


{ cover story }

A Torchbearer in

TAIN L'HERMITAGE

STORY BY RUTH TOBIAS / PHOTOS BY LUCY BEUGARD



Delas Frères winemaker Jacques Grange with his team, Marco Beckmann (left) and Clément Panigai (right), in front of Hermitage Hill vineyard Les Bessards.



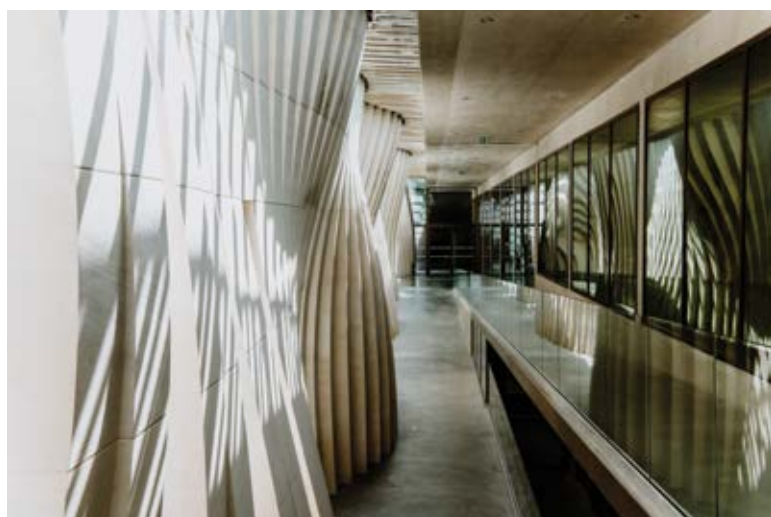
AT NEARLY 200, THE RHÔNE VALLEY'S DELAS FRÈRES IS AT THE TOP OF ITS GAME

When Champagne Louis Roederer acquired Delas Frères in 1993, it was simply part of a package deal whose prize was the Rhône Valley winery's owner, Champagne Deutz. After all, says Deutz/Delas CEO Fabrice Rosset, "The gurus were not holding Delas in high esteem at the time. But we quickly discovered [a] sleeping beauty."

Today, that beauty—founded in 1835—is wide awake. While it produces a broad range of wines from across the region, it's "positioning itself as a key player in the high-end Northern Rhône," in the words of Cyprien Roy, communications manager for importer Maisons Marques & Domaines USA.

Two recent developments in particular epitomize that endeavor: The first was the construction of a new, state-of-the-art winery in the heart of Tain-l'Hermitage on a site purchased from the Jaboulet family in 2015. Whereas the old facility in nearby Saint-Jean-de-Muzols continues to produce entry-, mid-level, and Southern Rhône reds as well as whites, this one—inaugurated at the end of 2019—is dedicated solely to the upper-tier reds of the Northern Rhône;

Delas Frères' new production facility in Tain-l'Hermitage was inaugurated in 2019.





Delas' two cellars hold approximately 800 barrels.

also on the property is a new retail boutique and a completely refurbished guest house that encapsulates the evolution of luxury wine tourism in France. The second—launched in 2015 though not released in the U.S. until 2020—was the addition of a new top cuvée, Ligne de Crête, to the already remarkable portfolio; translating as “Ridge Line,” the name pays tribute to the wine’s prized source at the crest of the hill of Hermitage, lieu-dit Les Grandes Vignes. It all speaks to Delas’ ambition to maintain world-class status in a world-class region.

