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Tamlyn Currin – August 2022

Old-vine wines – part 1

Lebanon



The first of an ongoing series on old-vine wines. We start in Lebanon, with what may perhaps be some of the oldest vines in the world. See our Old Vines Register [here](#).

It's tempting to start with the story of Faouzi Issa, the life force behind Dom des Tourelles. He's wired, electric, articulate, unflinchingly confident, and is, without doubt, the most pioneering winemaker in Lebanon since Serge Hochar. He has that mesmeric combination of scientist, engineer and romantic – spiritual-leaning philosophy dominating much of our Zoom conversation on his old-vine wines. But I'm going to resist the temptation to write about this change-maker and vibrant shaker-up of the Lebanese wine industry because Jancis has written so eloquently about him in [Lebanon and the new Serge Hochar?](#) And [Lebanon's oldest winery](#).



Faouzi Issa in his old-vine vineyards

What she didn't say, directly, is that Issa has been the first to champion old vines in Lebanon. He tells me, over a Zoom tasting, that in the late second decade of this century, he saw that everyone seemed to be looking back to their roots, trying to understand where they came from, what defined them, what legacy really meant. For him, this meant looking for indigenous Lebanese grape varieties and old vineyards planted in places where they'd formed such a strong, deep relationship with the terroir that they'd become independently resilient, needing little to no interference from their human keepers. Vineyards, he tells me, that have survived decades without chemicals, with minimal pruning, no ploughing or weeding, no irrigation. Vineyards that survive snow, frost, drought, heatwaves, mildew, without any help. 'The vine is the fighter. It fights. Vines want to survive. By feeding it, it becomes dependent. Without feeding, without over-protecting, it will adapt, become resilient.'

'My new vineyards', he tells me with the wry humour but black-under-eye-circles of someone with small children, 'are like my first child. Every cough, every cry, and we are calling for the ambulance.' His old vineyards need nothing. 'We sit and wait for the harvest, and even then we don't stress. The grapes will be picked and everything will be right. Phenolics, sugar, acidity. With old vines, you do nothing and it is all there.'



Dom des Tourelles' rocky old vineyards in the Bekaa Valley
Although the Issa/Issa-el-Khoury family had been leasing old-vine vineyards from growers in the Bekaa Valley for a very long time, it wasn't until 2014 that Faouzi Issa decided that he wanted to single out the very oldest vineyards they worked with, and make special bottlings of old-vine wines. Cinsault, he tells me, has always been seen by Lebanese winemakers as a blending component, or a grape for rosé, underestimated and even held somewhat in contempt – not a variety to be taken seriously.

'Until suddenly, I was tasting the juice from the parcels and realised: for this one spot, I was always tasting something special. It was always direct, sweet, pure, even if fermented just a couple of weeks before.' That 'spot' happened to be a particular parcel of old Cinsault vines, most of them about 70 years old. And that was when he knew he would make a vieilles vignes Cinsault. 'We didn't invent the rocket', he laughs, 'But to make varietal Cinsault in Lebanon was brave at the time. No one thought for one second that Cinsault was perfect to reflect the vineyard.'



In 2018, he found another parcel of old-vine Carignan, and began to bottle that separately as well.



Merweh vines growing wild in the trees in the cedar mountains
It was more recently that they discovered the Merweh vines, growing extraordinarily high up (more than 1,400 m/4,920 ft) in the ancient, strictly protected Arz al-Rabb, 'The Cedars of God', بَرّلا زراً, located in the Qadisha/Kadisha Valley of Bsharre. Some of these trees are thought to be more than a thousand years old. The vines, definitely more than 100 years old, but very likely as much as 200 years old, have entwined themselves into the trees of this untamed terroir, growing as they would have in the wild. Unpruned, untreated, unfertilised, 'competing' (as modern viticultural perspective would have it) with the trees for light, water and nutrients, facing a harsh, extreme climate and rooted in rocky, infertile soil, these vines defiantly challenge everything we hold to be sacrosanct viticultural science. They produce beautiful, ripe grapes year after year – for the birds, for many, many decades until now.



Harvesting wild Merweh, high up among the Cedars of God
Issa teamed up with some Lebanese ecologists to work on a project to make wine from these remarkable vines. The resulting wine is a blend of 50% ancient Merweh, with its screechingly high acidity, notable saltiness (which he says comes from the rocks of the mountains) and minerality, and 50% 60-year-old organically farmed, unirrigated Obeidi, which is also an indigenous grape. Both varieties were traditionally used for arak, the Levantine anise-flavoured spirit. Issa believes that Obeidi gives the blend more depth and fruit, rounding out the high acidity and saltiness of the Merweh. He only ever uses spontaneous fermentation, and winemaking is strictly minimal intervention.



