

Les Maisons Brûlées

Interview

This interview with Paul Gillet took place in October, 2014 on his front porch.

Tell us a bit about yourself.

My family have been vigneronns for many generations in the village of Ingersheim, so wine has always been dear to my heart. My grandfather, who is actually the first generation to stop working vines, had a fantastic cellar. This is where I made my first discoveries.

When it came time to get a job, I decided I wanted to sell wine. I briefly worked as a broker, then opened a retail store with my wife Corinne and another partner in Mulhouse. This was in 1998. Around 2002, we discovered natural wine and got really excited about it. By the end of our tenure in 2006, they had become the main focus of the shop.

Was their a "eureka" moment with natural wine?

My first "eureka" moment was tasting Bruno Schuller's wines, because as a lover of Alsace I'd never tasted anything even remotely similar. The second was a budding friendship with another retailer in Strasbourg. He'd been heavily involved with these wines for a long time, and was good friends with Marcel Lapierre, Phillipe Pacalet, Patrice Lescarret...

Were people in Mulhouse jazzed by this new direction?

It was a challenge! But stuff like Lapierre was an instant hit.

So what happened after the shop?

In 2006 we decided to close our doors and travel abroad. This led us to Argentina.

Why leave France and why Argentina?

It was highly circumstantial. Our minds were set on leaving Mulhouse, and due to my brief time living in Mexico as a child (my father lived there for a while), Latin America was on our minds. It just so happened that a friend of ours had a pending project in Argentina, and we decided to go visit him.

Corinne and I travelled to Buenos Aires in 2005, and immediately fell in love with the city's energy. From that trip, we were convinced to move there and start a new project. Mind you, we didn't really have an idea of what we even wanted to do out there! Of course we knew it would somehow involve wine, food or restaurants. It ended up being a restaurant.

Had you had any past restaurant experience?

No, but we had experience in catering. I failed to mention earlier that the retail shop was not only wine. We also offered fresh produce, oysters, fish, charcuterie, cheese... Just like with wine, we prided ourselves in getting the best products from all over France and even from other nearby

countries like Spain and Italy. In fact, we were more ahead of the times with food items than wine! In the early 2000's you couldn't find stuff like this anywhere else in Alsace.

So how did the restaurant come to be?

Corinne and I really wanted to open a restaurant. After moving to Buenos Aires, we met another French couple, and the idea came naturally: a French brasserie with simple food, highlighting the best Argentinian ingredients with French preparations. Of course this meant working with a lot of great beef! After moving the whole family to Buenos Aires, we opened in November 2007.

How did the restaurant pan out?

It was a great experience, full of memorable nights. We had a very good response to the food, and quickly developed a reputation for our wine list, where I did my best to highlight some of the smaller, less mainstream wines of Argentina. We were even able to find guys working with native yeasts, minimal intervention, low sulfur etc... Most notably Bodega Cecchin in Mendoza.

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We ran the brasserie for 2.5 years, but moved on because of a growing divide of interests with our partners. From there, Corinne and I started doing clandestine dinners, full meals in private spaces but only 3 times a week.

In the US, we call those "pop ups".

A pop up? **(laughs)** I like it!

How did these dinners differ from the original restaurant?

At the brasserie, I was in charge of sourcing the ingredients and wines. Our chef was Argentinian but familiar with French food. When we did the pop up, it was just me and Corinne cooking. Obviously this was a stark contrast to what we had been doing before: at the brasserie we were 5 in the kitchen and 4 on the floor, and the focus was on moving a lot of simple but delicious dishes. With the pop up, we took a more gastronomical route. It was partly to stand out, but mostly because we had much more freedom to use a wider array of ingredients than in the brasserie.

So what happened?

Again, the pop up was a great success and we had a lot of fun with it. But it was obvious from the get-go that we weren't going to be able to sustain it in the long term. We had a few ideas at the time, the major one being to start a viticultural estate in Northern Argentina, an area we had spent much time in and found quite beautiful. It felt like we had come full circle with food and wine, that it was time to start from the source and go back to the land.

While scoping out vineyards, we had a little surprise! It was the news that our third child Emma was on the way. This changed everything, and we both agreed that in taking the next step, we needed to plan for stability. So we chose to temporarily move back to France for me to follow a program in viticulture and oenology while Corinne took care of herself before giving birth.