A TOUR OF THE WINERY

Burgundy-born Delas winemaker Jacques Grange calls the exterior of the new production facility, whose design by Swedish architect Carl Fredrik Svenstedt received a 2019 Architecture MasterPrize, “the most photographed wall in Tain-l’Hermitage”—an undulating masterpiece composed of nearly 280 stones from Luberon. Behind that wall, Grange and his team, Clément Panigai and Marco Beckmann, work in a completely gravity-fed environment. The handpicked grapes are destemmed and carried by conveyor belt to funnels that, while preventing oxidation, drop them softly into stainless-steel tronconic vats, each containing a separate parcel of less than 1 hectare; there, says Grange, “I really want to keep the grapes between three to five days at very low temperatures before the alcoholic fermentation [begins] to extract slowly different components like color, tannins, and aromas to make



Just a portion of the Delas portfolio.

something very expressive in fruits.” To this end, the grapes are mostly kept whole; crushing is done in small percentages only in extremely hot, dry years, when there’s not enough juice to begin fermentation. (As of June, 2022 was shaping up to be just such a year: “Since the first of January here in Tain-l’Hermitage, we’ve had only 120 millimeters of rain,” says Grange. “The average for one year is 700 to 750 milliliters. It’s completely crazy.”)

The gently conical shape of the tanks—which are cooled by groundwater pumped through coils—is critical to the fermentation process: Because “a lot of components are contained in the skins, we have to mix every day the juice and the skins of the grapes,” Grange explains. “We [do] pumpovers twice a day and one or two *pigeages* [punchdowns] a day; sometimes it’s not enough,” but any more could lead to rough tannins. This shape naturally keeps some of the solids in suspension to allow for “a slower extraction, very soft.”

During vinification, the team tastes the wines daily, and “when we devat the wines, we imagine the mix of oak that they need.” At that point, off they go into the barrel cellar, of which Delas has two: one for each vintage currently in production, reason being that malolactic fermentation requires the wines be kept at 18–20 degrees Celsius, whereas those that have already undergone the process need to be kept at 14–16 degrees.

A total of nearly 800 barrels from different coopers—Seguin Moreau, François Frères, Saury, Chassin—also represent

different ages. “We don’t have any cuvées with only new oak,” says Grange. “We mix new and one- and two-year-old barrels.” Throughout the approximately 18-month aging process, they continue to taste every *barrique* and adapt their recipe for the final blend accordingly; the result may turn out to represent “another mix of coopers and age of barrels” than the one they originally envisioned, but either way it will be “a photograph of the parcel [along] with everything that made [the] vintage,” in his words. “If you [use] too much oak . . . you make something average. Every vintage is the same.”

A DEEP DIVE INTO THE PORTFOLIO

In short, Grange’s mission is to “show the potential of each parcel” in every wine he makes, regardless of appellation or Delas’ holdings therein—which is to say that the producer is a *négociant* as well as a *domaine*: In addition to farming estate-owned and -leased vineyards, it also purchases grapes and, in the case of its Cotes-du-Rhône Saint-Esprit, juice for blending from other growers.

That wine is worth a mention even in this context because, with an annual production of 1.5 million bottles, “This is the entry into the universe of Delas for people in so many countries,” as Roy puts it. “It has to be good.” With that in mind, Grange blind tastes dozens of samples a day for two months; in his view, “Every component is important to be considered—even a small parcel in a small



Winemaker Jacques Grange in the Delas tasting room.

winery that represents 20–40 hectoliters in a total of more than 8,000, I want to taste, so it's passionate work. For the 2021 vintage, I think I chose less than 5% of what I tasted." The current vintage on the U.S. market, 2020, retails for \$14–\$16; a blend of roughly 60% Syrah and 40% Grenache that sees no oak, it's a distinctly Northern take on a Southern classic, full but fresh from the forthright entry of black pepper, blackberry, and plum liqueur to the emerging touches of leather and espresso.

And though we are focusing on reds here, Delas' white wines also warrant discussion in light of Grange's state-

ment that, while "everybody knows the Northern Rhône and the Rhône in general as a region of red wines, I imagine in the future we [will] discover more and more the whites . . . with a real complexity and depth, with a real potential [for] aging." Case in point: The 2020 Condrieu Clos Boucher (\$102), which Grange calls "a mix of all the different soils and exposures" to be found in the 2-hectare lieu-dit it comes from, leased to Delas by members of the Delas family themselves. On its terraced slopes—steep enough to require double-echalas training, whereby two stakes form an upside-down V, for the vines, some 50 to 60 years old—the Viognier is handpicked in five passes within a very short window "because the maturity process for this variety is very quick," he says. "Monday it's not matured; Wednesday it's finished." Vinified partly in stainless and partly in wood, then aged in new and one-year-old barrels for eight months (it also undergoes both malolactic fermentation and lees stirring), it's lush-textured yet graceful, with apricot and rose leading to swirls of mango, vanilla, and a hint of hazelnut—and according to Grange, "It's able to go six to ten years without being heavy or tired."

