

Quality improves in leaps and bounds

From grubbing-up and replanting to investments and stringent production rules - in just 20 years, the Pic Saint Loup scaled the heights of quality wine growing. With a strong community spirit, its trailblazing wine growers continue to forge ahead; their ambition now is to secure their own appellation.

Before the war, no one could have predicted the spectacular changes that would occur in the Languedoc wine industry as a whole, and the Pic Saint Loup in particular. Gérard Jeanjean, the appellation's oldest wine grower at Mas de Fournel, remembers living conditions in Valflaunès at the time: *"Every inch of farmland was used. In addition to wine - the main resource - families were self-sufficient. They grew crops to feed livestock, had horses for work on the farm, kept chickens and had a kitchen garden. Daily life was one of toil but it was also about mutual aid and simple pleasures: evenings spent with the neighbours, the traditional pig slaughter, the wild boar hunt and the grape harvest festival which attracted people from as far away as Lozère and Aveyron."* Only the largest estates, with 60 to 80 hectares of vines, occasionally coupled with sheep rearing, boasted a well-equipped winery and the best soils at the time. *"Most of the villagers had neither suitable buildings nor equipment. Many were farm labourers on the large estates that belonged to the middle and upper classes, nobility or long-standing farming families who had extended their estate over time. As they were unable to store their wines properly, the poorest growers would take them to the distillery in Saint-Mathieu-de-Trévières."*

From co-operatives to VDQS wines

When the co-operative winery was built in Valflaunès in 1939 (and others in Claret and Corconne), it therefore marked a huge stride forward. *"With a capacity of 15,000 hectolitres and cutting-edge equipment, it was the finest monument in the village. Incidentally, it cost 1.5 million francs whereas the one in Saint-Mathieu-de-Trévières, built 11 years later, cost 80 million francs due*

to inflation! Mas Boisset was selling its vineyards at the time and some people were able to buy plots. The winery agreed to allow partial integration, whereby growers kept part of their crop, thus becoming fully-fledged wine growers." As major symbols of social, economical and technological progress, the co-operative wineries rapidly boomed: not only did they allow resources to be pooled, but they also enabled wine growers to partly escape the shackles of the wine merchants. Concurrently with this, a new category of wine was introduced in France: the 'Vin Délimité de Qualité Supérieure' (VDQS), for which precise boundaries and production conditions were established, along similar lines to the AOC - created in 1935 - but slightly more flexible. Its advocates hoped that this would put an end to the Midi's specialisation in jug wines and, therefore, the recurrent over production crises. In the Pic Saint Loup, growers geared to producing quality wines began to form structures. Christian Jean, a wine grower at Mas Farjou takes up the story, *"In 1945, Philippe Lamour, who was in charge of rolling out the VDQS system, asked wine growing villages away from the plains to join the scheme. My father Louis, who was chairman of the Claret co-operative winery, and a handful of others, including Mr Arlès senior from Château Lascours and Yves Brissac from Sainte Lucie d'Euzet, persuaded several local politicians to file an application."* In the process, the wine growers' organisation - which had been dormant since 1931 - was given a new lease of life. The VDQS endorsement was approved in 1955: the 6 original Pic Saint Loup villages were joined by a further 3, then 4 more in 1966, bringing the total up to its present-day number of 13.