

FINE COMPOSITION

TEXT BY ANDREW JEFFORD



PHOTO CREDIT: STUART HALL

ROB DOUGAN:
In the vinyards
of La Pèira

After a successful career in music, Rob Dougan has turned his attention to the grape and with a formidable winemaker in his corner, he's produced some of the best Languedoc wines of the last decade.

“**E**ven if this all goes down in flames, we can hold up our hands and say, we've tested a hectare in the Languedoc under the conditions you need to see if it produces fine wine, and we had a result and you can taste this result and it's a start. Someone else can then come along and carry on. Even if I end up driving a taxi and Jérémie has

to go off and swan around in Bordeaux, I think that's an incredibly precious thing. We did it, we tested it, it's on the books, and that could lead somewhere.” The speaker is the Languedoc's most improbable wine personality: London-based émigré, Australian music composer and songwriter Rob Dougan. Perhaps, though, I should start at the beginning.

Dougan was born in 1969 in Melbourne, the eldest of five siblings; his father is a pharmacologist and his mother an artist. He grew up in the Sydney suburb of Lindfield. He wanted to be a Shakespearean actor, but was thrown out of Sydney's National Institute of Dramatic Art after two years "because I was behaving badly and drinking too much" and fetched up washing dishes in London in 1990.

"A 'slave's slave', Orwell called it. I tried to do a little music in the evening." Why not acting? "I didn't have the confidence. There wasn't a huge demand in London either for an Australian to act in Shakespeare." Something has happened to his elocution, though: the Australian accent is gone, to be replaced by middle-class London English. Perhaps actors are more prone than most to accent loss.

It's difficult to get Dougan to tell a story plainly. He's intelligent, cultured, enigmatic and thin-skinned; self-demeaning and understated but fiercely proud too – an intriguing but difficult mix. I've had more luck on Wikipedia than via Dougan

himself in disentangling the details, but success as a songwriter came in 1995 with a single called Clubbed to Death, and he released an album (called Furious Angels) in the UK in 2002 and worldwide in 2003. His music has been used in films (such as The Matrix in 1999) and by advertisers (Audi, Toyota, Lincoln).

I knew none of this when a rather battered box of samples of Languedoc wines was delivered to me in the UK in 2007. After I tried them I thought they were the best unsolicited samples I'd ever been sent. I still think that. They are gorgeous wines. Rob Dougan turned out to be behind them, though the domaine name on the label was the tongue-tangling La Pèira en Damaisèla.

Not just Dougan, of course. His wife Karine is a French-Chinese who grew up in Montpellier, though she now works as a media lawyer in London. "We'd been to the Languedoc on holiday," Dougan told me. So why create a wine estate? "The people and the region had been wronged, and it's always nice to right wrongs." So you bought that land to right a historical wrong? "No, I thought we'd do



LA PÈIRA
EN DAMAISELA

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PHOTO CREDIT: GEORGES SOUCHE

KEEPING FAITH:
History has a strong
influence at La Pèira

INTUITIVE REASON:
The gravels at this
Languedoc site are
almost Bordeaux-like



PHOTO CREDIT: GEORGES SOUCHE

well. But there was a slight element of juvenile petulance. It seemed like quite an easy thing to do. I didn't realise how life-changingly complicated it was going to be." They acquired their first vineyards in the winter of 2004. Did you know anything about wine? "No, but I knew about drinking." At this point, you may well be thinking that this enterprise should be a flop. It has though, created some of the most remarkable Languedoc wines of the last decade. How? First of all, the two parcels of land that Rob

and Karine purchased are fine terroir: they lie close to one another on a terrace of beautifully drained glacial gravels

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in the Terrasses du Larzac. That was, perhaps, lucky. “I was just looking

for something that would be exciting,” remembers Dougan, “not in a scientific or materialistic or verifiable way, but more

an intuitive way.” He has subsequently researched the site in some depth and

had made interesting discoveries. The Roman polymath Pliny the Elder cited two regions of Gaul as producing outstanding wine. One being Vienne (in the Northern Rhône) for red wines, and the other the Béziers hinterland for whites. The latter citation seems puzzling – though one of Languedoc’s oldest AOCs is the white-wine Clairette du Languedoc [1948] and the clairette vine itself has a long history in the area. Parts of the La Pèira land lie in the Clairette du Languedoc zone, as do the remains of two Roman wineries.

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Reason number two it's a success are the collaborators Dougan chose, in particular the talented young wine-maker Jérémie Depierre. Depierre had worked in Sauternes (with Guiraud), and Médoc (with Margaux), Alsace (with Meyer-Fonné and others). Dougan also chose consultant Claude Gros. Gros isn't a homogenising wand-weaver. A little earlier this year, I tasted a range of the wines from domaines to which he consults. It was obvious that each owner has different levels of ambitions and a different frame of economic possibilities. They were all competent, but varied greatly along the scale of simplicity to complexity. The unusual thing about Rob Dougan, and this, surely, is reason number three, is that he doesn't think like most Languedoc domaine owners. He is madder or more innocent. "I'm just delighted to discover what's in the net at the end of a day's fishing. Do wonderful work in the vineyard, harvest at a sensible time – I don't think these are crazy things – then see what we have."

The La Pèira terraces may be Bordeaux-like, but there is a big difference between the Languedoc and Bordeaux, as Christian Seely of AXA Millésimes (which owns both Pichon-Baron in Pauillac and Mas Belles Eaux

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LARZAC PIEDMONT:
From La Pèira
the first foothills
of the Larzac.



near Pézenas) once told me: Bordeaux yields don't work here. Quality in the Languedoc demands lower yields. Indeed the yield for the debut 2005 vintage of La Pèira was a pitiful nine hl/ha. It's come up a little since, but even so, the overall yields for the whole domaine are still barely more than 20 hl/ha (traditional Languedoc farmers would regard this as unhinged. For them, good terroir was productive terroir.)

