

Elodie Balme

**Côtes du Rhône, Rasteau and Roaix from
Elodie Balme.**



Elodie Balme.

Profile

Elodie Balme's beginnings in wine started with sales. But it didn't last very long, and at 19 she quit her job to study viticulture and oenology. As part of her curriculum, she was placed part-time with [Marcel Richaud](#), one of the pioneers of biodynamics in the Southern Rhône. The two quickly became friends, and Marcel's approach to viticulture and winemaking resounded deeply with Elodie. With her mentor Marcel's encouragement, she founded Domaine Elodie Balme at just 23 years old.

2006 was Elodie's first vintage, produced with four hectares of vines belonging to her father Bernard. Bernard has been a viticulturist his whole life: starting with approximately four inherited hectares, he progressively acquired new parcels over time (funded by a parallel pépiniériste gig), and today he finds himself with 28 h. Bernard and Elodie are partners, and work the entirety of the estate together. She vinifies 14 hectares, with the rest of the grapes sold to the cave cooperative.

Bernard has always worked conventionally in the vineyard, but much has changed with Elodie's involvement. She's eliminated pesticides and herbicides in the majority of the 14 hectares she vinifies, and uses organic fertilizers (some of her harder to work parcels are still being worked chemically with one herbicide and pesticide treatment a year). Equally important, in the last two years Bernard has ceased using any systemic products on all 28 h, shifting to contact treatments of copper and sulfur. Elodie is convinced her estate will one day be worked organically, a process she is getting closer too each year.

In the cellar, a *pied de cuve* starts the spontaneous fermentation. The wines are vinified and aged in concrete. No sulfur is added during the fermentation and aging of the wine, but Elodie adds a small dose after blending tanks, as well as a tiny dose at bottling.

Interview

This interview with Elodie Balme took place in her Côtes du Rhône vines in July, 2012.

Tell us about the estate.

I started making my own wine in 2006, using part of my father's land. The entire harvest used to go to the cave cooperative; I made my first vintage using 4 of my fathers' 28 hectares. Today, I work 14 of them, with the rest still going to the cave. My father and I do all the vineyard work together. Prior to my involvement, he had always worked conventionally in the vineyards. I had other ideas, so little by little we are shifting the viticulture to more natural practices. It's definitely not a complete 180, but every year it's getting better.

The majority of the grapes we work with are Grenache, about 70%. 20% is Syrah and the rest is Carignan. Recently, I planted a tiny amount of Mourvedre. We are on three communes: Buisson, where we are right now, Rasteau and Roaix. We have all types of soils: white clay, red marl, sands[] This permits me to vinify parcel by parcel and get interesting results when I blend them together.

How do you and your father share the work?

Everyone does everything. We do however have different priorities: even though I spend 80% of my

time in the vines, a big part my work is working in the cellar, which I do alone. My father isn't involved in any cellar work, and doesn't want to be. This isn't a bad thing, since it both gives us our little moments of independence. He's a real viticulturist, and loves being on the field. He's extremely skillful with tractor and mechanical work.

I know you started working in the vines very young. Tell us about your path.

I've never done anything else. I started thinking about wine when I was 14-15. I knew I would work with wine in some capacity, but wasn't sure how. And to be honest, when you're a girl it's not something anybody really encourages you to do. I started with commerce classes, and got a job selling wine. I quickly realized that vigneron work interested me way more than a sales job. So I took classes in viticulture and oenology, splitting my time between classes and working at [Marcel Richaud](#)'s for 3 years. Marcel really pushed me to become an independent vigneronne: he told me there was always room for you when you're motivated to work well. I followed his advice, and made my first vintage when I was 23.

Did you ever consider starting an estate elsewhere?

