

Vintage Traditions in a Languedocian Hillside Area

1. GEOGRAPHICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

THE HÉRAULT SUBDIVISION OF LANGUEDOC is an area of striking geographical contrasts: Along the coast, a wide, flat and dull expanse of land has only recently been made attractive in places by some bold architectural and engineering features due to the need for expanding tourism.

Turning away from the coast, after about 10 to 12 miles the landscape has already changed. The road curves gently up and down hillocks on top of which villages cluster around the church, looking down on the valleys. Where the land has not been tamed, it is the kingdom of *garrigue*, stony, sun-drenched hills, covered with a sparse vegetation of thyme, spike lavender, juniperus and holm oak bushes. In 15 more miles the spurs of the Cevennes mountains are reached, with their fantastic scenery.

From the very sands of the beaches to every spot of flat land in the mountains, vine grows, luxuriant, free of wires or stakes, spreading low its dense green foliage which turns in autumn to a blaze of yellow, russet, red, and purple. Around the town of Béziers there is an ocean of rippling green leaves, from which villages or country houses emerge here and there. On a Hérault road in September, all sizes of lorries and even a few carts filled with grapes move to and from the vineyards, in which can be seen the bent backs of the vintagers gathering the grapes and the incessant movement of the bearers carrying them to the lorry, with much shouting and laughing.

150 years ago, the landscape was quite different, for the extensive culture of the vine is rather recent. Vineyards had indeed existed in the area ever since the Roman conquest of France. The Romans who were given lands and settled in Hérault, first imported the wine from Italy; then they realized it would be much cheaper to grow it and they taught the local population the art of wine tending. Viticulture, however, was not then or for long after the main agricultural activity in Hérault. Cereals, mainly wheat and maize, were grown in an intensive way for the locals needs; cattle were raised, some bovids in the plains, sheep and goats in the hills and mountains.

This state of things lasted until the 19th century. Then, the growing state of prosperity in France enabled most people to drink wine, hitherto a drink for the rich. At that time, sweet wines were in favour and *muscatel* was the main quality grown in Hérault. Because of the nature of the soil and the dry climate, the culture of cereals gave much pain and little profit, whereas vines grew easily, needed no watering and since the price of wine grew with the demand, a drastic change occurred in the economy of the region. Vines rapidly replaced grain-fields and meadows, which had almost completely disappeared by 1850. At the same time, production became extensive.

Unfortunately, vines became exposed to terrible enemies: Mildew started a mass attack, was identified in 1850 and sulphur was found to be a satisfactory remedy. By 1860, all danger was averted so long as the vines were treated properly.

Then, around 1870, travellers from America brought some wild vines to make culture experiments, and introduced a terrible calamity, phylloxera. Carbon sulphur was tried without result. Total flooding of the vines proved to be a better way but it was possible only where water could be pumped. It was then supposed that by grafting American saplings which had developed a resistance to the disease, French vines would also resist. Meantime, most of the Hérault vines had been destroyed. They were restored within a few years, but for economic reasons, other species of vines were chosen which yielded more, were less expensive to tend and convert into wine and produced standard wine: *aramon*, *carignan* and *alicante Bouschet*. It was said: „*aramon* is for quantity, *carignan* for alcohol, and *Bouschet* for colour“. Nowadays, since wine is paid according to its degree of alcohol, *carignan* is mostly planted. By 1907, a new wine region had appeared, covering a wider area, for, encouraged by the former commercial success, vine growers had planted in excess. The production soon exceeded the need and a terrible crisis occurred; prices dropped drastically; the vine growers rebelled; repression squads were sent and in some places blood was shed.

From that time on, Hérault never recovered its former prosperity. In 1910, mildew reappeared and was fought by various means, the best of which was copper sulphate which many people still use nowadays, though more elaborate products are now on the market.