But it's Delas' Northern Rhône reds that arguably represent the ultimate expression of terroir insofar as "they are made with the same variety in the same winery with the same philosophy, and [yet] the differences are quite evident," as he puts it, going on to compare the Syrah parcels in the region's various appellations to the Pinot Noir grown in Burgundy's climats: "Regarding the soils, the expositions, the age of the vineyards, there are a lot of tiny differences that make [an impact on] the wines." Accordingly, Delas works in most of the sub-regions, from Saint-Joseph to Crozes-Hermitage; in every case, he adds, "There are tannins, there is barrel aging, but everything [is] just under the wine. First you smell and you taste vineyards."

Illustration of that claim comes from a side-by-side comparison of the 2020 Cornas Chante-Perdrix (\$68) with the 2020 Côte-Rôtie Seigneur de Maugir-

ron (\$112)—both from a vintage that, compared to the "very ripe, solar," and powerful 2018 and 2019, was according to Grange "more quiet, more elegant [and] approachable; the balance is very beautiful." Interestingly enough, he notes, "We always begin the harvest with the reds of Cornas—and we always finish the harvest with the reds of Cornas," made as the wine is from fruit grown both on the early-ripening slopes of the natural amphitheater that the appellation forms and at its late-ripening top; 80% of the 2020 vintage came from the higher-elevation plots, which may partly account for its unusual finesse—undeniably masculine in structure but also "very flowery," as Grange puts it, while layering aromas and flavors of smoky plum, earth, and licorice softened by a mid-palate touch of vanilla. As for the Seigneur de Maugirron, he asks, "Can you imagine? There are only 50 kilometers between Cornas and Côte-Rôtie," but the latter wine—coming primarily from the mica-schist soils of the Côte Brune—is a whole different animal; powerful to its black-cherry core, it's streaked with iron and grilled meat yet silken in texture, its tannins finely woven amid hints of white pepper, violet, and cedar to a finish marked by a subtle note of dark chocolate.

Delas' top Côte-Rôtie, meanwhile—of which no more than 2,500 bottles are made in only the best vintages—hails from a 0.7-hectare, south-east-facing parcel of the famed La Landonne vineyard in the Côte Brune, also owned by the Delas family and estate-farmed. Here, in Grange's view, the iron deposits from the mica-schist blocks in the easily fractured granite give the double-echalas-trained Syrah "freshness and minerality," while the 200-to-240-meter elevation contributes to even more flowery, namely violet,



aromas. That much is evident in the full-bodied yet indeed fresh and fine-grained 2019 Côte-Rôtie La Landonne (\$340), which at this stage also shows cherry and red plum laced with licorice, tobacco, and a little tar—but time will ultimately tell the full story, given that "we try to make something with great aging potential. With

Delas vineyard Les Grandes Vignes at the top of Hermitage Hill.



Côte-Rôtie it is necessary to wait eight to ten years to appreciate it," he adds.

Patience is, in other words, a virtue at Delas—as exemplified by the tremendous work it has put into its vineyards on the legendary, 134-hectare hill of Hermitage, particularly the aforementioned Les Grandes Vignes, over the past decade-plus. In 2011, it began a four-year undertaking to rebuild the walls of the terraces that define so much of the Northern Rhône landscape, without which—to quote a book it published in 2019, *Delas Frères: The Art of Being a Maison Since 1835*—“the soil would have hurtled down these vertiginous slopes to the river a long time ago.” But these walls, or *chais*, are not merely critical to viticulture per se; they also provide shelter for lizards, snakes, and other pest-eating creatures. Delas is currently conducting a study on the biodiversity of the hill as part of a broader push toward sustainability that includes organic farming for the past five years; certification will be achieved in 2023.

