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Spring has returned. The Earth is like a child that knows poems. ~Rainer Maria Rilke

Natural Wine Fair Update



By the pricking of my thumbs something natural this way comes.

The catalogue, a labour of... labour is nearing completion. It won't have the razzle-dazzle of pie charts, Nielson stats, pretty colour photos or be totally *logo-rific*, but we are printing it on recycled paper, so, hey, who's complaining.

I don't think anyone should judge natural wine in general by one particular wine event. Yoking together a wide variety of growers from different regions at different ends of the spectrum we are putting a collective finger in the wind to gauge the response from the public and the trade in the UK. I'm always a trifle concerned when binding definitions are sought; for me natural wine should be seen both as an exemplification of all that is positive and dynamic in wine, rather than a sectarian movement. By exalting good practice such as ecological responsibility and biodiversity we challenge the orthodoxies of mass-marketed, highly manipulated wines and by illustrating that more can be achieved with less intervention we hope to stimulate consumers and commentators to re-evaluate what is good and what is right in wine. At the moment the adversarial debate on natural wines is being reduced to the formulaic "to sulphur or not to sulphur"; it is a hell of a lot more complex than that.

Freak-anomalous

People are strange when you're a stranger.

Only the insecure would claim that natural wine is an absolutist ideology. There are certain companies indoctrinating their customers with the notion that "natural wines are incomplete." Sometimes, you have to reduce the issues to a quantum wee-ness to get the message across. If wine were an individual and winemaking the make-up, then we prefer to see the lines of the face and the tone of the skin, in brief the natural, unadorned beauty. Once you begin to apply make-up clumsily the artifice is distracting and, in terms of winemaking, the sum of the many added parts is usually considerably less than the whole. Skilful physical interventions are part of the health of the wine (just like good diet and a balanced lifestyle makes for a healthier human being) but chemical interventions do not make the wine complete any more than make-up "makes" a person beautiful inside. The fact that wines *avec maquillage* (and chemical manipulations) are considered to be the norm and naked wines are seen as a perverse corruption is an indication of a topsy-turvy world that values appearance over substance.

It's about time we looked at winemaking in a holistic sense rather than as a succession of chemical choices. The question then that might be posed is "what should I do so that I don't need to wear make-up at all", rather than "how much, and what kind of make-up, shall I wear?" Why is it that certain wines evidently do not require sulphur, whilst others, equally evidently, need it for stability?

The healthy wine should be allowed to shine.

I've read recently that terroir can only be expressed in clean fruit and clean fruit can only be achieved if the winemaker has eliminated anything which might be construed as faulty in the wine. One person's cleanness is another's neutering. How many additives would you use to steer the wine away from its natural origins and make it into an unapologetic man-made product? How much of the flavour would you filter out before you felt it would be "agreeably fruity"? This product-driven view of wine doesn't seem to acknowledge that the better the raw material the less you generally have to improve it. Formula winemaking leads to wines that are bereft of personality and individuality. It is also lazy winemaking.

Fair Play

For the all feather-ruffling arguments one hopes that curiosity will attract cats of all creeds and colours to the natural wine fair. When was the last time the UK hosted an independent tasting of this quality and magnitude outside of the generics (which are brand-heavy).

Consider an event with

1. 120 growers - all working sustainably, the majority organically and a good proportion biodynamically.
2. A wide range of low and zero sulphur wines
3. A consumer day
4. A range of seminars and master-classes presented by experts in their field
5. A fortnight's promotion in 130 restaurants of natural wines by the glass
6. A sustained pr drive hitting food and wine bloggers, local and national magazines and newspapers.

Add to this a rolling series of educational wine events hosted by Isabelle Legeron at two star Michelin Hibiscus, the excellent work done by our partners in the on-trade, the continued profile of Terroirs, Brawn, Bar Battu, Green & Blue, Artisan & Vine and Wholefoods (amongst others), the support of writers and bloggers like Fiona Beckett and Jamie Goode and I think we can confidently say that the roots of a natural wine culture are pretty well established.

Some commentators are sceptical because they think they know the wines already, others critical because they see (as far as they are concerned) a movement without rules and precise definition. Generally, these commentators accept and enjoy the "conventional-natural" wines, but are less enamoured with the more "extreme" examples. The great natural wines may not chime with the great critical aesthetic; that is their peculiar charm. It is at the margins that the leap of faith, so it would seem, is required. That's the easy explanation; I would also say that it takes a leap of intellect as well, because it means putting aside preconceptions about right and wrong and examining the wine for what it is.

