AZILLANET

Les Mourels

Equipment : strong shoes, water, a hat.

Start at the Winery

What impact does the *terroir* - the local area and soil - have on wine ? What impact does vine-growing have on land ?

Are you eager to find out what lies behind a bottle of Azillanet wine ?

The purpose of this itinerary is to provide you with data helping you to understand Azillanet's vineyards and heritage.

We suggest that you study the village's *terroir*, from its geological history to present-day vine-growing practices, and gauge the impact of human activities on the landscape.

So come and discover part of the village's heritage, a fine illustration of a different way of life.

Improvements in Farming (1)

As soon as you leave the village and walk along beside walls of cultivated terraces, you can gain some idea of the scale of the work done by generations of inhabitants to develop and adapt the land, the better to farm it in sustainable and efficient ways.

The various farming improvements made should be seen as a system where the safeguarding of each factor is reliant on the conservation of all the others.

Involving tracks, terraces, and run-off systems, these developments are the

complex and fragile outcome of experience and hard work.

To the right of the road, 50 meters before the walled garden, look at this depression in front of the trees.

It is one of many rainwater run-off networks that punctuate the circuit. This is a basin receiving ditch water from parcels on the other side of the road.

Through a buried pipe, it feeds the walled garden's well lower down. You will notice farming improvements everywhere, because, up until 1960, 90 % of the village land was used for agriculture and livestock.

At the crossroads just after the garden, bear left and walk along the vines, then through the pine wood.

Once on the road, take a detour to the left as far as the cross.

Vines (2)

A whole host of grape varieties are used for wine-making.

To your left you have a parcel of Syrah (an ameliorative red variety), spur pruned and called "Cordon de Royat".

To your right, a trellised vine (on wires), long cane pruned, called "Guyot", and further up on the right a vine planted with Carignan, pruned in the old "Gobelet" manner.

These vines grow in poor ground, naturally so, but further impoverished by decades of intensive farming.

This situation has been aggravated by bare (weed-free) soil and a sizeable input of chemical fertilizer.

Marl has a natural tendency to clod and form a surface crust, preventing water from trickling downward - so, as it runs off, it erodes the soil.

Availability of water is also of paramount importance for wine quality.

In order to thrive in this dry, semi-arid climate, the vine must thrust its roots deep down, seeking the humidity that will keep it alive.

Why the different ways of pruning ?

It depends essentially on how the wine grower wishes to label his product (AOP Minervois, Minervois La Livinière, Vin de Pays) : short pruning to limit yields and encourage quality ; long to produce more.

But pruning will also vary according to the nature of the soil and the grape variety chosen.

The wine-grower's influence involves other farming practices as well - the way the ground is worked (fertilizer input, keeping grass between rows…) and "green" operations (controlling foliage and grape quantities).

He will try to distribute the bunches nicely on each plant, with good exposure to the sun (for better aeration and ripening).

In this way, the wine-grower with his sights set on quality wines combines several techniques to create balanced vines.

The Rain Cross (3)

"Those who weep as they sow, sing as they reap". The words carved in stone give us an idea of how farming used to be.

This saying attests to a period when vines were not ubiquitous, a time of mixed faming nowadays almost vanished, mainly because of the arid local climate.

In bygone days processions wound their way to this cross, to bring on rain.

Now go back the way you came, pass the Croses stream, and take the road to the left. As you do, stop and look at what is underfoot.

Geology (4)

You are now in the "Mourels" area, stretching northwest to the Oupia hills. What is a *Mourel* ?

It is an elongated hill formed by erosion.

This area therefore boasts a series of uncultivated rocky ridges and marly depressions where vines grow.

This earth is a marl ; the colour variations have to do with the degree of oxidized iron it contains - the more it does, the darker the hue.

And take a closer look at the rock beneath your feet, and touch it… It is rough and streaked with darker lines : it is a sandstone.

Marls and sandstones originate from river deposits, made 45 million years ago, sediment torn from the mountain.