Where in France?

Back to Alsace. It made the most sense since we're both from there. I then followed a program and the Lycée Agricole d'Obernai, and when it was done we all returned to Argentina to continue

pursuing our original plan of starting an estate there. After a month and half though, we realized that our project was too ambitious and that it would be wiser to move back to France permanently.

Can you elaborate?

When you have three children, you can't live day to day adventures with your wife like a young couple. Starting an estate in Argentina would have proven to be economically challenging, especially without subsidies from the government due to our foreign status. Not to mention our start-up capital was quite low! We were also concerned about our children and imposing this life on them. Maybe we just didn't have the balls. I don't know. But in the end we chose to come back to France.

So we re-focused our energy on finding an estate in France. Our main criteria was working in a region with wines we enjoyed. Our first choice was Auvergne, but we also had the Loire and Beaujolais in mind. In any case, we wanted wines touched by the Northern winds.

Why not Alsace?

Alsace was out of the question because land is extremely expensive and they are very adverse to outsiders. If you look at the vigneronns of Alsace, they're almost all lifers with long family histories. Plus the average hectare goes for 150,000 euros there. It's not Champagne or Burgundy but...

So the Loire?

I was interested in some nearby vines in Sologne. While in the area I met Michel (**note: Michel Augé, founder and prior owner of Les Maisons Brûlées**), who knew I was looking to settle somewhere. After tasting with him, he invited me to come prune with him in the vines, and I accepted.

While we were in the vines, Michel brought up the fact that we was thinking of retirement, and that if I was interested he could offer me some vines or even the whole estate. After some further discussions and negotiations, we came to an agreement in Spring 2013 that we'd take over.

You've chosen to keep the name *Maisons Brûlées* and some of the cuvées names. What will remain the same and what will change?

Michel is a formidable character. He was born here and knows his land like the back of his hand. He used to have way more land, and while downsizing he chose to keep the most interesting and coherent plots to make the best wine possible. I was not ok with the idea of erasing what he's spent decades creating.

Same goes with the cuvées; there is a real coherence in the choices Michel made. Of course we have our own experiments: coming from Alsace and really loving Pinot Noir, it was dear to my heart to vinify a 100% Pinot cuvée. We also wanted an earlier release, so we bottled *Dernier Née*.

But look: there are old Sauvignons (*Poussière de Lune*) and young Sauvignons (*Silènes*). The *Alterité* Chardonnays and Cabernet Sauvignons here make sense as bubbles. *Erèbe* makes sense as Cabernet Franc and Côte, etc...

After that, we have chosen to change the labels, and of course vinification is an extremely personal thing. Even in this first vintage of ours (2014), I think you can taste the difference in our choices. But in the end, the real flavors come from the land.

Where do you stand on the "natural wine" debate?

It's complicated. I think the day that people stop actively debating natural wine will be the day we decisively got the point across. We try to make wines as honestly as possible, even though we know we are taking serious risks. But I see this as a return to the way wine was always made. To say natural wine is something new, invented or different is incorrect.

When you truly love wine, you can immediately tell the difference in the way people work in the vineyards and cellar. You can taste convictions, from the choices made in the vines to those in the cellar. We feel that we are doing the right thing. Are we right? We're taking a lot of risks doing what we do.

So why do we categorize our work as something different? We are simply trying to make a living product. Not different, but alive! We're in our vines everyday, trying to cultivate the best grapes possible, all the while respecting nature and life. In the cellar, we try our best to transmit this by not making the process artificial. If you don't know anything about vinification, it's very difficult to grasp these concepts. It's a question of fluidity from grapes to wine.

When I started selling wine, it was a life changing experience discovering these types of wines. I remember looking back on experiences when I'd go taste with vigneron in the early stages of a wine, and absolutely love the barrel samples. But when it arrived to the shop, the wines would be tight, tense, closed... They tasted nothing like what I had tried in the cellar! Wine should taste as fresh as possible.

What are you favorite things to drink?

One day I heard someone say that the peak of a grape's expression is found in regions touched by Northern winds. The more a grape finds itself touched by Northern wind, the more it finds its optimal maturity. When I say this, I am referring to the aromatic potential, vivacity, and acidity to have a beautifully balanced wine.

My big passion for whites is Alsace. For reds, I love anything that is light and fruity but still manages to express its structure.