

## **Irish Time – mars 2004.**

**The Languedoc : France's Languedoc is in a ferment of excitement, where nearly every producer is inspired about new and better vin de pays, writes Mary Dowey.**

Let me introduce you to one of my wine heroes. He's Jean Orliac, the man on the right in the photograph above, sitting with his son Yves on a wall of boulders cleared to plant a vineyard, right at the foot of the Mont d'Hortus – a limestone plateau close to Pic Saint Loup, the towering white landmark of the Languedoc. He's not famous – not really, except among a growing band of Languedoc lovers. You won't see him on the international winemaker circuit, toggled out in a suit and spouting jargon-laden chit-chat. You can't imagine him anywhere but here, up in the wild hills north of Montpellier. He loves this place – loves the savages magnificence of the scenery, loves the microclimates which foster different grapes. I am with him for hours and he never stops smiling. If somebody could bottle a fraction of that passion and pass it on to the purveyors of dreary, formulaic wine...oh, the world would be a tastier place.

As a young man, Orliac came here to rock-climb up the sheer limestone cliffs. Compared with what he was soon to undertake, rock-climbing sounds easy. There weren't many vineyards in the area then – most had been abandoned after the war – but he decided to get into wine. Hanging on to his post as a lab technician in Montpellier until 1992, Orliac double-jobbed for 16 years, spending every spare minute up in the hills at his Domaine de l'Hortus. His wife and family helped – not just with planting vines and harvesting grapes but building a winery and a fanciful, tall wooden house next door, like something which might have suited Topsy. Were there difficult moments ? Yes, “The Languedoc at that time was a big question mark,” Orliac recalls. “And it took me 20 years to plant everything. But, from the first bottle the wine was very well received by major critics – so I knew we'd planted the right varieties in the right places. That was reassuring.” He beams. This is a man who made his difficult dream come true – and looks as if he still can't quite believe it. **Mary Dowey.**

### **Bottles of the week :**

**Bergerie de l'Hortus Vin de Pays du Val de Montferrand 2002 :** have been a fan of this deliciously peachy yet refreshing white for a few years. It's a highly unusual blend of Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, Viognier and Roussanne : the proportions of the various grapes vary from year to year, depending on harvest conditions. I don't think it's ever tasted better than in this vintage. A perfect white for spring and summer. From Wines Direct.