The stripes and alternating marl and sandstone are caused by the current's strength. The slower it gets, the finer the deposits - resulting in coarse and fine sandstones, and marls.

Higher up, on your left, at the bend, you will see a scale model of erosion at work as it fashions the landscape.

A few years ago, the blocks on the ground were part of the sandstone bank just above.

The marly stratum beneath the sandstone is gradually eroding, causing the latter to topple. Now try to put the puzzle back together.

If you look carefully, you will observe this phenomenon further on, on a larger scale…

After the ford, on the straight uphill stretch of road, have a good look at the vines and earth. All along the path you are on you will notice several fallow areas in differing stages of development.

Fallow areas (5)

This piece of land was abandoned some ten years ago. For an area that was once farmed in its entirety, evolution has to beat a retreat at some stage.

This is what has been going on since the 1960s. Subsidized vine clearances, aimed at dealing with over-production crises, have above all concerned less productive hillside plots.

These fallow areas are not used by anybody these days - the last flocks of goats and sheep disappeared from these parts not long after the last war - except beekeepers.

This abandonment goes hand in hand with more intensive farming methods.

Areas described as unproductive, because of their surface soil, and labour-intensive upkeep, are being increasingly abandoned, with most farmers preferring to focus their efforts on more accessible lands.

Though fragmented, these environments form especially important ecological compensation zones in farming regions.

In them, fauna and flora develop during the early evolutionary phases. But as the land becomes gradually covered and closed, this interest dwindles.

This phenomenon - the appearance of natural plant cover - renders the landscape uniform, and alters our perception of it.

Orchids are excellent clues, because they appear as soon as a parcel stops being farmed, immediately after colonizing plants, and they then vanish once the vegetation reaches the bush stage, and suffocates small plants because of lack of light.

This is when there is the highest fire risk, also when biodiversity is at its weakest, and when the environment thus formed is barely accessible to us.

Agriculture follows a cyclical evolutionary pattern ; the next cycle of vine replanting should help reduce the amount of fallow land…

As you leave the wood, the track joins the Route des Cardonnières. Take this to your left…

Cardonnières (6)

The name of this road reminds us that teasel (also called fuller's teasel) production - the *cardère* - was carried on in this part of the Commune in the 19th century.

This thistle is used for carding wool, an operation that separates untreated woollen thread and aligns it in the same direction.

Separated from the plant and affixed to long narrow wooden planks, the prickly forms made nothing less than natural brushes, perfect for carding.

First used in cottage industry, these thistles were still in use when carding was being industrialized.

The small, prickly brushes were then put together in hundreds on rollers which, with a regular movement, combed the wool and unravelled the fibres.

Another use was then developed : with manufactured linen fabrics, the thistle brushes created a flocking on the surface.

This down increased the fabrics' softness and warmth. Up until the early 20th century, thistles from the south of France were still being dispatched all over the world.

They are still used for luxury woollens.

As you make your way downhill, fruit trees line the roadside.

Fruit Trees (7)

Wine-growers often used to include a few vegetables and fruit trees within their vines.

There are still plenty of fruit trees on this stretch of the path - including service trees (*Sorbus domestica*) and azaroles (*Crataegus azarolus*).

Their fruit is rich in vitamins and is conveniently ripe during the grape harvest.

You will also find caper trees (*Caparis spinosa*) at the foot of scree and slopes.

Some wine-growers tend to these trees, and plant more of them, for the pleasure of it, but also because more and more scientific studies are proving the advantages of plants associated with crops.

The link may be direct (soil improvement and protection) or created via crop-useful animals hosted by the plant.

At the azarole tree, head right.

From now on, and as far as the road, you can see different stages of fallow : compare the plant species present and

their stage of development.

Now you come to the “Paysage d’Azillanet” sign.

Go back to the right, behind you, following the cypress trees.

Appelation d’Origine Protegée/Protected Origin [AOP] (8) Minervois La Livinière

You have just entered the Terroir du Petit Causse zone, listed as “Minervois La Livinière”, a village AOP within the Minervois AOP, which is more restrictive for parcel selection and yields.