Beautiful, wild-grown Merweh grapes

Dom des Tourelles' old-vine Lebanese wines

Dom des Tourelles, Vieilles Vignes Merwah/Obeidi 2021 Bekaa Valley

Full bottle 1,226 g. 50% Merweh (as it's spelt on the label), 50% Obeidi. Spontaneous fermentation in stainless steel, each variety separately. No additions. The Merweh comes from vinifera vines thought to be up to 200 years of age. Forgotten for decades, Faouzi Issa found them growing wild up the hundreds-of-years-old cedars in the Bsharre mountains above the Qadisha (Holy) Valley. The Obeidi is from a parcel around 60 years old, planted at 1,100 m (3,610 ft) in the Bekaa Valley. The second vintage of this Vieilles Vignes Merwah/Obeidi.

Slightly nutty on the nose, a whiff of cordite, but not saying much. But one sip and the wine explodes into a million glittering shards. As if a chandelier of white light had fractured into thousand of salt and lemon crystals. Almost shocking, the intensity of the acidity, the saltiness, the singularity of the driving arrow-like line of the wine. Salt-pickled lemons, white grapefruit, sour satsuma. But there is also a hidden note of honey, quinine, a tangle of aromatic Mediterranean herbs, and the sweetness of angelica, which becomes more apparent as the wine warms in the glass. Issa says that the wine will age very well, 'for years and years', he reckons. Although this unusual, coruscating wine is so bracing, it is all you need on a hot day to cool you down. (TC)

11% Drink 2022 – 2027

Dom des Tourelles, Vieilles Vignes Merwah/Obeidi 2020 Bekaa Valley

Full bottle 1,253 g. The first vintage of this 50% Merweh, 50% Obeidi blend made from vines around 200 years old growing up the cedars of Lebanon, high in the mountains. Untrained, unpruned, untouched for decades and decades. Spontaneous fermentation in stainless steel. Cold fermentation and lees contact during and for five or six days after fermentation.

A touch more colour than the 2021. Smells like wild honeysuckle, sweet-box blossom and pickled grapefruit peel. Much more fruit here than in the 2021 – although the acidity is still formidable, glittering and structural. Tangy citrus, brine, quinine. Like the 2021, intensely salty, but this has more curve, not so much the cutting edge of the 2021. Almond liqueur and a tiny trace of something cedary. Is it at all possible that might have come from the trees? Fascinating wine. (TC)

11% Drink 2021 – 2027

Dom des Tourelles, Vieilles Vignes Cinsault 2019 Bekaa Valley

Full bottle 1,265 g. Made from 50- to 70-year-old Cinsault vines – a vineyard that the family has leased for a very, very long time, and in fact the family planted these vines. In western Bekaa, at 1,050 m (3,445 ft) above sea level, on clay limestone. Dry-farmed, low-yielding bush vines. Hand-picked, spontaneous fermentation in 150-year-old concrete tanks for 10 days. Spontaneous malo. Aged for six months in very old casks before bottling. The first vintage of this wine was in 2013.

This is so good that the nose of wine made me smile out loud. The first sip made me laugh with pleasure. Outrageously drinkable, and yet there are layers and layers. The acidity puts vivid relief into the contours of the fruit and flavours of the wine. Redcurrants and raspberries, a darker pop of ripe, sun-warm blackcurrants and sour-cherry snapshots, but under all this somehow transparent fruit with glass-bauble sheen, there is a taste of lavender, a lick of red blood, old terracotta roof tiles baking in the hot sun, Turkish delight, grenadine, thyme. Immensely complex, despite its jollity, despite convincing anyone not looking too hard that this is simple fun. This will age. It has the temerity of tannins, the backbone of acidity, and the trueness of fruit. Although I would not be able to resist drinking it now. It practically grabs you bodily and dances you around the room, singing 'Drink me! Drink me! Drink me!'. Damn delicious, quite frankly. VGV (TC)

14% Drink 2022 – 2028

Dom des Tourelles, Vieilles Vignes Carignan 2019 Bekaa Valley

Full bottle 1,264 g. 50- to 70-year-old Carignan vines from a long-term-contract vineyard adjoining the Cinsault vineyard. Planted by the Tourelles team. It's located in the western Bekaa Valley, 1,050 m (3,445 ft) above sea level on clay with some limestone. Dry-farmed and no chemicals used. Hand-picked two weeks before the Cinsault.

Spontaneous fermentation in 150-year-old concrete tanks, spontaneous malo in tanks and aged for two years in concrete vats. The first vintage of this was 2018.

Unusually perfumed for a Carignan – prunes and rose petals. Sweet paprika dust. One of the most gentle Carignans I've tasted. Deep but relatively delicate red-plum and wild-strawberry fruit dipped in cherry sherbet and rose-hip syrup. A touch of amaretto. The top notes of fruit are pure, rounded, fleshy and red-juicy with a woody, pine-scented, mountain-herb lift. The under notes are dates and leather, dustiness, Sichuan spice. Stone-dust and iron-shavings minerality. It has the

rugged rasp of Carignan, but it's wrapped in cashmere. Strikingly delicate and translucent for a Carignan, yet losing nothing of Carignan's gypsy-wild, windswept devil-may-care. (TC)

14% Drink 2022 – 2029