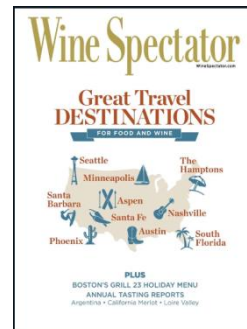


## Mastering Drought Resilience



The gnarled old Grenache vines in southern France's Roussillon region have a camellike ability to adapt to their harsh, dry climate. They don't need much water to thrive. Annual rainfall can be as low as 15 or 16 inches, making it one of the world's driest wine regions.

But the 2023 growing season was extreme. Record-breaking drought impacted much of France. Roussillon, a rugged, rocky stretch of land on the border of Spain between the Pyrenees and the Corbières mountains, received less than 8 inches of rain—that's less than one-third of normal. Some young vines, which require more water and also lack the deep root systems to access underground water stores, died. Even sturdier older vines fought to survive.

For Jean-Marc Lafage, the 2023 harvest was a litmus test for his new way of farming, practices he adopted to prepare his vines for just this sort of catastrophe. Owner of Domaine Lafage and Château Saint-Roch, Lafage is both old guard and new. His ancestors have grown grapes in these soils since 1791, and he grew up in the tiny village of Maury. He left to travel the world, making wine in California and throughout the Southern Hemisphere, before returning with his wife, Eliane, to reclaim the family vineyard. The modern style of wine he aims for and the unconventional way he farms places him firmly in the progressive camp. And as demand for Roussillon's traditional sweet wines—Rivesaltes, Banyuls and Maury—has waned, he has been a driver of the transition to dry red and white table wine that is breathing new life into the region. He began with organic methods, but in recent years has shifted to regenerative agriculture, a philosophy that focuses on improving soil health, namely through permanent cover crops between vine rows. In 2021, he began adding biochar (more on that later) which also helps the soils and vines hold water.

When I met with Lafage last April, he was encouraged by the health of his vines and how they were withstanding the drought. But it was the recent 2023 harvest—which Lafage began on Aug. 2, the earliest in France—that proved the effectiveness of his new approach. While drought reduced volumes as much as 70% for some Roussillon growers, Lafage lost only a quarter of his crop. And his berries were much larger than the smaller, shriveled



*Has Jean-Marc Lafage cracked the code on how to craft wine in France's drought-stricken Roussillon?*

grapes of many neighboring vineyards.

"Because we have so few vines per hectare in Roussillon, we don't need that much water," he explains. "We just need to capture and manage what we get." The real game-changer this year, he's convinced, was the biochar. A charcoal-like organic material made from forest and agriculture waste, biochar enriches the soil by decreasing acidity and retaining nitrogen. But perhaps most importantly for growers like Lafage is its role in retaining water.

Lafage started biochar trials in 2021 and saw how it stimulated vine and root vigor in drought conditions. It also soaks up rain water, which is later absorbed by the vines. He believes biochar could be a valuable tool for vignerons across the globe. Even the French government has joined the biochar project, reports Lafage.

In spite of labor-intensive farming and famously low yields, Roussillon offers phenomenal value. Consider for example the Domaine Lafage Côtes Catalanes Narassa 2020, a hedonistic blend of Grenache and Syrah with

loads of ripe fruit and earth (90 points, \$20). And the Tessellae Old Vines 2021, a smoky, full-throated Grenache-Syrah-Mourvèdre (90, \$17). Lafage's whites offer a lot of freshness, such as the saline-infused Centenaire Vieilles Vignes 2022, a Roussanne, Grenache (Gris and Blanc) blend (89, \$18).

Affordable land is luring an increasing number of younger winemakers here. Lafage has become somewhat of a leader and mentor to many newcomers. He shares the results of his vineyard trials and biodiversity in collaboration with the University of Montpellier. "With so much less water, we think maybe the DNA of our vines is adapting, but it is critical to have the right clone planted in the right place—this is a big part of regenerative."

Existential crises abound in wine regions everywhere as growers grapple with climate change. Some are swapping traditional varieties for more heat-tolerant ones. Others are pioneering higher elevation subzones. A number are lobbying regulatory bodies to permit irrigation. Lafage is proving what is possible by harnessing natural forces: "In Roussillon we have magnificent terroirs, but we need a viticulture that cultivates water. Living soils will give us wines that speak better than us of our place."

Senior editor Kristen Bieler has been with Wine Spectator since 2021.