by their sense of place - infused with the region's signature spicy notes, and

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redolent of the garrigue. These archetypal southern wines can easily – and in Jérôme's view, absolutely should – be cellared for around 20 years.

Much of the tiny production is destined to Europe's best restaurants, and iDealwine was thrilled to receive an allocation earlier this year, which all but flew off the shelves. At auction, it's a similar story. The hammer price on many vintages has doubled in the space of a few years, particularly mature vintages. In recent months, the 2000 vintage has doubled its price estimate at auction, reaching €73 (£64). The 2007 – a year that has been praised to the heavens – has, in 2019, constantly sold for over €100, doubling in value in two years. Slowly but surely, prices are ballooning. This 'insider's' wine of the Southern Rhône belongs to a category of risk-takers whose production transcends its appellation, making a name for the hitherto less celebrated terroirs of France.