

WINEGROWING

CHATEAU DE LARDILEY, GIRONDE

Selling wine...and eggs

Chickens are the new chic in vineyards. While some rely on them to deter pests and maintain cover crops, others integrate them into a much broader approach combining fertilization and revenue diversification, as demonstrated by Château de Lardiley in the Gironde department of France.

Eventually generate 50% of his revenues from wine and 50% from diversified products, including eggs, poultry, mutton and even medicinal herbs: this is the idea driving Vincent Lataste, biodynamic winemaker at Château de Lardiley (Cadillac). “With climate change – and the drought of spring 2022 has shown us again – we can’t be sure of anything. That’s why it’s interesting to diversify our output and return to the multi-revenue farm model of 50 years ago.”

In 2020, the winemaker bought 20 hens and four cocks. “I chose the Gascon breed, famous for Henri IV’s famous *poule au pot*. This local, rustic breed is known for the quality of its eggs and meat. But since it’s rare, we had to develop the flock on site,” says the winegrower, who now has 750 chickens on his farm after incubating his eggs.



Each of the six 20 m² mobile coops can house 120 chickens

IN THE VINEYARDS IN THE WINTER

The chickens roam free on a dozen hectares of vineyard during the winter period (up to bud break) and then in planted fields. The winemaker, who has a total of 15 hectares of vines, also has 16 hectares of land where he grows cereals for the chickens. “We close off 2-hectare plots with sheep fencing and leave the chickens there for two months. We then change plots. In the vineyards, we don’t have trouble with snails anymore!”

To avoid foxes helping themselves, two Pyrenean donkeys live with the chickens and deter predators, including in the vineyards from the end of fall until spring. “Still, I lose about 10-15% annually to foxes, birds of prey and also pecking between the chickens!”



In 2020, the winegrower started by buying 20 hens and four cocks of the Gascon breed. He now has 750!

1 EURO AN EGG

The six mobile chicken coops (20 m² - €3,000 euros/unit second hand, each suitable for 120 laying hens) are moved by a neighbor's tractor during the season. Eventually, the winemaker expects a daily output of 1,000 biodynamic eggs, sold at €1 each. “The Gascon breed only produces 150 eggs a year, compared to 300 for modern laying breeds. But the quality of the eggs is truly superior!” The eggs are sold direct from the farm, in specialist organic shops and through café/hotel/restaurant networks. “Many clients were asking me to supply them with other products from the farm! That's where the idea came from.” The sale of poultry, slaughtered at 6 months (compared to 3 months in general) is being considered as a complement (2.5 kg of carcass at €20/kg). The idea is to create two full-time jobs in poultry.

While the financial investment is “not excessive,” it is above all “the human investment that's very sizeable,” admits Vincent Lataste. “To have the right to sell eggs, they have to go through an approved packing center. A request has been made for the farm but could take 6-9 months. So, for the time being, I'm going through a supplier.”

Finally, the Sword of Damocles above the project: bird flu. Although the virus is wreaking havoc in 2022, the Gironde region is not currently targeted by lockdown measures. So, Vincent Lataste is keeping his chickens outside and pursuing his goal of “complexifying the biotope.”

Olivier Lévêque



The donkeys protect Vincent Lataste's chickens from foxes... But a few still end up being devoured.

ALAIN MALARD WINEGROWING CONSULTANT

“Combining poultry and cow manure”

“The agroecological approach is to restore life to systems and not try to reduce it!” For Alain Malard, on vines and crop covers, poultry manure is a way to restore balance to the needs of the vineyard. “Every chicken produces around 3 kg of manure a month, or a total of 2 tons of manure per hectare per month with the 750 chickens at Château de Lardiley. Chicken manure is an excellent fertilizer, rich in nitrogen (35/40 units/ton), phosphorus (30 units/ton), potassium (30 units/ton) and calcium (up to 80 units/T) + magnesium, sulfur and many trace elements. With a few chickens (25/ha), you can quickly obtain a fertilizer (1 ton/ha) that is eco-friendly, economical and very good quality.”



“By leaving the chickens from harvest to bud break, you accumulate manure, and the urea will be transformed into ammoniac starting in March, once the soil temperatures rise above 10-12°C, when the vines start to need it,” says the consultant, who recommends setting up rotations to leave the chickens no longer than 3-4 weeks in any zone of the vineyard, avoiding them over-scratching. “And during the summer season, you need to have chicken runs to take them out the vineyards, and then spread the manure from the coops on the vineyards.”

A final tip from Alain Malard: combine poultry manure with cow manure: “The synergies are very interesting, thanks to the wealth of microorganisms from the cow dung. By giving it nitrogen from the poultry manure, you considerably boost its action, with heightened mineralization and in the end real potential increases in vine yields.”