The wine is alive. It will change, from minute to minute, hour to hour, day to day. If your professional duty demands that you snapshot-taste two hundred plus wines in a day, how do you judge something that is constantly mutating, something that exists not within the normal realm of reference, but within its particular arc of development.

To which the answer might be "if the wine is not for customers who is it designed for"?

This is not a question of design. True artists aren't thinking of the hypothetical everyday punter waiting in the wings to buy their picture while they are painting. Great art happens when the soul of the artist is liberated from the constraints of commercialism. The natural winemaker is a kind of artisan-artist, striving to interpret nature as sensitively as possible. It may be an ideal of imagination rather than reason to hope that certain wines may slip the surly bonds of earth to exist happily on their own untrespassed plane, but some artists certainly aspire to render themselves as invisible as possible in the creative process.

Isabelle Legeron Redresses The Balance...

Isabelle Legeron wrote this extremely persuasive and passionate piece in Harper's Wine & Spirit. For all that we appreciate articles on natural wine, sometimes the nuances are lost in translation and it requires someone on the inside to give a clear perspective.

Isabelle Legeron MW: thoughts on natural wine

Tuesday, 19 April 2011

The comments by Isabelle Legeron MW follow the analysis "Making a Case for Natural Wines" in Harpers Wine & Spirit on April 8.

"I have tasted hundreds of natural wines and I would say that there are really only a few that I have come across that I would say fall short in winemaking terms. All in all, it's a tiny minority. Of course there are faulty wines in the natural wine camp but there are 'bad' wines in every other wine category as well. It is a silly argument to levy against 'natural wine' per se. You'll find poor examples in any 'type' of wine - conventional or natural. So to extrapolate from one example to the category as a whole does not make any sense.

I don't think that all early drinking natural wines are faulty. Far from it. And I would certainly include them on a wine list. My point about easy drinking vs fine wine referred simply to the issue of stability. Easy drinking wine made for early consumption (i.e. vin de soif as it is known) tends to lack ageing potential and needs to be drunk within the year. Fine natural wine, on the other hand, is definitely age-worthy (very important as I often hear critics of natural wine saying 'they don't age') and it is actually incredibly stable, particularly once open. Whereas a conventional wine is likely to have lost most if not all of its character a couple of days after opening, many natural wines hold their own for a good couple of weeks. Extraordinary but true.

I am quoted saying "in the other camp are wines that have been matured properly, have had a long elevage in tank or oak...", which I think is misleading since it's not about the vessel used. The key is that great natural wine is given time to find its own stability rather than being forcibly stabilised through processing and additives. It's all about time and giving the wine a chance to grow up.

I think we need to focus on encouraging growers who are working really hard and taking a lot of risks by producing wines without any additives. Natural wines are live products and yes sometimes things can go wrong and you might end up with a wine that referments, but as an industry I think it is time we started recognising that while wine is in its essence a natural product, unfortunately most wines today have veered off the 'natural' path and have become foregone conclusions defined by processing and predictability. Crushed grapes left to their own device do not necessarily become vinegar, they can and do become beautiful wine. As an industry it is time we started questioning the validity, genuineness and so-called 'authenticity' of the flavours we associate with terroir. Can you really say that added industrial yeast reflects terroir?

Wine is a truly exciting drink but its excitement is only due to its true diversity and irreproducibility - its terroir. It kills me to see the standardisation and homogenisation that has happened in the wine world today. I for one frankly prefer too much brett or volatility to the squeaky clean boiled sweet aromas and excessive vanilla or coffee notes so often associated with modern winemaking."

Jason Yapp Rages Against the Machine

We second these emotions!

<http://www.yapp.co.uk/blog/index.php>

Alcohol Anomalous

Just taken delivery of some samples: a Muscadet from Landron - 11.5%; a white Roussillon from Jean-François Nicq - 12% (!); a couple of southern Rhones from Gilles Azzoni - 12% and a Txacoli Rosado weighing in an angel-wing 10.5%. Two swift observations - the best organic and biodynamic wines seem to reach physiological maturity at lower potential alcohol levels than those which have been farmed using chemicals. The wines seem better balanced with lengthy maturation on the vine yet retain fine acidity. And the most accomplished winemakers don't force the issue in the winery by attempting to trick the wine up.

