



# Sun country

ROGER VOSS meets four intrepid wine lovers who have left their home country to start a new life and career in the Rhône Valley

Walter McKinley sold his IT company to set up Domaine de Mourchon in Séguret

**L**ike many wine regions in France, the Rhône attracts its fair share of winemakers from abroad. Some come for the sun, some for the lifestyle. Some come to add wine to the equation and to make their living out of one of the area's principal products.

Anthony Taylor is one such person. Originally from the USA, and a sommelier by training, he started his working career at the Hôtel de la Poste in Beaune, and then worked in New York where he was head wine steward at the 21 Club. He obtained a Masters degree after a study course organised by the Office International du Vin, and is now director of public relations at one of the region's biggest négociants, Gabriel Meffre. He has been in the Rhône for seven years.

For him, this is the land of what he calls 'sun country wines'. These are the French wines that best fit the demand for 'ripe, fleshy, extroverted wines, for people who don't like the drier styles such as Bordeaux'. Rhône wines also fit his own personal taste for 'voluptuous southern wines'.

As part of the management team, and a shareholder in Gabriel Meffre, Taylor is in a position to promote both the lifestyle and the wines of the region. 'The Rhône wines are gaining in momentum,' he says, 'because they represent good value. They also have great fruit, even if it is not overworked as it sometimes is in New World wines. And, speaking personally, I'm very happy to be here because my everyday wines can be so delicious.'

'There is such a tremendous variety of wines. You could live here for 20 years and still not know them all. So there's diversity, and now there are the effects of the generation change. Today wines are being produced by people who have been to oenology classes, domaines have changed hands and the new owners have invested greatly. This has all pushed up the quality of Rhône wines.'

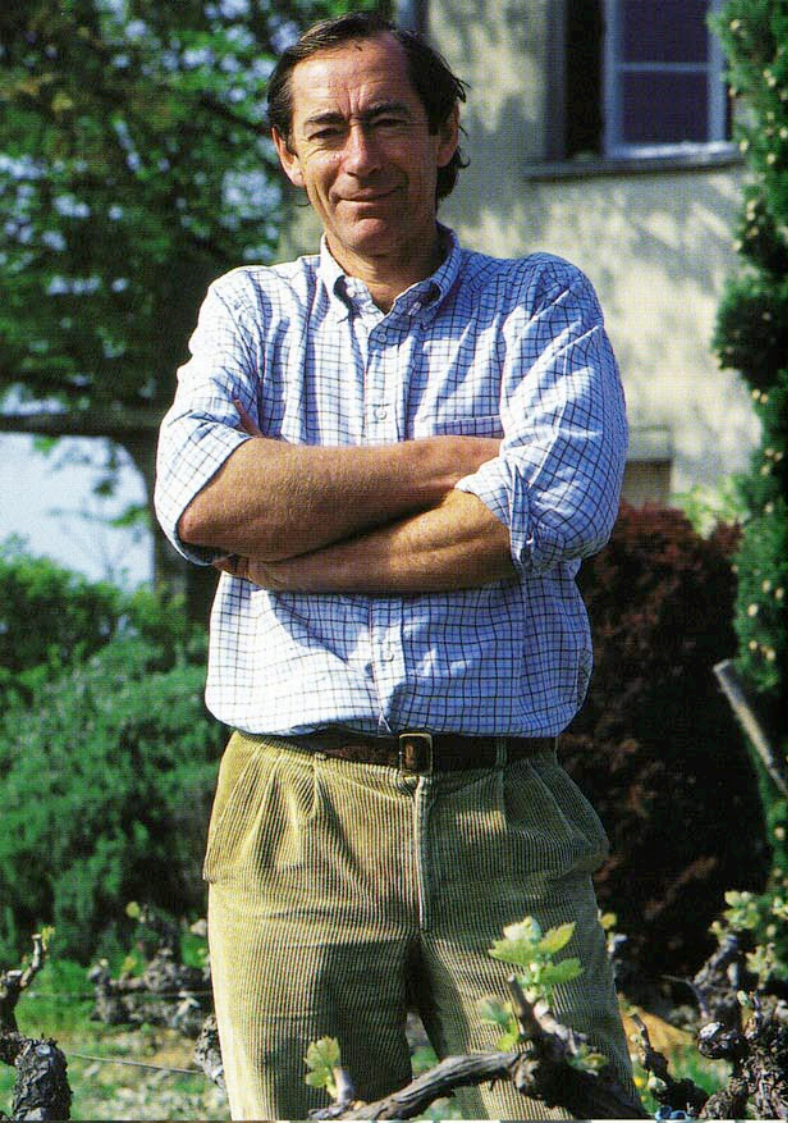
Meffre's wines now include a range called Laurus. It is a brand that covers wines produced in most of the major appellations of the Rhône. They are aged in 275-litre barrels, known by the firm as the Laurus barrel, which is based on the traditional barrel of the Vaucluse.