No. Everyone told me: *"If you're going to settle here, you're not going to be able to go anywhere. So if you want to work elsewhere, do it now!"* But I didn't want to leave my father alone for too long. I wanted to show him that I was here to help right now, and willing to eventually take over. In this rural environment, the only way to prove yourself is to work; I don't think I could have permitted myself to spend a year or two somewhere else. But at the same time, I never wanted to. I wanted to start right away! It could have been interesting to start somewhere else, but getting to know my own land has been very rewarding.

You mentioned earlier that you are slowly shifting viticultural practices. How have things changed since 2006, and what are the long term plans and goals?

It's definitely the big question! Since I took over in 2006, I've eliminated herbicides in the 14 hectares I work with. We use organic fertilizers, and only use contact treatments of copper and sulfur (for the last two years, my father has only been using contact products on all 28h). Unfortunately, some very difficult to work parcels that I vinify are still being treated conventionally. My father is more experienced and active in the tractor work, and feels that they are just too much work to convert. This has been a point of contention between the two of us, but like I said, every year we push things a little further.

The goal is to learn how to work naturally in the vineyard so we can do it right. I don't want to convert to organics just to say I'm certified. And I don't want my father to start working organically unless he himself is convinced it's worth it. Personally, I am sure we can do it. We can make this change, but don't forget that we still have 28 hectares of vines to tend. Everything that goes to the cave is still being de-grassed chemically in the spring.

Speaking of the size of the estate, how do you plan to proceed with the grapes that go to the cave?

Working organically and selling 28 h worth of wine is going to be very difficult if I take everything over by myself. So the question becomes, what do we do with the remaining 14h? In 3, 4 years, we will have to decide if we renew our contract with the cave. In the mean time, one possibility is to sell some of the land, but it's not always that easy. Another long term investment would involve going back to the Jachère methods. A lot of our vines are degenerating because the soil is tired from vines

constantly being ripped and replanted. By letting the soils regenerate for 7-10 years, you really do them a lot of good.

If we do a bit of both, I think we could significantly reduce the amount of vines we'd need to work. I still hope to re-acquire 3 or 4 more hectares into the estate, and for the rest we'll find a solution.

What's the work in the cellar like?

It's inspired by what I learned with Marcel Richaud. When I started tasting more wines made this way, it became clear that I could do nothing else but a natural vinification; it gives the wine a reason of being, a vibrant energy. A life!

I am not not an extremist of sulfur free winemaking. I add some when I blend the wines and a little at bottling. However, the wines are fermented and aged without any added sulfur. I minimally extract as to best express the fruit and to add finesse to the wines. We have a lot of Grenache, and could easily be making heavier, more alcoholic wines, but I'm really going for finesse and elegance.

What do you like to drink?

What do I like to drink? A lot of stuff! From the Loire I like [Noella Morantin](#)'s whites and Sancerre from Riffault. In the Languedoc, I really like [Yannick Pelletier](#) I don't know, a lot of stuff! Oh and Champagne!

Visits

This visit with Elodie Balme took place in June, 2012.



Words by Jules Dressner, photos by Maya Pedersen.

Elodie Balme is a go-getter. She's one of those personalities that just exudes positive energy, and in this day and age it's impressive to see someone so young and enthusiastic about anything, let alone agriculture! It's also very refreshing that she isn't afraid to admit that she is still very new at this, and that everyday is a learning experience.

We arrived around dinner time, where we ate some delicious cheese and tomato tart thing and drank Plageoles Mauzac. Well, everyone except Elodie, who is four months pregnant! While eating, we started talking about Elodie's work dynamic with her father Bernard, a recurrent theme that would come up throughout the visit (more on that later).

The next morning, it was time to taste the 2011's and check out the cellar. Almost everything is vinified and aged in concrete.



There's also some fiberglass tanks to blend the wines.



Elodie also has a few barrels, mostly for experiments. The 2011's were showing well: the Côtes du Rhône and Roaix had just been bottled, and we tasted tank samples of the Rasteau, which should have been bottled by now. Elodie really goes for elegance and finesse in the wines, which are fresh and fruity, but with enough weight to add structure. One new thing was a *Vin De France* made from Merlot, Grenache and Carignan on sandy soils. Elodie's dad basically planted the atypical Merlot in front of their house so that no one would build a house in front of theirs:

"He thought it might be something original for me..."

