

Jefford on Monday: The Natoli touch



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On the opening day of the Vinisud Wine Fair, Andrew Jefford takes a look at the work of one of the Languedoc's most influential wine consultants and tastes some of the wines he has helped create.



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What are the qualities a great wine consultant should have? Everyone who's worked with Michel Rolland testifies to his uncanny blending abilities. Stéphane Derenoncourt understands vineyards, is prepared to modify his opinions in the light of experience, and helps create wines of beguiling tenderness as well as texture. Eric Boissenot, like his late father Jacques, enables those he works with to maximise grain, grace and finesse in their winemaking. Philippe Cambié is skilled at making southern extravagance both intelligible and beautiful.



Jean Natoli. Credit : Andrew Jefford

When talking and tasting with the influential Languedoc consultant Jean Natoli recently, though, I realized that human sympathy might be the most important quality of all, and stand behind all those others — ‘to work with the grower,’ as Natoli puts it, ‘and not to impose

anything on him or her.’ Any consultant setting out with a formula (the way in which Michel Rolland was traduced in ‘Mondovino’) would be doomed to failure. Magic tricks don’t work in wineries. Using a consultant as a marketing aid won’t wash. What wine producers need is a partner, an interlocutor, a bringer of confidence. Any consultant will have technical resources, and should always have a sensitive palate, but it is the exchanges with the grower which follow on from those things which can really move a region forward.

Jean Natoli is, together with the Narbonne-based consultant Marc Dubernet, one of the prime movers in the renaissance of Southern French winemaking over the last three decades. Natoli began work at Dubernet's Narbonne-based laboratory in 1983, but eventually set up on his own from a base to the north of Montpellier. Now he has a staff of 30, working across not just France but southern Europe, too; and he and Dubernet have jointly taken control of Inter-Rhone's consulting service Diœnos, which has clients like Chave and Chapoutier. As was the case with the Boissenots, both Dubernet and Natoli now work with their sons (Matthieu Dubernet and Pierre Natoli). Perhaps the avuncular nature of consulting lends itself to family transmission.

One reason why Natoli's name is less well-known than it should be is that he's tended in the past not to work with headline, big-name clients, preferring to help smaller growers and those who are under the radar. His principle is that every wine should have its own *raison d'être*, whether that wine costs three euros or a hundred. 'Sometimes you come across a wine and you think "What's it for? What was the point of making a wine like that? What does it bring?" There are too many useless wines. Of course wines can be coherent and meaningful in different ways – thirst-quenching, or gastronomic, or emotionally intriguing – but it is basic wine-growers' politeness to make sure that every wine has some kind of clear appeal.' Subtlety, as for the Boissenots, is a key quality Natoli seeks out. 'Once you do things in a caricatural manner, you quickly pay for it.'

He's astonished by the progress the South of France has made over the last three decades. 'In complete sincerity, it's really incredible the level of complexity we are now able to achieve, compared to when I started.' Varieties and soils are now understood far more intimately, as is the process of blending itself (the new-year blending meeting, he says, is always the most important and longest visit of the year). The 'toolbox' of techniques is much larger; and nature, too, is more generous (when he began, he remembers, the weeks after harvest were spent helping growers fill out the forms authorising them to chaptalise, something no one need do today).

Above all, confidence has improved. 'There were a few people who made great wines here in the early 80s, but on a Sunday they used to go off and buy a bad Bordeaux or a thin little Burgundy – and that was what they thought was 'great wine.' He's in no doubt that Languedoc can go a lot further, and that there will be wines from here which compete at the highest levels in fifty years' time. 'But that also depends on communication, on commercial networks, on the broad question of 'legitimacy.' Is the world, in other words, prepared to allow that a particular Languedoc wine might be great? 'That only comes with time,' suggests Natoli, surely correctly, 'and it's a very difficult process to short-circuit. I'm glad I've had the freedom to work here, to discover, to create synergies – and to nourish that process along.'

A consultant's work

Jean Natoli co-owns a Terrasses du Larzac estate with German organic specialist importer Peter Riegel: Mas des Quernes. He also owns a tiny Vaucluse vineyard planted with white varieties only, Mas Cascas, whose fruit he vinifies at home in Montpellier. The other wines below are a selection of those for which he and his team consult. They all exhibit remarkable sureness of touch.