

INTRODUCTION: SETTING THE SCENE

The vineyards of Faugères sit at the foot of the hills of the Espinouse. The perfect introduction to the area is to drive or, if you are feeling particularly energetic, walk up to the Pic de la Coquillade. Bernard Vidal of Château de la Liquière took me up there on a sunny spring afternoon and I had Faugères at my feet, with the village of Caussinjoûls in the immediate foreground, Cabrerolles and then Autignac and Laurens in the distance. I could just make out a silvery streak of the Mediterranean. It was breathtaking.

The other viewpoint is the site of Les Trois Moulins above the village of Faugères itself. It gives a wonderful idea of the topography of the vineyards and villages, the undulating hills and valleys that twist and turn as they fall away towards the sea. The term *balcons de schist* or balconies of schist is very apt. You can also see numerous examples of the *capitelles* – constructions that look rather like dry-stone igloos – for which Faugères is known. The tradition of *pierres sèches*, dry-stone walls, is strong in the region and being kept alive by an energetic woman, Claude Froidevaux, who encourages local people to learn the art of restoring walls and rebuilding the *capitelles*. Watching her work with amazing speed and dexterity, you sense how she can read the stones, knowing just which will fit where with unerring accuracy. Thanks to her efforts, some sixteen or seventeen *capitelles* around Faugères have been restored, but she laments the number of stone terraces that have disappeared.

The appellation of Faugères consists of seven villages and a couple of hamlets, all of which are rewarding to explore on foot. It is easy to

overlook the charm of the village of Faugères itself as you drive past on the main road; you must stop and walk. The narrow streets of the village take you past little doorways and old houses as you turn away from the narrow main street, rue Droite, which climbs up through the village. The little café, the Dame Jane, is worth a stop for a *plat du jour* and some local produce, both liquid and solid, or just a cup of coffee. The village is at its most animated on the second Sunday in July, the Fête du Grand St Jean. Numerous *vignerons* have stands in rue Droite, upturned barrels from which they serve their wine – usually the most recent vintages. There are other attractions too, arts and crafts and things to eat. The members of the Confrérie in their tapestry robes and gold hats parade through the street, along with other *confréries* – not just for wine but also for olives, biscuits and pâté – making a colourful pageant. Then they *intrônise* (enrol, literally ‘enthroné’) a few people who they consider have helped the cause of Faugères. It was an honour that I was happy to accept.

Fos is one of the prettiest villages of the Faugérois. Its long and winding main street, with a small church and a bread oven, ends in Ollier-Taillefer’s new cellar. Roquessels is dominated by its ruined castle; Cabrerolles too has the remains of a castle that you can climb up to. It is well worth it for the views of the surrounding countryside, and in the remains of the castle of Caussinjoûls you will find the tasting *caveau* of Château Chenaie. Laurens is a more substantial village; it once had a railway station and still has a marble quarry and, at the top of the village, hidden amongst the houses, is a château with an attractive green and yellow glazed tile roof. There are more substantial houses here. Autignac is a *circulade* village, built in a circle for defensive reasons, with an attractive little square and a café offering a satisfying *menu du jour*. However, you sense it has lost some of its former prosperity; there are some grand houses that are now sadly shuttered and neglected, vestiges of the former wealth of the village.

I spend part of each year in a village near Faugères but not within the appellation, and I find that I never tire of the scenery of my corner of the Languedoc. It changes with the seasons. In the winter the vines are silhouettes, some scraggy and waiting for pruning, others neat and trim. The almond trees are a gentle pink and the mimosa a brilliant yellow harbinger of spring. Then the green buds of the vines begin to appear

and suddenly, if there is a warm spell, the vegetation will race, and the blossom on the trees and the yellow coronilla will add colour to the more muted scenery of green *garrigues* and brown vines and soil. The vines become verdant as the year advances, but you can easily miss the moment of flowering, so discreet are the tiny, pin-point, white flowers. As summer progresses and the grapes fill out the countryside takes on a sleepier note, with the leaves losing their vibrant freshness. And then in September, after the somnolence of August, everything bursts into life again with the harvest. You can see activity in the vineyards and find yourself stuck behind a trailer of grapes heading to a nearby cellar; you pass cellar doors from which emanate that intoxicating aroma of fermenting grape juice. Then the year draws in, but the winter days can sometimes be the most invigorating, for Faugères can be at its finest on a day of clear blue skies and winter crispness. I have yet to see Faugères in the snow, but I am told it happens – not every year, but not infrequently either.

So why write a book on Faugères? Because it is there. Because it is the nearest vineyard to my Languedoc home. Because I love the wines and the sheer variety of the wines within this small area. I tasted and drank my first Faugères on an early visit to the Languedoc in 1987, when Gilbert Alquier gave me a perfumed 1985 as well as his experimental *cuvée* of an oak-aged wine, and I immediately loved the spicy flavours of *fruits rouges* and *garrigues*. And I have never been able to resist them ever since.

Faugères is a compact vineyard compared to many of the other appellations of the Languedoc with, for red wine, the same five grape varieties, grown on similar soil. But none the less the variety is infinite, prompted by the human hand and the perceptible differences between the different villages. And the white wine, which accounts for a meagre 2 per cent of the appellation, amply demonstrates how the white wines of the Languedoc are developing and improving with every vintage, their wonderful herbal flavours conjuring up the scents of the herbs of the *garrigues*, fennel and bay and thyme. Pink Faugères, which accounts for just 18 per cent of the appellation, provides delicious refreshing drinking with acidity and delicate fruit. The wines of Faugères should always have a distinctive freshness which places them amongst the finest of the Languedoc.

Then there is also the village of Gabian, neighbouring the village of Faugères itself. This might have been part of the appellation of Faugères had the right decision been taken at the critical moment. Gabian has the schist of Faugères but it has other soils too, and its wine growers provide a fascinating picture of what happens to a village without a particular appellation. As you will see, the wine growers of Gabian encompass the innovative and inventive, the highly original, and also the traditional.

Since that first visit in 1987 I have returned regularly to the area, with increasing frequency over the last ten years, when Faugères became my nearest Languedoc vineyard. Then, over several months in 2014, and with subsequent visits in 2015 and 2016, I managed to visit every *vigneron* in the appellation as well as the cave cooperative, including four new growers who made their first wine in 2014. Some *vignerons* proved more elusive than others. So this book is the culmination of many highly enjoyable weeks of research, walking through vineyards, and talking and tasting in welcoming cellars.

Naturally things will not stand still. I know that there are other new wine growers and new wines from existing estates in the pipeline. A book about a wine appellation can only provide a snapshot at one particular moment, as I write this to conclude the introduction on a sunny spring day in early April 2016. With it I hope to offer a tribute to one of the most individual appellations of the Languedoc.