The winery's larger Hermitage lieu-dit, sitting at 400–450 meters, is the 7-hectare, west- and southwest-facing Les Bessards. Though it's planted mostly to Syrah on granite, toward the bottom of the slope, where the soils are deeper and contain alluvial deposits brought in by the river, about 0.6 hectares is also devoted to white grapes; historically all Marsanne,

it today contains about 10% Roussanne. Some of these vines are being bridge-trained in a return to an old technique whereby the vines are tied together in an arch formation to slow down their growth. But the Syrah vines are, per tradition, all echalas-trained, which keeps them upright along a stake, not only to help them withstand wind and give them 360-degree exposure to sunshine but also to make more room for the vineyard workers—entirely manual labor is, after all, essential on this steep terrain.

Said wind is most keenly felt at 500 meters up at the top of the hill, where the south-, southwest-, and southeast-facing Les Grandes Vignes commands 2.5 hectares (just 0.3 of them dedicated to white grapes). Here, the high-draining soils of disintegrating granite de Tournon are especially poor—“and with poor soils we obtain very concentrated grapes; that's what we smell and taste with Les Grandes Vignes,” says Grange. They're also flecked with silica, which “is really what makes this granite particular to this hill,” according to Clément Panigai, who credits it with providing “silky tannins [and] more austere but more delicate aromas.” Many of the Syrah vines here are between 80 and 100 years of age, though new ones are also planted each year to replace any that are dead or dying.

Together, these two remarkable sites yield three of Delas' finest reds (as well



Maison Delas Frères is now a top destination for luxury hospitality in the Rhône Valley.

as a stunningly buoyant Hermitage Blanc). The Hermitage Domaine des Tourettes is a blend of Les Bessards and Les Grandes Vignes fruit; Roy calls it “the perfect first acquaintance to a Delas Hermitage [at] \$100 on the shelf.” Grange, for his part, compares tasting the wine to “the way you feel the parcels when you walk across them,” with Les Bessards contributing “the depth of the soils” and Les Grandes Vignes “something more precise, more direct.” The resulting “expression of Tourettes is strength . . . [but] there is a lot of minerality; it's not heavy.” To be sure, while there's a meatiness to the mouthfeel of the 2019 vintage (\$100), it's supple, and there's also a ringing purity to the top notes of cherry liqueur and blueberry that's made all the clearer by the dashes of pepper, candied olive, and fresh earth that season the way to a streaming finish.

Then there's the single-vineyard Les Bessards, produced only in the best vintages, including 2018 (which was made in the old facility in Saint-Jean-de-Muzols, where fermentation took place in small-lot concrete tanks installed by Grange upon his arrival at Delas in 1997—one of many improvements he made in both the vineyard and the winery early in his tenure). At once “fresh and powerful,” in Grange's words, the wine (\$249) is seductive in its intensity, brimming with black currant and black cherry as well as spice both savory and sweet, including cracked pepper and licorice root, which are both lightened by a breath of violet and framed by earthy tannins before a subtly mineral finish.



Pops of color fill the interior of the guest house at Maison Delas Frères.

Which brings us, finally, to the Ligne de Crête. It's a wine that "we tried since 2010 [to make] and every vintage, we saw that the quality is something special," recalls Grange; especially as "we rebuilt a lot of walls and terraces in Les Grandes Vignes and we planted a lot of new plants, [we saw that] the place is so beautiful that we want to make [it]. And it costs a lot of money"—he estimates that hillside farming requires "1,500 man hours" per year; three or four times more than at lower elevations—"but suddenly the quality is there, so we [felt we] can make a special cuvée at that place that would be the equivalent of Les Bessards. So it's easy to understand."

