

Domaine des Tourelles, Vieilles Vignes Cinsault 2021 Bekaa Valley



As rare as hen's teeth: a wine of the week that has been [a wine of the week before](#), albeit in a different vintage. From \$24.96 or €19.50

There is not much I can say about Bekaa-born Faouzi Issa (above), co-owner and winemaker of Domaine des Tourelles in the Bekaa Valley, that has not already been said by Jancis and Tam but in a week in which Lebanon has again been in the news because of death and destruction, I wanted to celebrate the life that continues to be created every year at Domaine des Tourelles in the most challenging circumstances imaginable. (See Michael Karam's [Lessons in wine-region survival](#).) Issa told me on Wednesday that the nearest pager explosion to them was 1 km away from the winery.

In 2018, the year Domaine des Tourelles celebrated its 150th anniversary, Jancis's articles [Lebanon and the new Serge Hochar?](#) and [Lebanon's oldest winery](#) told of Issa's journey into wine, via Bordeaux's Château Margaux and René Rostaing in the Rhône, as well as giving a brief history of Domaine des Tourelles, Lebanese wine more generally and the arrival of Cinsault in the country in the 19th century along with Carignan and Grenache.

Tam continued the story in 2022 in more personal terms in [Old-vine wines – part 1 Lebanon](#), describing Issa as 'that mesmeric combination of scientist, engineer and romantic', at the same time highlighting Issa's commitment to old vines.

The first vintage of this wine was [2014](#), which was when Issa realised that the old vines offered something special and deserved to be bottled separately (they now have four wines in their [Old](#)

Vine Collection). He explains, ‘Cinsault has been farmed in the Bekaa Valley since the mid 19th century before ceding the way to new imported varieties.’ For many a year, it was the most widely planted variety in the country but it is now much less popular than it once was.



Old-vine Cinsault bush vines

It’s a testimony to the resilience of Issa, the team at Domaine des Tourelles and these old vines that this wine is just as good – maybe even better – in the 2021 vintage. I tasted it with Issa at the Old Vine Conference event in London earlier this year (my notes on many more wines will be published next month) and was so enamoured with this Cinsault that he subsequently sent me samples of several more of his wines, including a heroic – and delicious – old treasure, their Vin Rouge 1976.

The Vieilles Vignes Cinsault is made from dry-farmed vines in the Western Bekaa at an elevation of 1,050 m (3,445 ft). At least 50 years old, many of them 70, they are planted on clay with some limestone. All of their vineyards are farmed organically. The grapes are harvested by hand, fermented in what Issa claims are the oldest unlined concrete fermenters in the world with ambient yeasts and aged in neutral French oak for eight months. His explanation of these winemaking choices is that they offer both ‘the purest expression of the grape’ and allow ‘the reflection of the terroir of the Bekaa Valley’.



The 2021 is utterly moreish, expressive and vibrant but deserves to be taken seriously. It smells of bitter-sweet cherry, with a subtle and attractive impression of stone dust and a lovely peppery note. A bitter-red-fruit freshness dominates the flavour that fills out the chalky-dry and definite, refined tannins. There's a delicious 'bite' of freshness on the finish and even with all this energy and life, it somehow manages to be elegant, too. The alcohol is a respectable and integrated 13.5%.

At the end of my tasting note I also added the abbreviation GV, indicating good value, though I should perhaps have been more generous and used VGV (very good value), as Tam did when she tasted the 2019.

The 2020 is the vintage available in the US and a bottle miraculously winged its way from Lebanon to the UK this week for me to taste this morning. Issa describes the differences in the two seasons as follows:

'Vintage 2020 was a bit earlier for the Cinsault due to heatwaves at the beginning of September that enhanced a fast ripening on the Cinsault and higher alcohol [14%]. However, we notice good acidity, especially as our Cinsault is very old and at an elevation of 1,200 m. The weather was more balanced in 2021 and the wine has greater ageing potential [I'd suggest at least 3–4 years] thanks to bolder tannins.'

The 2020 is a little more evolved than the 2021, the red fruit now entwined with more mature flavours – hints of fig, dried cherry and leather. The flavours are more complex, the tannins still firm enough to suggest the wine should be drunk with food and yet it is also enticingly aromatic. As it warmed in the glass, there was even a subtle floral note. Both vintages are deliciously fresh with that red-cherry bite at the end and a nicely dry texture, telling the story of their origins in the harsh conditions of the Bekaa Valley.

While I cannot say much more about Issa himself, there is news on the changes Domaine des Tourelles have made to make their business even more sustainable, in particular switching totally to solar energy for the 2024 harvest, which is wrapping up this week, about 10 days earlier than previous vintages.



As he explains, ‘The switch to solar power is particularly significant because Lebanon does not have access to 24-hour electricity, meaning that generators fill the gaps in the supply. During harvest this means a particularly high demand for fuel, which over recent years has often been in short supply in the country.’ This initiative is supported by their use of concrete tanks, which need less cooling than stainless steel.



They have also switched to lighter bottles, use locally grown bamboo and sugar cane to support young vines, clean up waste water from the winery, fertilise the vines with pomace (or give it to local shepherds), use dried thistles harvested from the mountains for the first filtration from the tanks and provide employment opportunities for people from the villages surrounding the winery who would otherwise have to emigrate to the city or abroad to find jobs. With such an eye to the future, maybe another vintage of this wine will be a wine of the week in a few years' time.