Oxy-moron - More about Wine Faults

We speak confidently about faults and yet these are not cut-and-dried issues. A wine which is oxidised (maderised, if white) is dying the moment it hits the glass. These wines are musty, lifeless, brown. Wines where oxygen is a factor in the élevage - either overtly (think of the rancio Banyuls and Maurys of the Roussillon, traditional yellow wines from Jura, oloroso, Madeira, Marsala, classic Vernaccia di Oristano, white wines from Granada), or more subtly, (think Loire chenin, Chateau Musar Blanc and northern Italian whites with a certain amount of skin contact) - not only last but improve over the course of time. Whilst I love uncomplicated fresh wines - they are as snapshots of bright fruit - I also appreciate the meditative qualities of wines which are like paintings with a rich impasto of texture...

Oxygen confers secondary notes and layers of flavour - it can soften and enrich the wine. Those aromas of honey, truffle, walnut, cooked pastry, humus, spice, toast, those beautiful complex liaisons of smell and flavour are integral to wines that you can return over the period of several days and discover something new in every sniff and slurp.

The ultimate aromatic profile of a wine contains a succession of biochemical reactions that is far too complex for a bear of my particular limited brainpower to understand, let alone explain. Symbols on a page are one thing, aesthetic taste is another. To me the most interesting smells in wines result from vinifications which have minimal intervention, in other words, wild yeast, ambient temperature, low or no sulphur throughout. This is not a fail-safe way to make wine and sometimes a

bacterial reaction will occur that renders the wine undrinkable, but the rewards, in my opinion, outweigh the risks.

Let's look at the alternative winemaking options. During ferment at cool temps certain primary aromas come to the fore. When you taste a host of cool ferment (whites) it is very difficult to determine grape variety; it is nigh impossible to pinpoint their origin. This kind of homogenisation is counter-intuitive to the notion that wine is a natural product. Add flavoured yeasts to the recipe, filter and fine, et *voilà*. When one has reached this level of manipulation the further addition of acids, sugars and colour seems only logical.

By chemically counteracting (or rather anticipating) perceived faults, winemakers are in danger of antiseptic over-compensation, thereby denaturing the very grapes they have strived so hard to nurture to health.

Yesterday, I drank a beautiful natural wine that was fresh, utterly vibrant and charming beyond belief. Throbbing with healthy purple (I didn't see that quality of colour in a hundred plus red wines of Decanter tasting), the flavours were clean and crunchy, the palate full of sap and zip with a trace of graphite minerality bringing the wine to an exhilarating close. This was real grapes-to-bottle stuff sans funk. I would venture that no-one would find such a wine remotely objectionable, and once enough people acknowledge that natural low-intervention wines are not only not "off", but can be deliciously flavoursome, then we will have advanced the tenor of the debate.

The Box Rebellion - The New Refined Bibulosity

Bladderbags are not rentagob commentators who can't hold their vino whilst holding forth on vino. I'm referring to box wines or bag-in-box (BIB) wines (the Australians call 'em cask wines) that feature an airtight wine-filled plastic bladder inside a cardboard box. You use a built-in spigot to get to the wine. Or a hammer and a chisel if you fancy a flood. They can be found on the bottom shelf of the wine wall and behind the bar, out of sight at your local restaurant and on the top shelf of my fridge where the food should live. They come in several sizes – 5 litre and 10 litre containers are the most common. The BIBs are definitely making a comeback and this time they merit your consideration.

Box wines have justifiably had a bad rap. Who can forget Stowell's of Chelsea? I can. They actually first appeared in the 1970s and were filled with generic bulk wines. They were one step down from the popular 1.5 litre "magnum" bottles of "Burgundy," "Chablis" and the notorious "Rhine" wine in Australia and the glorious Hironnelle and Soave (but not sophisticated). They were the vinous equivalent of the Party Seven "tins" of Watney's Red Barrel. Many a student party would finish with a recumbent future professor, or wine writer, lips glued to the teat of the BIB, sucking the last precious grapejuice.

[Re]-Thinking Inside the Box

We can laugh, but technology laughs louder. Screwcaps once used to excite similar disdain amongst the cognoscenti and now they are perceived as a highly desirable closure for quality wines.

The technology of box wine is very solid. The airtight bladder is a neutral container that is well suited to holding wine for relatively short periods of time. The wines do have a sell-by date, but I would submit that plenty of inexpensive wines should also have a "best-by"

because if not drunk young they are soon on their backs waving their legs in the air. The advantage of the box is that the bladder and spigot do in fact protect the wine from oxygen in the short run, so it will last longer once opened (especially if the box is stored in the fridge) than similar leftover wine in bottles.

Bladders, apparently, are so good at the particular thing that they do that they have become an industry standard technology for bulk imported wines, which are shipped in huge bladders inside steel shipping containers (think monstrously big bag in big box) and then bottled in the import market.

Big box, big saving

For gimlet-eyed accountants the cost saving is considerable.