After tasting, we went to visit [Oratoire St-Martin](#). In the evening, we returned to go check out the vines. The first parcel we visited is a clos called *Le Plateau*.





This parcel was the one Bernard started with. Elodie's grandfather actually deforested the entire 4 hectares to plant vines! Being there, it was crazy to think this parcel of 80 year old vines could ever

have been anything else. For these vines they put a treillissage in the middle because the infamous Mistral wind causes them to break. Most of the grapes go into the Roaix cuvée.

As we left Le Plateau, Elodie pointed out saffre, the compacted sands that constitute the majority of her sub-soils, as well as some of her top soils.



Saffre retains water, so the soil remains cooler than if it was just sand. It's quite compact, but breaks into the exact sand kind of sand you find at the beach.



Next up, we visited *Les Champs Libres*, a 5 hectare clos of 55 year old vines and *Samuel*, a parcel of 80% Grenache and 20% Carignan with vines over 80 years old.







These are two of the many parcels Elodie works organically, and goes mostly in the Côtes du Rhône, with a little bit in the Roaix. Every year, more and more parcels are being converted, but Elodie is partners with her father, and they work the 28 hectares of vines together. And while the two get along well, share all responsibilities in the vines and are indispensable to each other, viticulture has been a serious point of contention.

Many things have changed since Elodie settled in 2006, and this hasn't always been easy for father/daughter team. Making and selling wine independently was never a problem for Bernard, since he has absolutely no desire to partake in cellar work. If anything, he's proud that his daughter is pulling it off, and has no qualms with spontaneous fermentations and minimal cellar intervention (he says it makes the wines taste good). But when it comes to viticulture, the two see things differently: Elodie's time with Marcel Richaud deeply influenced her approach to viticulture, but this approach is contradictory to what Bernard has been doing since his early teens (he's in his early 50's now).

And while there have been significant changes made in the viticultural practices (no pesticides/herbicides on the vines Elodie makes wine with, organic fertilizers, contact copper and sulfur treatments on all 28h), Bernard is still not totally convinced on working organically, especially if the estate is 28 hectares. Though he has always been "soft" with his chemical use compared to a lot of his heavier handed neighbors, he still refuses to take them out of the picture completely. Still, switching to contact copper and sulfur treatments is a big decision, and Elodie sees this as a huge step forward for the estate. It also makes her feel like her father understands and respects what she is doing.

"Things really have changed. Even in "his" vines, he's reduced the chemical products considerably. For example now he only does 1 pesticide treatment a year, as late as possible to last through the summer."

One thing the two definitely agree on: a lot their soils are suffering from over-exploitation. The plan for currently empty parcels and those they will soon rip out is simple: back to the jachère technique. After ripping out the vines, you plant cereals one year, then something else, then something else. By doing this for 7, 8 years, the soil gets to rest and purify itself.

"People used to plant with the goal of having vines for 60-70 years minimum. Now, as soon as they start getting less productive (usually around the 30 year mark), you rip them right out and replant. Things back then were less about quantities and productivity."

That night, we had dinner with Elodie and her boyfriend Jérôme at this great place in Rasteau. Marcel Richaud came up.

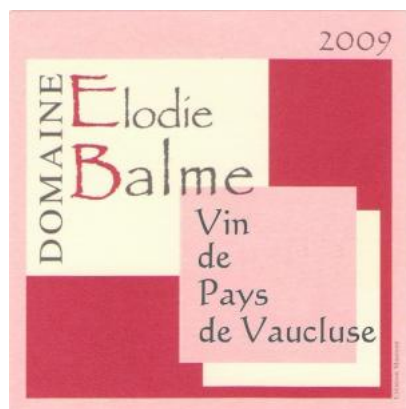
"I have him to thank for everything. He really encouraged me to start my own estate, introduced me to all his customers, got me press..."