Overall, the soils here have the same features as in the “Mourels” zone, but are stonier, caused in particular by the juxtaposition of sandstones and soft limestones.

Gravel and pebbles improve the soil’s structure, helping water to penetrate, reducing compaction, and speeding up the earth’s warmth.

After the picnic area and the panoramic table, the track passes by a well and, a little further on, runs past a…

Capitelle (9)

There are not many ‘capitelles’ in this area compared with other parts of the Commune.

You have seen other types of shelters, combining two parallel stone walls and a corrugated iron roof.

This ‘capitelle’ built up against a rock is thus all the more interesting because it is

associated with a water collection system consisting of a tank, a well, channels and a pond.

You can stick your head inside the 'capitelle' to see how it is built, and admire the corbelling used in this region : the stones are laid on top of one another, slightly staggered.

This 'capitelle' is covered with large sandstone slabs.

The stability is obtained by the balanced masses between the building's inner and outer "skins".

Most dry stone huts in this area were built during the 19th century to act as temporary shelters for those working that parcel.

If the weather turned, the farmer would find refuge here, or take a pause from the wind ; he would also use it to keep his tools and products needed for his activities.

Today it may be your turn to take shelter, if the weather turns bad. You will soon find the Chemin des Jardins running along the Tary stream, leading to the Font Grande spring.

Posaranca (10)

from *potz* meaning a well

Heading slightly downhill towards the village, you can see a garden where there is a well still with its well-sweep, called a *posaranca* (*pouzzarenque*) hereabouts.

This is the oldest system for raising water, and one still used in many countries (e.g.. the *chadouf* in North Africa).

This well-sweep is in a village garden, downstream from the wash house.

You can still see its counter-weight, a metal ball, and the two stone basins used to distribute water in the garden.

You must now go back up the track to see the Font Grande spring, where another sign awaits you nearby. Before leaving the spring, take the narrow path to the right, after the bridge… for 50 metres.

Lignite (11)

This place may seem of little interest, but on closer inspection you will note the shift between banks of limestone and sandstone.

And this dark line in the limestone is a seam of lignite, the very origin of mines.

You can rejoin your track where, higher up on the bend, you will be among shady holm oaks. So sit for a while on the low wall. The village off in the distance is Oupia.

The vines in front of you are Syrah, and those behind the cypresses, Grenache.

In passing, note the way these parcels are farmed, and work out the wine-grower's goal.

Now you can start your descent to the lowlands. When you reach the stream, you will walk along a cleared vineyard. You will be walking on a …

Calade (12)

from *cal* meaning stone

This arrangement of dressed stones is still in good repair, proof of the endurance of this kind of pavement, often used in courtyards and steep streets.

A 'calade' represents a huge amount of labour, probably designed to strengthen a wet area - and is certainly not there ha-

phazardly. This road was definitely important for the village in the past.

The road now takes you to the village through vineyards. On the left, you will see an ideally managed parcel : capitelles and supporting walls in good repair, vines, olive and fruit trees, well maintained embankments and ditches.

You now enter and walk through the village taking its narrow lanes, and end up where you started out. Just before reaching the village winery, the pretty painted doors hide a marvel of this wine-growing heritage :

The Wagon Room (13)

In 1965, the equipment in Azillanet's cooperative cellars was replaced by an ingenious device for transporting grapes, invented by Professor Flanzy, a Narbonne-based agronomist and engineer.

Foreshadowing carbonic maceration (whole grapes), he installed a system of small wagons running on a raised rail.

This makes it possible to take the grapes to the vats without crushing. Unfortunately the building is not suitable for visits.

Now that you have discovered the village's personal secrets, along with its history, its growth, and its land, you will no longer sample Azillanet's wines with the same palate. They will certainly not taste the same, and perhaps you will find in them images, aromas and sensations encountered during your walk.

PAYS HAUT LANGUEDOC ET VIGNOBLES
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