"The thing must be to create something excellent," insists Dougan, "otherwise you are really wasting time. But when you create something excellent, it's very

With Claude Gros and Karine, they have created great wines, the kind of wines that can jolt consumers' perceptions of the Languedoc and can rival the best from Bordeaux, and the Rhône. Maybe, given time, they might even right a historical wrong.

Tasting La Pèira

The domaine produces four red wines, and one white. The white, Deusyls, is at present roussanne and viognier with a dash of marsanne, though (in a nod to history) Dougan has just planted clairette and the great, though unheralded, grenache blanc.

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hard to work out a balance sheet behind that. For me, it has taken too much to date, which is something you just can't sustain. All the wines sell well, but we don't make much and our costs are high. The fact that a lot of the classic wine regions are in areas where you can get a high yield and still make good-quality wine may not be a co-incidence," he notes wryly.

I hope taxi driving doesn't beckon for Dougan; I hope Depierre doesn't have to go and swan around Bordeaux again.

The simplest of the reds is Les Obriers, a cinsault - carignan blend, while the grand vin (in a Bordeaux sense) is La Pèira, a selection of the best syrah with a little old-vine Grenache. There is also a second wine called Las Flors, which is not only the most complex blend (grenache, syrah, mourvèdre and cinsault), but also perhaps the best value wine. Finally the best parcels of mourvèdre have, since 2007, been bottled on their own as the magnificent and singular Matissat.

“ Astonishing depth
and texture ”



PHOTO CREDIT: GEORGES SOUCHE

Tasting La Pèira La Pèira

2010: A great La Pèira with scents of roasted cherry, and rich, intense flavours of red fruits, bacon, licorice root, plant essences and stone dust. Almost piercingly intense with exuberant tannins and a peacock-like aromatic presence.

2009: The warm vintage has given this wine scents of ripe black fruits and raisins, while on the palate it is liqueur-like, perfumed and sweet, layered with super-ripe fruits and velvety, tongue-soothing tannins.

2008: This artfully composed wine from a slightly cooler vintage in the Languedoc has meaty, beefy scents, over raked earth and wild elderberry fruits. It's characteristically mouth-filling, textured and essence-like on the palate. The extra bottle-time has given it a finishing savoury subtlety.

2007: The scents are rich and truffley, while the palate is rich, heady and exotic with astonishing depth and texture. It's characteristically complex in its aromas, too, with both lingering floral notes and apothecary herbs. Perhaps the most flamboyant of all the La Pèira wines so far.

2006: The slightly cooler vintage has given an impressively gentle and graceful La Pèira. The perfumes are characteristically beguiling. While the black fruits are impeccably ripe and yielding. It has svelte, sumptuous tannins. The wine has a creamy quality that makes it glorious drinking now.

2005: The first vintage of La Pèira (made from tiny yields) may never be surpassed for sheer force and girth. It is both gargantuan and essence-like with intense fruit flavours and a dense weave of mineral/medicinal notes. The distinctive La Pèira charm is there in a hint of chocolate truffle. Still a young wine with plenty of time left.

Andrew Jefford's tasting notes

“ A landmark
Mourvèdre,
like no other
in France ”



PHOTO CREDIT: GEORGES SOUCHE

Tasting La Pèira Matissat

2009 (A\$140): Aromatically this is a huge contrast to the 2008: open; graceful; serene; brimming with chocolate. On the palate it is sweet, lush, toothsome and low-acid, yet high drama, subsiding in a wave of perfumed licorice. Mourvèdre is rarely this comely.

2008: Rather a grouchy nose (typically for Mourvèdre) though it clears to forest fruits with air. This is a higher-pitched wine than the 2007, and is the most savoury and least sweet Matissat yet. Concentrated, poised, very herbal with chocolate acidity.

2007: A deep, seductive burr of warm blackberry, blood and meat: viscerally attractive. On the palate this is deep, rich, baroque and indulgent. The blackberries mingle with fig, licorice and thyme, and there's a shower of fine tannins. It has a forty second finish and is perfumed to the last. A landmark mourvèdre, like no other in France.

Andrew Jefford's tasting notes

“A winter-night wine”

Tasting La Pèira Las Flors

2010 (A\$90): A dark, dense aromatic blend of prune and tea leaf. There's more prune plus cinder, white mushroom and truffle on the palate, with plenty of extractive depth: a winter-night wine, and very different from the sweetly inveigling 2009.

2009: Wheat, blackcurrant, blackberry, cream and clay mingle on the nose, which needs time to open. The palate is full, expansive and long, with notes of rose petal and chocolate creeping into the mix. A gratifying wine from a very ripe vintage.

Andrew Jefford's tasting notes



PHOTO CREDIT: GEORGES SOUCHE

“Mouth-filling and poised”

Tasting La Pèira Les Obriers

2011 (A\$45): Savoury scents of undergrowth and mushrooms with lush, smooth, soft yet vivid fruit flavours and a faint chestnut sweetness. Mouth-filling and poised.

2010: This was an even more low-yielding Les Obriers than is usual. The result is an unusually deep, chunky wine with deep cherry flavours. Les Obriers isn't meant for aging, but this wine might see out half a decade.

Andrew Jefford's tasting notes



PHOTO CREDIT: GEORGES SOUCHE

“An exotic aperitif”

Tasting La Pèira Deusyls

2011(A\$90): The nose is almost understated, soft and mossy, but the palate is lushly rich, almost sweet, unctuous and expressive with lots of almond, summer fruit and nougarete flavours. An exotic aperitif; you barely need the nuts to go with it.

Andrew Jefford's tasting notes



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