The bag in box container costs less than \$1, according to a *Wine Spectator* article, which automatically saves \$4 to \$8 compared with a similar quantity of wine in standard glass bottles and the box they come in. Shipping costs are also less since the boxes weigh much less than glass bottles for the same quantity of wine and are less likely to be damaged in transit. There are environmental benefits too, especially in areas where glass bottle recycling is problematic because the economy has undermined the market for recycled glass.

We looked at BIB prices for about twenty wines and found a saving of 25% - 35% across the board on 10-litre and 10% - 15% on 5-litre boxes.

Service, please

In restaurants you would probably bung the red BIBs on the bar and dispense accordingly (the whites and roses would have to live in the fridge). At Terroirs, we prefer to serve the wine from the cool room just not for fear of opprobrium but because the wines are light and juicy and thus benefit from being at a lower temperature. Although the size offered is 175 ml glasses or 500 ml carafes, the wine could also theoretically be decanted into unlabelled bottles.

2010 Raisins Gaulois, Marcel Lapierre

This baby Morgon (from young vines) is a delight, brimming with juicy blueberry fruit and with enough personality to engage one's interest.

2010 Les Galets Rouge, Vignerons d'Estézargues

Syrah, Grenache and Carignan pleasingly embedded in this inky little Rhône-ette. Hints of warm earth, red fruits, liquorice and pepper

2010 Clampins d'Abord, Isabelle Frère

Uber-natural wine in a box. Grenache/Syrah (some Carignan?). Hint of reduction gives way to lovely smoked fruit flavours. Negligible tannins.

2010 Tire l'Arigot Rosé, Domaine Les Terres Promises

50/50 Grenache & Cinsault. The name of this cuvée comes from the French slang phrase "boire au tire l'arigot" (which means to drink without stopping). Perky pink wine that is just ridiculously delicious.

Stefano Bellotti on why he doesn't use sulphur



“Wine is, by definition, the transformation of grape juice via fermentation. Any other addition, subtraction and any forcing of the process are devices used to fabricate drinks “based on” fermented grape juice. At Cascina degli Ulivi we have always strived to produce natural wines, with no additives, using only the grapes from our vineyards, farmed with biodynamic methods. The art of winemaking is that of overseeing a natural process in its various stages. For each wine we choose a different vinification method in an effort to “interpret” in the best of ways our grapes. We do not use selected yeasts, nor enzymes, nor any other type of oenological additive.

The entire vinification, for both white and red wines, happens without the addition of sulphites. On some wines we add a very small quantity of sulphites at bottling time only, hence all of our wines have less than 40 mg/litre of total sulphites.

The use of sulphites is essentially an agricultural problem: one cannot make wines without the use of sulphites, with common grapes. You need real fruit, stemming from plants that have a strong root apparatus, well set in the depths of the Earth, as well as a healthy canopy, one that can capture a great deal of light (see the page on biodynamic viticulture on this site).

Nowadays, the words organic wine have little meaning and hardly guarantee anything. This wine can very well be the result of a camouflaged industrial agriculture or being organic merely on paper. During vinification all sorts of manipulations are perfectly allowed. Industrially produced yeasts, which more often than not are OGM, extreme physical treatments, fining, acidification, de-acidification, etc. Organic products laws state that yeasts and enzymes should not be OGM, but European Laws state the principle of equivalence between OGM and non-OGM micro-organisms so they can all be declared OGM free even if they are not in the same way as artificial flavours are classified under natural flavours.

Potassium metabisulfate has two main functions: the first one is as an anti-bacterial so it is used on juices, grapes and must. With sensible harvest management, scrupulous cellar hygiene, and perfectly ripe grapes it is easy to do without it.

The other function of sulphites is as an antioxidant (the Italian law prescribes up to 220 mg/l whereas AIAB, the organic control body opts for max 80 mg/litres) and here we have two ways we can do without them. One is to rely heavily on technology, making the vinification in a highly reductive ambient with much energy expenditure by having to control vat temperature, invest in costly machinery and add yeasts, enzymes and nutrients of industrial origin. In such cases I often think: "give us sulphur back!" because the manipulation is so heavy and the risk in using additives so uncertain that low dosages of sulphites are more preferable.

Nowadays, it is possible to arrive at bottling with sulphites levels lower than 40-50 mg per litre and with such quantities the threshold of toxicity of sulphites is higher than that one of drunkenness, since one needs over two litres of wine to reach it.