Clearly Marcel really likes Elodie since he decided to be her mentor. But there's actually a cool story behind it! When he was just getting started, Marcel was 19, the same age Elodie was when she was placed to work for him part-time. His father had also sold his grapes to the cooperative his whole life, and in his day it made you a good living; when Marcel decided he wanted to be independent, everyone told him he was crazy. He was shunned from his family (Marcel elaborates on the whole story in [his interview](#)), and since no one wanted to help him, he actually produced his first vintage in a cellar with no roof! Incredibly discouraged, his first vintage was almost his last.

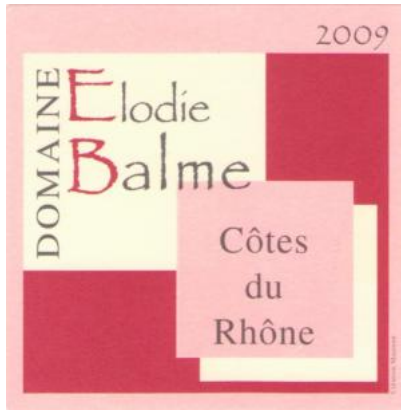
On the verge of giving up, a chance encounter with a monsieur Charavin (a famous vigneron from the area), would change everything. Seeing this 20 year old kid try to be a vigneron really clicked with him, and he told Marcel he could use a part of his cellar to make wine and show him how to properly vinify until he was more settled. This man who took him under his wing, who taught him everything he knew and gave Marcel the chance to succeed, this M. Charavin was none other than...Elodie's grandfather! Remembering what he'd done for him, he felt he had to do the same for Elodie.

That's some full circle shit right there!

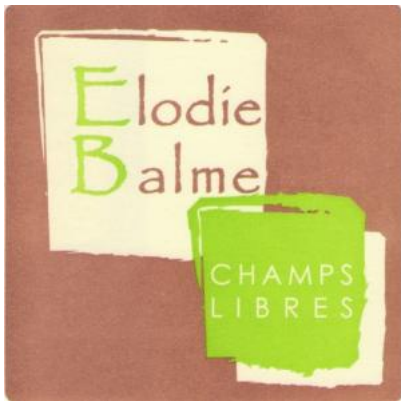
Wines



Vin de France: made with 50% Grenache vines of about 40 years of age (1 HA), on sandy soils in Roaix in CDR A.O.C area. 20% of the blend comes from 8-year-old Merlot (not allowed in CDR blend) and 30% from 40-year-old Carignan grown along the river, outside of A.O.C area.



A.O.C Côtes du Rhône: 85% Grenache, 10% Syrah and 5% Carignan (over 4 HA), from vines located in the village of Buisson (North of Rasteau), with northern exposure, on clay sub soil and gravelly sandstone on top soil (sedimentary rock made up of agglomerated sands bound by limestone): these are the old vines of the estate: some of the Grenache and Carignan vines are 80 years old.



CDRV "Roaix": (1.5HA): a single plot of mostly Grenache located in Roaix, on a plateau of red, ferrous marls and big galets on the surface, like the soils in garrigues. The vines are 55 years old. Through 2009, Elodie could not make a CDR Villages Roaix out of this plot, because the AOC imposes 50% Grenache minimum and a complement of Syrah and/or Mourvèdre coming from the same plot. In 2010, she got a small crop of Mourvèdre and will be able to make a CDR out of this vineyard. In Roaix, the sandy soils are either pure sand or have a sub-soil of safres, which are compacted layers of sand that retain water and keep the soil cooler.



A.O.C Côtes du Rhône Villages Rasteau: 80% Grenache (20 years), 20% Syrah (18 years) The Grenache grows on white clay slopes looking south-west, the Syrah on richer, gravelly soil lower in the village.