

# Les Wineries du Rhône

**Marrenon**



PORTRAIT —

## MARRENON – PICKING THEMSELVES UP AND DUSTING THEMSELVES OFF

Being told their wines were old-fashioned was a bitter pill to swallow. But the Board of the Union of Cooperatives in Tours d'Aigues, Luberon, took it on the chin, and realised it was time to turn everything around.

### Coming a cropper

When Amédée Ginies set up the Marrenon Union of Cooperatives in 1965, it was for two reasons: first of all, he was among the first to predict that large-scale wine retail was heading for a period of high growth, and secondly, he saw the potential for Syrah in the mountain vineyards of Luberon and Ventoux, when all around him were growing Grenache. Success came swiftly. **The now-thriving business is often cited as an example** of how one man believed that his terroirs could produce far better-quality wine than the table wines made there thus far. And history has proved him right.

Then came the end of the 1990s. Suddenly progress ground to a halt, taking not only the Union by surprise, but the whole of France as well. “Made-in-France wines and the whole AOC system had been resting on its laurels, lulled by unfettered growth and a bullish world market. France couldn’t – or didn’t want to – see that their competitors

were growing twice or even three times as fast as they were - and not only in the New World, but in Italy and Spain too. It was a brutal wake-up call.

### Changing the power structure

Jean-Louis Piton was elected president of the Union of Cooperatives in 2000. He suggested a dual approach to addressing the issues, **focusing on adding value, and making changes at the top.** “Our appellations couldn’t continue to match the price/quality ratio of the larger-capacity regional appellation. We had to act more like a cru, like Vacqueyras, Gigondas or Châteauneuf. “But adding value doesn’t happen automatically. You have to know your 4,500 hectares of vineyard as intimately as you’d know a 10-ha estate. And it takes time and money to determine the winegrowing potential of every plot. It takes monitoring, tasting and trials – a raft of data to be stored and analysed. The next challenge, again not an easy one, was to persuade the winegrowers that where they had largely been autonomous, it would now be up to Marrenon to decide on their agricultural practices and harvest dates, and determine when their grapes could be brought in. It was a tough call, and some members chose to jump ship.

### It’s all about the people

But when one person leaves, another takes their place. In this case, Marrenon welcomed a new MD, Philippe Tolleret, formerly of Skalli wines. In Philippe, Jean-Louis Piton saw someone who knew the business, **who could immediately identify the potential of the grapes, even when tasting a less-than-perfect wine.** In the course of his career, Philippe had amassed a valuable store of knowledge and understanding of flavour; he knew which products worked on which markets. One winery tour later, he was ready with his verdict. He explained the style of wine he felt would be right, and put forward his

**Jean-Louis Piton,  
President of Maison  
Marrenon.**



**Established in 1965**

*Employees: 54*

*Sales: 195,100 hl*

*Turnover 2016: €32*

*million, including €7*

*million to export*

**Brands include:** Grand Marrenon, Orca, Petula, Doria, Gardarem



**“It’s not enough to be a good manager or salesman. One of the reasons we’ve done so well is that we picked someone who’d been involved with the technical side of the business all his life.”**

recommendations. It was just the thing.

### Harvest Time

Although the journey is far from over, there are signs that it was the right path to take. Critics who had been reluctant to feature Marrenon wines, like the Wine Advocate or Wine Spectator, now had no issue with them. When you sell your wine at €1 above the current market rate, the name on the label has to be famous enough to convince consumers to pay the extra. 10 years ago, the Marrenon name “wasn’t worth a kopek,” as Jean-Louis Piton puts it. Now it’s coming into its own. “These successful products will be the basis of our new umbrella brand,” he says. Some things are still a bit of a surprise. Marrenon’s Amountange, for example. It’s the Provençal for transhumance and is about as unpronounceable and incomprehensible as it can get for a foreigner. Yet it’s selling like hot cakes in Asia. The true meaning of going global, perhaps?



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