



Vintage journey

Ever looked at a wine label and wondered what kind of place the contents come from? Chris Rundle traced back a bottle of Faugères. Pictures: Fran Stothard



I'll just let the brake off," said Bridget Petit, and hauled on a rope hanging by the stone wall. As the wooden shoe eased away from the great central wheel, the huge wooden beam 3ft above our heads started to rotate, picked up speed and was soon creaking and spinning at a fine old rate while outside the arms of the windmill, set with the minimum of sail, rattled round in the teeth of the Tramontane, the north-west wind which, they say, blows away the clouds, the rain and the mosquito – and, sometimes, even the tourists. Up here, the sky was a piercingly bright blue and the air clear enough to see the thin, sparkling band of the Mediterranean 25 miles south. Apart from the odd distant house half-hidden in the landscape, the scene was timeless. Even the windmill looked exactly as it did when first built in the 16th century, and for one very good reason. When it was rebuilt as the result of a local fundraising campaign in 1998, the work was carried out by members of the same guild of craftsmen who had constructed the original almost 500 years earlier. They even had the original plans to work from. But while the views stretched far to the south, offering a glimpse of the distant Pyrenees and rolling away northwards on a succession of mountain ridges, the one place we couldn't see was from where we'd set out half an hour earlier to climb the old miller's path through woods of evergreen oak – Faugères. It was tucked away under the ridge at our feet, but we quickly rejoined it, passing the old stone terracing and capelles, the dry-stone shepherds' shelters now being painstakingly restored by

conservation volunteers. It has to be admitted that of Faugères itself there is not a great deal: a main road winding up a hillside, a maze of narrow lanes and alleys between the houses. But it's a large enough village to have an official "centre", albeit one of the smallest it's probably possible to have. A few square yards are given over to some tables and chairs, and the proprietress of the minuscule grocery will serve you a coffee or a cold beer and bring you a paper to read after you've done your shopping. So why should Faugères be such an illustrious name to discover on a wine label? Because Faugères isn't just a straggling village – the word also applies to the small and jealously-protected wine-growing region which sprawls across the surrounding landscape, an Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée area where a shade over 50 vineyards produce some of the most fabulous wines in south-west France. Down on the Biterrois plain close to the coast, there are thousands of acres of vines all producing the

workaday glugging wines most commonly associated with the Languedoc. Up here in the arriere-pays at an average height of 250 metres above sea level, it's an altogether different matter. Faugères grows its vines uniquely on the south-facing slopes, the slaty schist rock giving mineral-rich results, the whites fruity, keen-edged and refreshing, the reds deeply complex – the first mouthful is a stunning kaleidoscope of flavours which leave the palate gradually but only slowly, one by one. There's a wine festival here every second Sunday in July when the connoisseurs turn up to sample, quaff and buy – at prices which generally come in at least a third less, if not a half price, compared to what you'd be paying in the UK. And for the rest of the year there's the walking: mile after mile of footpath and trail through the wooded hills, routes which occasionally break out at viewpoints which offer vast panoramas down across the plain, before plunging you back into

the welcome shade of the woods. Our base was La Vigneronne, run by Christian and Regine Godefroide, who moved here from Belgium eight years ago, restored the winery to create a chambre d'hôte operation and threw themselves into wine-making. The old cellar became the dining room where guests now eat at the long, communal table while Christian punctuates dinner with a selection of four wines. The bedrooms are simple, elegantly furnished and immensely comfortable. For the summer days, when the shade temperature can nudge into the 40s, there's also a swimming pool. Our first meal took us to Villemagne a few miles to the north, where the mayor proudly offers free guided tours (twice a month on a Thursday afternoon) of a medieval village now standing two, if not three, metres above the original settlement, the result of generations of inhabitants attempting to build themselves out of the reach of the frequent floods. At the Auberge de l'Abbaye, chef Christian Bepot has been experimenting with local ingredients for years, and now turns out artistic creations which constantly surprise with the most unlikely pairings of flavours and textures. In nearby Bedarieux, we ate at La Forge – as its name suggests, a former iron foundry – where they offer an excellent three-course lunch for 16 euros. But the Hostellerie du Grezan in Laurens, a few miles south of Faugères village, presented the real surprise – a crenellated "chateau" where we ate

regally on the terrasse and sampled a red of such immense character that it was impossible not to leave without visiting the shop. And if you consider wine-tasting and buying to be an essential element of any holiday, then you have come to the right place. Most of the local estates are now geared up to receive visitors – much to the delight of Daniel Gallier who heads up the Faugères tourist committee, based in an office little larger than a wardrobe. "A few years ago," he said, "if you went to try and buy direct from a producer there wouldn't be any tasting. He'd probably ask you what you wanted, give you a price and that was it. It was really a question of 'take it or leave it'." "But they're much more clued up now. They've realised the importance of welcoming customers, letting them taste what's available, making it a real experience for the customer." We visited three or four wineries where we were offered tastings in rooms where smoked glass and subtle lighting added to the natural atmosphere of centuries-old vaulted ceilings, and found it difficult to imagine how even a wine novice could fail to be seduced by the local produce. Dinner at La Vigneronne on the last night was a noisy affair. There was a full house of guests, some of whom had been helping Christian with the grape harvest earlier. And there was animated discussion of the particularly outstanding selections Christian had made to accompany the meal. And finally, with a glass of Fine de Faugères, Christian's homedistilled brandy, we toasted ourselves off to a very late bed.



Vine times: Christian Godefroide harvesting. La Vigneronne, a windmill at Les 3 Tours, a wine label and the chateau on it.

Factfile

- Chris Rundle and Fran Stothard travelled to Beziers, 20 miles south of Faugères, with Ryanair, which flies to a number of other destinations in southern France including Carcassonne and Nîmes.
- Ryanair operates three weekly flights to and from Beziers from Bristol International Airport with prices as low as £10, but varying according to availability and how far in advance you book. Car hire rates start from £12 a day. For more details visit www.ryanair.com or call 0871 246 0000.
- Rooms at La Vigneronne in Faugères cost from about 69 euros a night for two people, including breakfast. Dinner, including a selection of local wines, costs 32 euros. Call 00 33 467 957 849 or email: lavigneronne@yahoo.fr
- For more details call Faugères Tourist Office on 00 33 467 985 473 or email si.faugerois@free.fr