Launching with 2,000 bottles in the 2015 vintage, they've now increased the volume to 4,000–5,000 bottles; though just 50–60 cases are currently exported to the U.S., that number is expected to rise too, so confident are they in that quality. "People think of Hermitage as massive, but it can be very elegant, and Les Grandes Vignes is the epitome of that," says Fabrice Rosset. "On south-, southwest-facing slopes on granitic soils, Syrah is just majestic. . . . Here we have the quintessence of Syrah." Indeed, the expansive nose on the 2019 Hermitage Ligne de Crête (\$340) turns like a kaleidoscope on aromas of leather, deep black cherry, peppered brisket, chocolate-covered espresso bean, and cured olive plus a hint of violet; on a palate of velvet, the fruit continues to evolve—plum, black currant, blackberry—amid hints of game in balance with chocolate-edged tannins before licorice graces the finish. Its complexity is matched by its self-possession,

and the same is true of the 2015 (\$340), even more minerally and savory with tobacco and pepper but also perfumed with violet and red fruit (cherry, raspberry, plum) as well as emerging hints of fig and date; as it elongates on the palate, showing elegant acidity, licorice and dark chocolate meet a touch of smoked meat.

A SHOWCASE FOR L'ART DE VIVRE

Because extraordinary wines deserve an extraordinary place in which to drink them, the Rouzaud family didn't stop at constructing a new winery. They also turned the old home of the Jaboulet family into a guest house with the goal of making Maison Delas Frères not just a jewel in the crown of the Roederer Collection but also a top destination for luxury hospitality in the Rhône Valley, if not all of France: After all, says Delas director of wine tourism and public relations Valérie Antomarchi, "You find facilities like this mostly in Bordeaux or Burgundy or Champagne, but for Tain-l'Hermitage, [it's] something absolutely new."

While initially that hospitality was to be reserved for what Antomarchi calls "friends of the company," including members of the trade and press, the house is now, a few years after its completion in December 2019, beginning to open to the public. To be clear, "We will never have a bus of tourists every five minutes," says Antomarchi; with just 11 rooms available for an average of 500 euros per night, it's very much for guests who understand and appreciate *l'art de vivre*.

Designed by Julia Rouzaud—the sister of Champagne Louis Roederer presi-

dent Frédéric Rouzaud and the founder/creative director of studio GOOD-MOODS—the interior is indeed luxe but hardly ostentatious: "When you enter, right away you feel comfortable because it's peaceful," Antomarchi observes. "It's made of materials that are related to nature." Against light woods and off-white walls, the color scheme is rich in greens, golds, and terra cottas accented with pops of yellow and turquoise, evoking the vineyards under sunny skies. Modern, sculptural furnishings and geometric prints are juxtaposed by organic details—ceramic, linen, wicker, cane—throughout the ground floor, which includes a private tasting room, meeting rooms, a dining room graced by pink-marble tables, and a kitchen where local chefs like Rika Bau prepare meals that are "a reflection of the region" and the seasons.

A Guggenheim-inspired spiral staircase leads to the guest rooms and the rooftop of the winery, where small gatherings can be held overlooking the park at the property's center. There, according to Antomarchi, landscapers ensure that the vegetation, blossoming variously throughout the year, appears "different from one day to another"; against that backdrop, in addition to hosting private events, "we can easily do festivals of poetry, of cinema, concerts of classical music. This is something we will have in the next few years." Of course, tastings themselves can be multidimensional experiences; for instance, Antomarchi is working with a perfume specialist who can come in and "interpret the philosophy of the scents in wine . . . to help [guests] understand what the wine is provoking in [them] as an emotion. I want [opportunities like] this to be a trademark of this place."

While the hospitality program is still developing (thanks in part, or rather no thanks, to the pandemic), its potential is bound to be realized sooner rather than later. France will be hosting the Rugby World Cup in September 2023 and the Summer Olympics in 2024; in both cases, Saint-Étienne and Lyon, an hour's drive from Tain-l'Hermitage, are home to competition venues. "So there is a lot to do in the next two years that is going to help us to be visible," Antomarchi notes.

Ultimately, Fabrice Rosset says, "Within the [Hermitage] AOC we want to take the lead." All things considered, Delas appears poised to do just that. **\$**