The Common Market was a terrible blow to Hérault wines which had already had to suffer from the competition of Algerian wines after the second World War. Italian wines became formidable rivals; since they sold for low prices, the French Government had to keep down the official price of ordinary wine. On the other hand, the French began drinking less wine than they had used to.

The consequence of these facts is the progressive disappearance of middle-sized estates, whose owners earn too little to make a living out of their crop. Only the large scale wine-grower, working with as little help as possible, is still able to make a comfortable income, weather permitting. Small estates generally belong to people who have other jobs and grow vines only for their own consumption.

Another event contributed to change the character of vine growing: the social and mutualist movements of the beginning of the century led to the institution of cooperative cellars. In the old days, every wine grower was making his own wine and was obliged to have his own press, fermentation tanks etc. The first Hérault wine cooperative which was also the first in the world was founded in 1905. Now, there is one in every village. People bring in their crop which is weighed and receive either wine or money in proportion to the quantity of grapes they have given. The convenience of this organization for small landowners is added to the advantage of producing a wine of equal quality over a season. Unfortunately, beside suppressing the efforts of some wine growers to make quality wines, it has also put an end to a number of customs linked with the work in the cellar and has caused the disappearance of many cooperage craftsmen.

II. EVOLUTION OF IMPLEMENTS AND CUSTOMS

ACCORDING TO THE ABOVE mentioned historical data, three periods in Hérault vine growing clearly appear:

1. Before 1907: Replacement of polycultures by vineyards.
2. Between 1907 and 1945: Destruction by phylloxera; reconstitution with other species on a larger scale; crisis of viticulture.
3. After 1945: Progressive industrialization.

With this in mind, we have tried to establish a comparative study of the vintage customs during the three periods just defined, including the gathering of the grapes and cellar work during the vintage season. — We shall not treat the permanent facts, but only deal with the disappearance of a custom or the appearance of a new one.

1. Before 1907

Vintage is a family matter. Women and children pick the grapes and collect them in wicker, wood or iron baskets or in oval buckets about 3' deep and 2,5' long called *baratons* and carried on the head. These are transported directly to the cellar or emptied in *comportes* (*semal* in occitan), kinds of tubs looking like half barrels, with two small rods sticking out of the sides to transport them. They are made of curved planks by the *semalier* and held together by iron circles. The owner's name is often engraved by fire on them.

The *vendemiaires* (vintagers) added to the usual black kerchief they wore instead of the traditional linen cap, a large brimmed straw hat, held by a ribbon passing over the crown and tied under the chin.

Once in the cellar, the grapes were emptied into the *moustado*, a wooden flat tank containing the yield of two *comportes*. Then, some men took off their shoes and started to *troulha* (tread on the grapes). With the emanations coming from the grapes beginning to ferment, they reached a state of euphoria and the treading took a quicker rhythm and was transformed into a kind of ritual dance. After this first coarse pressing, grapes were pushed with a wooden spade into the *tina* (vat) made of dubbed timber.

After a few day's fermentation, the grapes were put into the *presso* (press). It was made of a circular wooden fence on a hard wooden base. Fermented grapes were shovelled into the enclosure thus formed. A heavy wooden lid turning round a huge *caragol* (wooden screw) was screwed down by means of a thick piece of oak timber passing through a hole in the head of the screw and pushed by hand. This operation was and still is called *monter la pressurée* (prepare for the pressing).

Once all the grapes were pressed, the muss was transferred by means of a rubber tube primed with the mouth into barrels of various capacities known as *muid* (700 l), $\frac{1}{2}$ *muid* (400 l), *pipe* (200 l) and *pipot* (100 l).

At the end of the vintage, a special meal gathered the whole family and the relatives or friends who had been helping.