The other way we can do without sulphites is following the natural way of wine making using "managed oxidation" where oxidation is no longer viewed as a monster to fight but as a friendly component of wine. But this is only possible when using grapes of excellent quality. No yeasts, no enzymes, no vitamins, no salts. A natural fermentation and a careful use of lees. Lees contain many colloids that have an anti-oxidant and protective function but to do so, one needs to vinify in wood and that entails more effort and higher costs.

By using this method I have always produced red wines with no sulphites and a guaranteed stability of decades and lately I have also managed to produce white wines with no sulphites added that not only they are stable, but have - if anything - the opposite problem: they need a couple of years in a bottle to reach optimum harmony, a quality that they will maintain for several years thereafter."

Another Burnt Note On Sulphur

There are those who snort when you mention low-sulphur wines and those who weep when they taste wines literally loaded with the stuff. Didier, our French buyer, told me about some plug-ugly whites from a recent buying trip, in particular, that were practically reeking with sulphur. Meanwhile, I spent two days judging at the Decanter World Wines Awards and found that sulphur dominated the nose and palate of many a wine. When you taste a wine and find that the fruit is masked by a bitter/burnt flavour and your tongue practically ends up numb because of continuous exposure to that sensation, it completely skews your judgement. If your tongue is calibrated to accept this sensation then you may not find anything amiss. As one sheltered from the depredations of chemical wines I underwent a certain palate shock. My tongue is conditioned to look for certain flavours. Since I've started drinking natural wine I've begun to pick up on the technical tropes of winemaking ranging from commercial yeast flavours, cold fermentation aromas, oak chips, acidification and the aforementioned abusive levels of So₂. These wines don't make a lot of sense to me. Whilst I wouldn't drink them or recommend to anyone myself, I also can't understand why they are made in the first place since they so obviously elevate chemical stability above varietal accuracy and regional character.

Champagne Francis Boulard



Champagne Francis Boulard lies in the heart of the Champagne region between Reims and Epernay. The Boulard family have been tending their vines for five generations, since 1792. Today, they farm land in seven villages producing the three classic Champagne grape varieties, Pinot Noir, Pinot Meunier and Chardonnay, including top ranking «Grand Cru» on the hillside of the Marne Valley and "Montagne de Reims".

Boulard has established a reputation for vine-growing which respects the environment, using organic manures made from tree bark, cow manure and guano and working proactively in the vineyard removing leaves to aerate the canopy and discarding unripe grapes. Harvest is manual and as late as possible to ensure optimal ripeness and maximum of aromas so that the addition of sugar isn't necessary. Deep ploughing is done every year after the harvest. Since January one of the vineyards has been converted to biodynamie and grapes from here are vinified separately.

Fermentation is with natural yeasts. Whether or not malolactic fermentation takes place, and to what degree, depends on the vintage and cuvée.

We are listing four wines. Quantities are tiny.

Grand Mailly Brut Nature

From the Grand Cru of Mailly-Champagne this cuvée is a blend of Pinot Noir (90%) and Chardonnay (10%) from twenty years old vines on chalky-clay soils. Harvest is manual with severe selection. The grapes are pressed with a 4000 kg pneumatic press to give a refined, delicate and precise choice of juice.

Vinification is classic - in small 50 to 100 hectolitre stainless steel vats, and traditional - in oak barrels for 10-15% of the aged "reserve wines". The colour is bright, a brilliant deep straw gold, the nose expressive with blossoming elegant fruit, whilst the palate is frank with integrated fruits and is utterly balanced, fresh and supple. This wine has plenty of Pinot structure and mineral drive, the addition of the Chardonnay bringing a little elegance and lift. Aromatic notes of sun-dried fruits, just baked bread, dried spice and biscuit. Opens in the glass to reveal hawthorn notes and apricots and completed by a lingering warm savouriness.

Rosé Saignée Brut Nature

50% Pinot Noir and 50% Pinot Meunier from 40 year old vines in the Marne valley (the oldest vines in the estate), predominantly a single vintage with a little reserve. The saignée is made by the wine being in contact with the skins for a short period of time to extract colour. Francis prefers extraction based on aroma and flavour as the primary consideration, with colour only secondary. Hence the colour will vary from year to year depending on the vintage.

Delicate salmon-pink with orange tints. Delicate red berry fruit aromas, vinous creamy palate with watermelon, redcurrant and raspberry predominant and a little shortbread biscuit character. Being a Brut Nature it has a dry crunchy finish. Lovely to taste a rosé without clunking dosage and one which is structured without being heavy.

Petraea MMVI Brut Nature

The name Petraea comes from an oak variety, the quercus petraea, one of the finest woods for barrel making.