'We aimed to produce a range of high-quality wines with limited production,' says Taylor, drawing back a curtain in the conference room in which he and I are seated, to reveal the cellar lined with Laurus barrels. 'We started with Gigondas and Châteauneuf-du-Pape and now have 18 appellations in the range, including Côtes du Rhône and a village Côtes du Rhône from Rasteau.'

Both the Côtes du Rhône illustrate this approach. The generic Côtes du Rhône is full of black and juicy fruits, with tobacco and spice flavours, while the Rasteau is more terroir-driven, very concentrated, solid and chunky. These are modern wines, designed to compete in the international market, and it is perhaps no surprise that Meffre's greatest successes are in the British market.

The UK market is uppermost in the mind of two other British vigneron, Nick Thompson and Walter McKinley, who have settled in the Côtes du Rhône. Thompson has been in Cairanne for just over 20 years, during which time he has built up his Domaine de l'Ameillaud, so that he now produces Côtes du Rhône-Cairanne from 35ha (hectares), as well as having land producing Vin de Pays and generic Côtes du Rhône.

In those 20 years, Thompson has seen huge changes in the perception of the Côtes du Rhône. 'In the 1980s, few people exported. The wines here were seen as a commodity, which meant they were shipped in bulk rather than in bottle. Now everybody has respect for the bottled wines from the Rhône.' One of the keys, for him, is the quality of the fruit. 'We have great fruit here. Even if we can't hit the heights of northern Rhône Syrahs such as Hermitage, we can aim for rounded, mature fruit which gives great shape and structure to the wines.'



Thompson's cellars are in an ancient farm, built around a huge courtyard. On one side is a view of the flat valley of the Rhône. To the right are the spectacular jagged rocks of the Dentelles de Montmirail. Behind is the hill of Cairanne, one of the leading villages of the Côtes du Rhône Villages. Vin de Pays and generic Côtes du Rhône come from the plain, while the Cairanne comes from the hillside vineyards.

The Cairanne of Domaine de l'Ameillaud is a blend of Grenache, Syrah and Mourvèdre. The 1999 is well perfumed from the Syrah, but has some delicious juicy fruit. It's a soft and heady wine with a fine, concentrated finish. It's a wine that reveals the generous aspect of the Côtes du Rhône.

By contrast, the wines of Walter McKinley are more complex, as befits their origin in mountainside vineyards at the back of Séguret. His Domaine de Mourchon is new – 2000 was the third vintage McKinley has made, and only the second in his spectacular, architect-designed hillside cellars. His 17ha vineyard was purchased from the Meffre family.

McKinley used to work in information technology and sold his company in 1994. It took some time to find the right location, with its spectacular views of Mont Ventoux to the east. Now he is deeply immersed in a living which he describes as 'tangible business. You cover everything from planting vines to selling bottles. I've never seen a business like it.'

I asked him how he fitted in to the local wine scene. 'People here have been extremely helpful. Of course, the last thing you should do is show any form of arrogance because you are coming in from the outside. But, for instance, I was involved in helping the Séguret *vignerons* organise a tasting in London, which was very successful.'

The red wines of the Domaine de Mourchon come in two styles. Both are Côtes du Rhône Séguret. There is a Grande Réserve and what is effectively a second wine, which McKinley refers to as his generic. He scored a big success from his first vintage in 1998, which was made in Nick Thompson's cellars at Cairanne. The Grande Réserve from that year is still concentrated and tannic, and nowhere near ready to drink. By contrast, the 1999s are lighter and fresher, and should certainly be drunk before the 1998s.

Vintage 2000 shows the estate in full swing. Both the Grande Réserve and the generic wine show ripely concentrated fruit, with flavours of violets and southern herbs. The Grande Réserve, from selected parcels of vines, has an added layer of wood which is bringing out the fragrant perfumes of Syrah.

### 'Many foreigners come, attracted by the lifestyle,

The McKinleys arrived in the Rhône because of their desire to extend their interest in wine from drinking it to producing it. The same is true of Marianne Fues and her husband from Geneva in Switzerland, a mere three hours' drive from their estate of Domaine de Coste Chaude at Visan. Although they bought the 21ha property together, Marianne is still the only one living there full-time. 'It is quite expensive to run this estate,' she explains, 'so my husband has to work to give me the money.' He is there for holidays and harvest.

Domaine de Coste Chaude is another spectacular mountain-top estate, at a height of nearly 365 metres on the summit of the hill which dominates Visan to the east. Madame Fues describes the estate as being in 'countryside which resembles Tuscany'. This is something I will have to take on trust, since on the day I am there, the house and vineyards are in the middle of a rain-drenched cloud, and there is no view beyond the terrace.