

Elodie Balme

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!