2. 1907 to 1945

Because of the growth of the estates, outside manpower was needed. Hired people came down from the near-by mountains. People called them *gavatchos* (French *gavache*); the word is still used as a pejorative nickname. At first, they just came for the vintage season, but many of them thought that life was much easier in the valley and tried to get a permanent job. Since they were hard workers and frugal, they were appreciated and could settle either as permanent workers, or even as *ramonets* (bailiff), whose main job was to supervise the estate and take care of the horses. They were hired over the year and received a salary either in money or in kind. They had to be given lodging, wood for their fire, and wine but no other food. During the vintage season the *ramonet* supervised the cellar work.

Towards 1916, too many Frenchmen having died at war, it was necessary to find manpower outside the country and many Spanish people came, mostly those who lived in Catalonia, close to the border. They arrived with their families and an extraordinary amount of miscellaneous baskets, bundles, and packages including camping stoves, pots and pans and food for three weeks, which is the usual vintage duration. They were lodged in small dry stone houses called *grangettes* (small barns), bare except for straw mattresses. They worked hard and lived on bread, onions and slices of ham or bacon as a treat. All they earned, including the two or three litres of wine the vintagers received per day according to their functions of cutters or bearers, they saved. Unfortunately, they also brought in their luggage what was called "the Spanish flu".

Since the vintagers were too numerous, it became necessary to establish some working procedure. Therefore, they were divided into *colhes*, groups of 10 to 14 people, including the *coupaire* (cutters), mostly women and children, led by the *meneuse* (leader), who often was the *ramonette*, the *ramonet's* wife. Each *coupaire* was allotted a row of vines which they had to strip of the grapes at the rhythm imposed by the *meneuse*. Grapes were cut with a *coutil pendadou* (curved knife) and later with scissors or pruning shears and placed into wide, slightly coneshaped baskets made of iron. The latter were emptied into *comportes*. An old man, not strong enough to work more actively, the *quichaire* (presser), pounded them with a *masse*, a block of wood provided with a long handle, in order to slightly crush the grapes and allow more pails to be emptied into the *comporte*.

When the latter was full, two men, the *portaires* (bearers), lifted the *comporte* by placing two long poles (*pals semalers*), the ends of which they held in each hand, under the handles, and carried it in the same way as a sedan chair in the old days. Thus, they reached the cart in which they emptied or placed the *comporte*, depending on the shape of the cart (tip cart or rail cart). In the latter case, the *comportes* were tied together with ropes to the rails of the cart, so that

they should not be shaken too much or even dropped on the way. The driver of the cart, often the *ramonet*, would drive the full cart to the cellar, have it emptied and come back for more.

The working-day lasted from daylight to sunset, broken at 8 am for *un morcean* (a bite) of bread and cheese or sausage for the French and onion or pepper for the Spaniards, at noon for a light lunch and a quick *siesta* (nap) and around 4 pm for a break and another bite. At times, *outres* (goatskin bottles) would be passed around and people would *beure at galét* (pour drink directly into their throats, without touching the bottles with their lips).

To break the monotony of the job, jokes and songs would run from one end of the *colhe* to the other. Spanish and French people understood one another, Catalan resembling somewhat the slightly distorted *occitan* spoken in Hérault. There were, however, no special traditional vintage songs.

Whenever a girl forgot to pick a bunch of grapes, the boy who discovered it had the right to *faire le mourre de vendémi* (make the vintage muss), which meant crushing the forgotten bunch onto the girl's face and hands. She could redeem herself by accepting the *capounade* (a kiss). But if the latter lasted too long, the other girls would come to the rescue and *farcir* (stuff) the boy's trousers with vine leaves.

It is hardly necessary to mention that the prettiest girls were the most *caponnées*.

At the end of the day's work, the *colhes* would follow the cart home and if the vineyard was far, would squeeze as best as possible between the *comportes* or on the rails.

After a supper more consistent than lunch, including dishes known as *mata-fam* (hunger killers), for example *daube* (meat cooked in wine), beans and sausage etc., the young people would sing and maybe dance, while their elders would sit and gossip a while.

For the men, the day might not be over if it had been decided to *monter une pressurée* (prepare for a pressing).