Blend of every harvest from 1997 (XCVII) to 2006 (MMVI). For the first three years, terroir and grape variety have been separately vinified and aged in oak barrels (Quercus Petraea). The barrels used are thrice-used barrels from Burgundy and Bordeaux, plus 10% of new traditional champagne barrels (205L). Blending is done just before bottling.



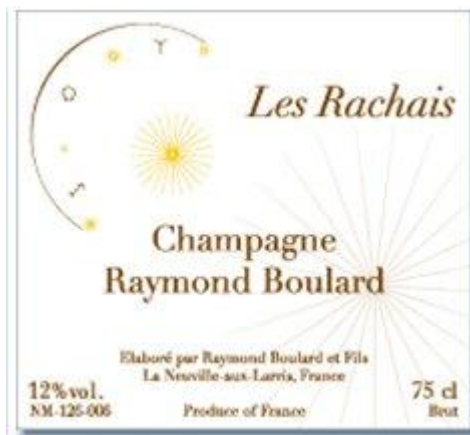
Natural indigenous yeasts, no filtration nor fining, batonnage of the lees of the new harvest. The prise de mousse limited to 5 atmospheres / cm² of pressure to obtain fine discreet mousse and to emphasize the structure and the vinosity of this cuvée, while preserving its elegance.

The blend is Pinot Noir 60 %, Pinot Meunier 20 % and Chardonnay 20 % from thirty year old average age vines. Deep gold, with gentle pearly bubbles. The nose shows complexity, harmony and balance. Striking autolytic notes of sweet buttered brioche and toasted spice. Rounded and long, with a sherbet-quality whilst, as it warms in the glass additional nuances appear. Palate is filled out with some gentle nutty oak and has a slightly honeyed feel.

These are the first grapes from the section of vineyards that have been converted to biodynamie which are on the Massif de Saint-Thierry, to the north-east of the Montagne de Reims. Les Rachais is pure Chardonnay on flint-bearing chalk soils from 40 year old plus vines.

Harvesting is on a fruit day (according to the lunar calendar). Vinification is with natural yeasts and carried out in small oak barrels that have been used six times previously. Batonnage is practised, depending on the character of the vintage, every ten to twelve days. The wine spends approximately 40 months on the lees before disgorgement. Les Rachais is neither filtered nor fined and is coincidentally bottled on a fruit day. This is extra brut with a dosage of 2g/l.

2005 Les Rachais



Les Rachais is stunning, one of the champagnes that remind you of stellar white Burgundy. Golden in colour with that fleeting green Chardonnay tint, it has a delicate effervescence with tiny bubbles. The nose bequeaths fantastic terroir aromas - flint and chalk conjoined. The wine develops in the glass - as all great wines do - here some savoury notes, a little lifted citrus, biscuit and malt. The palate reflects these myriad flavours. The acidity is exquisite, lively and refreshing, the saline minerality provides the core and the secondary aromas of mushrooms, lightly toasted nuts and seasoned wood fill the mouth with rich, long-lasting impressions. This wine just gets better and better in the glass and is, of course, a food wine, to be paired with roast turbot or lobster with a butter sauce.

Loire Fest

A quick reminder of some new Angevin arrivals and others on their way.

Jo Landron - the man with the tash makes spankingly good, often ageworthy Muscadet from his various estates. He works biodynamically in his vineyards and achieves terrific concentration and terroir expression. If you ever wanted to run your tongue through some mica-schist and amphibolite now is your opportunity.

Former jazz and blues pianist Nicolas Reau decided a few years ago to tickle the vines rather than the ivories. Mellow Anjou Blanc and bright peppery Cabernet Franc are the result.

Stéphane Bernaudeau was a lumberjack before jacking it in to work with Mark Angeli in Anjou. The influence is apparent - he makes stunning Chenin outside the appellation from 80- 100 year old vines, wines for keeping. His red, from an equal blend of Gamay and Grolleau, is enormously drinkable and won't frighten the horses.

Didier Chaffardon puts the artisan in his art with his sweaty singlet, fag dangling from the lips. The wines are the man, damn-the-consequences-authentic, earthy and more than a touch naughty.

Jean-François Chene cultivates his vines organically in Beaulieu-sur-Layon. Amongst other oddities he makes a vin jaune style Chenin and a sweet Cabernet Franc.

Les Vignes Herbel is the project of Laurent Herbel and Nadège Lelandais who started in 2005 and now have a three-hectare parcel of vines at Rochefort-sur-Loire called La Pointe on a terroir of purple schist and clay. This includes 1.4 ha of Chenin Blanc planted in 1920 and 1.6 ha of Cabernet (70% Franc and 30% Sauvignon) planted in 1974. They farm organically and biodynamically. La Pointe Chenin 1921 is a true vin de garde with a long élevage in wood.

