

Elodie Balme

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!