The *moustado* was replaced by a *boulidou* (*fouloir* in French), made of two grooved wooden rollers turned by means of a handle above a wooden conical tub with a large split at the bottom through which the grapes could pass directly into the vat, when wood was replaced by a buried cement tank.

The wood of the press base and of the screw were eventually replaced by cement and steel respectively.

From the press, the muss went back into a vat to ferment again for a few days and then was manually pumped into huge oak barrels which might contain as much as 2.800 l called *foudres*.

The last cart bringing the grapes home was decorated with reeds and vine branches. The horses received ribbons or pompoms on their foreheads, tails and harnessing. Girls climbed into the cart, men followed. Everybody was singing.

Current Activities in European Ethnology

When they arrived at the cellar, the *mestre* (landowner) would offer drinks of his best wine (*muscatel* or other sweet wine) to everyone. It was called the *soulenque* (a Spanish word meaning the way of becoming drunk). As was said earlier, at that time, many vintagers came from Spain. Depending on the atmosphere, the Catalans would often start dances from their own country. The others would clap their hands. There would also be singing, perhaps a spontaneous ball and it would last till very late in the night.

3. After 1945

Though mechanical grape picking is already in use, it is not yet generalized because of the special way vines have to be planted in order to enable the machine to work properly. Manpower is therefore still needed but increasingly difficult to get.

Spanish people are still coming over, but have become much more exacting about lodging and food. Many students, coming not only from France but from all over the world, earn during the vintages the money they need to pay for their studies. Sociologically, it is a very good way of broadening the viewpoints of Hérault people, who have a tendency towards xenophobia. They are suspicious of any kind of foreigners including people coming from north of the Loire valley. In some places, gypsies have also been hired as vintagers, but the experience does not seem quite satisfactory.

The vintagers are still lodged in a *grangette*, but the latter must be equipped with sanitary facilities.

The principle of the *colhe* is still in use, but there is no more *meneuse*. Each person is allotted a row, but the first who come to the end of their own one, go and help the slowest.

Pails and *comportes* are now almost everywhere made out of plastic. The wooden *comportes* are sought by the antiquarians and bought by people who convert them into flower-tubs.

Some wine-growers have adopted the plastic basket carried on the back which, made out of wicker or wood, was a traditional vintage tool in other vine areas (Alsace, Champagne etc.). The pails are then emptied into these *hottes* and carried by the bearers, who by bending over, empty them into the lorry.

The custom of the *capounade* has survived but when boys get excited, they will throw the girl into the lorry full of half crushed grapes and the poor victim will come out all wet and sticky, but laughing.

Now that carts have disappeared except for a very few (in our village there is still a donkey-drawn tipcart and two horses-drawn rail-carts), the tip-lorry is equipped to coarsely crush the grapes and the load is emptied directly into the vat where it is left 4 or 5 days and then sent into the press by means of an electrical belt conveyor. Nevertheless, a man wearing rubber boots stands inside the press fence with a pitch fork and distributes the grapes evenly around. Then, when the press is full, the lid is fitted, and the screw is electrically set to move down.

The pumping is now done electrically. Many people have had cement tanks built to replace their *foudres* when the latter fell out of repair.

Nowadays, the vintage still ends in an atmosphere of gaiety. The *soulenque* custom is still alive. It may take the form of a supper or an aperitif party with drinks, cakes, sweets. There may be spontaneous singing, but no dancing, at least at the landowner's house. Young people may decide to go together to a ball or gather and dance to the music of some modern records.

The historical dates have shown that vintage is a relatively recent event in Hérault. Though the whole year of labour culminates in this event, from which richness or poverty will issue, not much literature has been written on the subject.

Naturally, several tools and implements are closely connected with the vintage, but apart from the *caponade* and the *soulenque* very few traditional customs are linked with it. Due to industrialization, most of the handicraft that had been connected with the cellar work has now largely disappeared.

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