Inspect our Plouzeau

François and Pascaline Plouzeau tend their 50 acres of biodynamic vineyards, near the village of Richelieu just to the South of Tours. The vineyards at Domaine de la Garrelière have been certified organic by Ecocert and biodynamic by Biodyvin. They started working the land here (the estate once belonged to the Duc de Richelieu) in the 1970's, slowly bringing it back to life after many years of conventional farming and have quickly become one of the rising stars of the region.

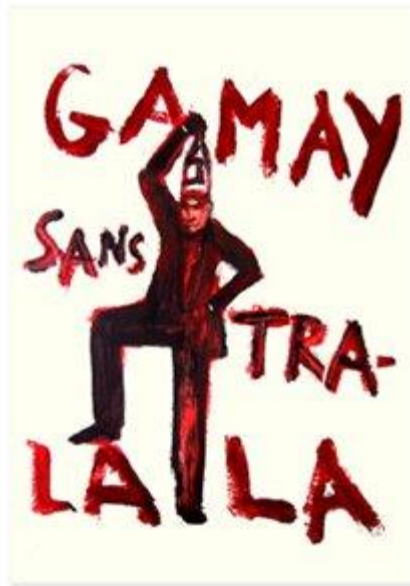
Yields are low - around 40hl/ha in a region where 60 hl/ha is closer to the norm and the vineyards are on south-east facing slopes with limestone and clay soils. The wines are made very naturally...harvested by hand, natural yeasts and carbonic maceration for the reds. Minimal sulphur is used in the wine-making process.

Le Blanc is not a homage to Joey from friends but a dinky little Sauvignon that Plouzeau harvests in October to ensure proper ripeness. The wine has mineral character extracted from the land's rocky clay, limestone, and flint-rich soils and François avoids many of the pitfalls of modern technology-driven winemaking. "My nose is my guide," as he says.

Le Rouge provides varietal symmetry being a Cab Franc. "Smoky, peppery notes lead the way for sappy kirsch and snappy black cherry fruit. A peppery edge chimes back in on the finish.

The Gamay Tra La La exudes bright aromas of wild cherry, plum and woodland fruits with hints of exotic spice, pepper, violets, sous bois, herbs (rosemary) and meat juices. There are plenty of earthy facets along with some raspberry and red-fruited high-tones- a pretty smelling wine.

"Milliard d'étoiles" is composed of Chenin, Chardonnay and Cabernet Franc. The wine receives no dosage. The colour is amber and the effervescence is gentle. The nose is reminiscent of cut apple. The mouth is given the impression of sweetness and elegance.



Clos Roche Blanche's "Pif" - A Nose By Any Other Name

Touraine, a Loire Valley appellation, designates a large viticultural area around the city of Tours. The vineyards of Clos Roche Blanche were planted on the Touraine hills bordering the Cher river by the Roussel family at the end of the 19th century and have remained in the family since. Catherine Roussel took over this 28-hectare estate in 1975 from her father, and was later joined by Didier Barrouillet, who tends the vineyards and makes the wine. Both are enthusiastic proponents of non-interventionist winemaking.

Their soil is poor, mainly clay with flint over a limestone subsoil. The varieties grown are Cabernet (Sauvignon and Franc), Gamay, Côt (or Auxerrois, the grape of Cahors) and Sauvignon Blanc. Roussel and Barrouillet keep yields low by maintaining old vines, using organic fertilizers in moderation and growing grass between and ploughing under the rows.

They converted the vineyards to organic farming and, with the 1995 vintage, received the official "organic agriculture" accreditation. The vines are treated with copper and sulphur solutions, and plant decoctions (a mixture of nettles and other herbs) used in biodynamic viticulture.

All the fruit at Clos Roche Blanche is harvested by hand, pressed using pneumatic equipment, and then fermented in a variety of vessels which might include old tronconic oak vats or new barrels, with the option of temperature control. Sulphur is avoided on the whole, Roussel and Barrouillet preferring to use carbon dioxide to ward off oxidation instead. The wines are handled minimally, in a very 'natural' fashion, and unsurprisingly are often bottled unfiltered. Much of this comes through in the wines, which are typically fresh and vibrant, whether they be red and white. Cuvée Pif (meaning "nose" in slang - named for their dog supposedly - which is a

blend of Cabernet Franc and Cot (70/30) from vines ranging between 20 and 115 years on clay soils mixed with sandstone and flint. After destemming the grapes are fermented in stainless steel vat and are bottled without filtering or fining.

