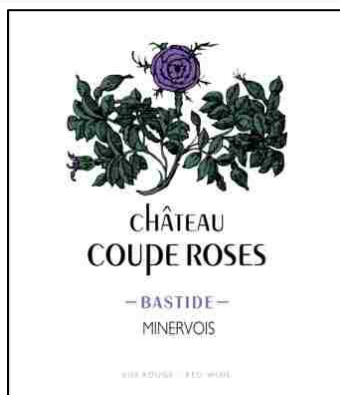


Château Coupe Roses (biodynamic) Minervois



The family of Françoise Le Calvez—parents, son and daughter—manage Château Coupe Roses with passion and acumen high in the Mediterranean hinterlands. Their vineyards, now all farmed completely biodynamically, are in Le Causse and Le Petit Causse (a *causse* or *karst* refers to an enormous outcropping of rock—in this case, limestone—that supports little more than southern France’s omnipresent *garrigue*, olives and vines). These two delimited areas make up the highest growing zones in the Minervois appellation. At 750 to 1,350 feet above sea level, these zones have relatively cool nights, and the growing season is the longest in the AOC (domaines down on the plain often begin harvesting a full two weeks earlier).

The wines from Coupe Roses have excellent acidity and freshness, which Françoise always favored over the heavy and plodding characteristics of overripe wines. Her son Mathias, now in charge of the cellar, feels much the same.

Françoise’s father hails from Brittany (Le Calvez turns out to be a common Breton name), but her mother’s side of the family has been in La Caunette for at least twelve generations. The village essentially is a one-street village strung along a bench at the base of a tall limestone cliff that towers above the Cesse River. Cesse shares the root word of cease and cessation, because in summer this river stops running. La Caunette, for its etymological part, is Occitan, referring to small cave dwellings—in ancient times, the locals lived in caves burrowed into the cliff. Just upstream is the village of Minerve, which gives its name to the appellation of Minervois. It sits high on a pinnacle of limestone at the confluence of the Cesse and the Rieussec, hidden in a mountain valley behind the first range of mountains after the vast Mediterranean plain. It was here that the Cathars (catharsis—to purge!) had a stronghold, which held out for months before surrendering early in a twenty-year crusade launched by Pope Innocent III in alliance with the king of France in 1209 that swept over the Languedoc and burned infidels wherever they could find them. They found a lot in Minerve.

Most of Coupe Roses’ vineyards are on the plateau above the cliff, an arid, windswept place of scrub and rock—calcified limestone that microorganisms living in the threadbare soil eat into, creating pockets for water, soil and roots. In the old days, Pascal Frissant, Françoise’s enologist husband, was fond of taking visitors up to the plateau to show them vineyards that appear to be growing in pure rock. He would point out the odd olive tree here and there, the remnants of an ancient Roman road, and evidence of the fiendish rabbits that gnawed at his young vines. Then he would tell everyone to hush and listen. Up there, there’s nothing to listen to; the silence is overwhelming. If you want to go crazy, he would say, this is the place to do it.

In 2008, Françoise and Pascal purchased 15 acres (6 hectares) of vineyards in Petit Causse that are part of the Minervois cru of La Livinière. These vines grow on the highest point on the southern side of the Cesse Canyon, above Minerve. Indeed, these are the highest vines in the cru of La Livinière, which extends down the southern flank of the mountain ridge toward Languedoc's great plain; the lower one descends, the warmer the terroir becomes. Coupe Roses doesn't label a cuvée La Livinière because legally it would need to have a cellar located in the cru zone, but the altitude of their holdings gives them the potential to make the cru's most elegant wine. A lot of the red grapes from this site go into their Vignals bottling.

Today their vineyard holdings total 86 acres. Save for the fifteen acres in La Livinière, all of their vineyards are a hodgepodge of plots—some 40 total—mostly on the mountain plateau above their village of La Caunette (i.e., north and east of the Cesse Canyon). The soil is a classic French mix of limestone and clay, with the accent on limestone. The mountain elevations make for a cool microclimate in the sunny south of France, and this shows distinctly in their wines. In broad tastings of Minervois, Coupes Roses invariably lands on the fresh end of the spectrum.

The winery itself is a large nondescript building on one side of the village, while the “château” is an old automobile service station that Françoise's father operated decades ago on the other side of the village. For years it housed the office, and the old garage was insulated to store the bottled wine. Time was, the sum total of high-tech wizardry at the domaine consisted of the wine press and a narrow gauge Lamborghini tractor. In 2009-10, the old garage was completely revamped (and covered with solar panels). Now there's a tasting room and a new bottling line. In 2013, the domaine earned organic certification for its farming practices, and in 2021 it earned biodynamic certification.

In 2016, following his studies in enology, Françoise's son Mathias took over as cellar master. Among other changes, under his direction all ferments in the cellar are permitted to happen spontaneously, without additions of yeast or enzymes. Daughter Sarah is now heading up sales, while her better half David changed careers to work side by side with Mathias. Previously, David had been doing advanced engineering studies in Toulouse and working as an acoustical engineer for Airbus; he gave it all up to move to La Caunette and get a degree in enology. This younger generation is now going full-bore into cutting edge winemaking and viticulture.

A cool bit of trivia is that since 1991 a friend and colleague of Françoise and Pascal, one François Serre, had been the consulting enologist at Coupe Roses, and he assisted Mathias in the beginning. For an even longer time, Serre had been the consulting enologist at Chateau Rayas in Chateaufort-du-Pape. During the pandemic, he retired and his son took over his responsibilities.

Another cool bit of trivia concerns the label. We started working with Françoise in 1998. In that era she had a pretty ho-hum label, and she readily admitted that graphic arts weren't her forte. But the folks at Michel-Schlumberger knew a guy with such forté—one James Robertson, a Beatnik printer and designer who, with his wife, had formed the Yolla Bolly Press in Mendocino, where they put out letter-press publications (an all but lost art, then and now). Jim designed the current Coupe Roses label, the original one being the Vignals label, from which all else sprang. One of Jim's claims to fame was that he designed the Ridge Winery label, arguably California's most iconic wine label. For the Ridge label, he used a brand-new font that had just been invented in Germany: the Optima type font. Much later, this font was chosen for the inscription of the names into the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, DC.

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