Catherine & Didier describe "Pif" as "un vin aromatique et vineux"

The colour is ebulliently, healthily purple and the nose is equally youthful and expressive with lifted dark red fruit aromas leading into a crunchy fresh palate where the vibrant fruit is underpinned by soothing acidity.



Michon Possible

Biodynamie Biodyvin Brem Domaine Saint Nicolas Fiefs
Vendéens Renaissance salon singulier vigneron Thierry Michon
Vigneron Indépendant vin b vin bio vin nature

It was in 1960 that Patrice Michon settled in Brem-Sur-Mer, inheriting several acres of vines belonging to his father. Slowly but surely he bought more vines to increase the value of his wine heritage which is now over 32 hectares. In 1970 he moved to Ile d'Olonne and built a winery. He was joined in 1984 by his two sons Thierry and Eric who have broken with wine-making tradition in Vendée and making their mark with these very special wines of Domaine Saint Nicolas. Due to its proximity to the ocean, Domaine Saint Nicolas benefits from a micro-climate: sea, woodland, marshes of the Ile d'Olonne. The vines are planted facing south-west for the Pinot Noir, Gamay and Cabernet and south-east for the Chardonnay and Chenin on clay and schist soils. Domaine Saint-Nicolas extends to some thirty-seven hectares and each one of them farmed biodynamically! It is a major undertaking to keep the soil, and hence the vines, healthy. His job is also made more difficult due to the range of different grapes he tends here. He has the standards such as Chardonnay, Chenin Blanc, Pinot Noir

and Gamay, but he also has Cabernet Franc, the obscure Negrette and the equally obscure Grolleau Gris. The Negrette ends up in his entry level red called Reflets which sees 40% of Pinot Noir blended with 20% each of Gamay, Négrette and Cabernet Franc. The Grolleau Gris add a touch of spiciness and excitement to the salty, white wine called Les Clous which is a blend of Chardonnay, Chenin Blanc and 10% Grolleau Gris. Grapes are harvested by hand and are sorted on a mat and destemmed. Whites and rosés undergo pneumatic pressing and partial pelliculaire maceration followed by cold settling and temperature-controlled fermentation at 18/20°C on the indigenous yeasts in stainless steel tanks the reds Stainless steel and wood tank maceration, punching down, fermentation and ageing in oak barrels

For Thierry Michon, the gregarious force behind one of the Loire's best-kept secrets, Domaine Saint Nicolas, it's all about the soil. Working on schist and silex a stone's throw away from the Atlantic, Thierry is the prophet of biodynamics in this tiny viticultural area. His vineyards never see a non-organic product. Thierry raises his own cows simply for the manure they produce which he religiously spreads between the vines. He has slowly purchased buffer zones all around his property to prevent chemical products from other winemakers from seeping into his parcels. For him, biodynamics isn't a pragmatic consideration, it's a religion.

Les Clous is a blend of Chenin, Chardonnay and Grolleau Gris from clay schist soils. Beautifully distinctive with aromas of the forest and the sea, the wine has flavours of candied fruit with a wet rock element. It finishes almost dry and has the hallmark refreshing acidity of wines. Le Haut des Clous is pure Chenin with average age vines of 25 years, planted on clay/schist soils. Slight slopes which are exposed south-east, cultivated biodynamically since 1995, ploughing, mechanical and manual hoeing, vines treated with sulphur, spraying with Bordeaux mixture, herb treatments (nettle, etc...) Fresh and lively, with light-weight floral, persimmon, green almond, apple and pear notes stretched over a bright, elegant frame. You can smell the marsh in the aromas present, manifesting as heather, lavender and almond. Good tight, crisp palate.

Reflets Rosé is 90% Pinot Noir, 10% Gamay and Groslot Gris with average vine age of twenty years, planted on schist soils. Gloriously pale pink colour with berry aromas with a savoury dry finish, whilst the Rouge features Pinot Noir with Gamay and Cabernet Franc (and often a little Negrette.) Light berry aromas on the palate but the real beauty of the wine is the incredible lightness of being in the palate. Fantastic delicate balance in the mouth. The playfully monickered Gamme en May is light, refreshing and delicious.

Lastly, a Pinot Noir from vines planted in the mid 70s, manually harvested and 80% destemmed grapes made in the Burgundian style. Fifteen months elevage in big (400-litre) casks (hence the name, "Grande Pièce" which means big cask). Whether it is the schist soil or the micro-climate, this Pinot Noir is one of the Loire's best, exhibiting a strong hit of raspberry allied to a vibrant saltiness, alluding to its maritime origins.