

Francis Boulard et Fille

Interview

This interview with Francis Boulard took place in Bordeaux in June 2011.

Your estate is very new but you've been a vigneron for a long time. Can you tell us a bit of your history?

In 1973, I came home to work with my father in the Vallée de la Marne, an area rich in clay soils. The estate was spread out over two regions: 3 hectares in the Vallée de la Marne and 2 hectares on the silica-limestone soils of Massif Saint-Thierry (the most Northern point of Champagne).

My brother and sister soon joined my father and I around this time and we started expanding the estate as a family. We went from 5 hectares in the 80's to 10 in the 90's. This consisted of replanting vines in the two regions we were already working in, but we also ended up finding some unplanted limestone plots in the Mailly-Champagne region and managed to acquire some Grand Cru parcels in the process.

We made our reputation by highlighting our different terroirs and the varietals that grew in each of the three regions. La Marne has a lot of Pinot Meunier, Massif de Saint-Thierry is mostly Chardonnay and Maily is predominantly Pinot Noir.

From what I understand, you became interested in biodynamic viticulture while working conventionally with your brother and sister. What attracted you to it?

I was personally attracted to biodynamic agriculture and viticulture for many reasons. The first is that like all humans, I am sensitive to nature, to my environment, to the flowers and the birds, etc... I also started noticing the allergic reactions human beings were having to the products we were using in the vineyard. But I think the biggest reason that made me reevaluate the way my family and I were working was the fact that I was finding molecules from 90% of the chemicals we were using in the wine itself.

As a simple peasant, I always assumed that the products we were putting on our vines would wash away after a couple of rains, that they would naturally go away. No one ever told us that chemical residue would not only permanently affect the vineyard, but actually end up in the wine. This was around 1996; I'd never even heard of biodynamics at this point but knew I wanted to change the way I was working.

I discovered biodynamic viticulture because of an initial desire to lower sulfur levels in the vineyard. My friend Michel Gendrier from *Domaine des Huardes* told me that if I wanted to lower sulfur levels, I should consider working biodynamically. He pointed out that by using certain biodynamic principles, I would also be able to use significantly less copper to fight mildew (a big problem here in Champagne).

What's interesting to note is that without even realizing it, by working biodynamically I was reverting back to the days of my grandfather. My grandfather was completely self-sufficient, and from the 70's to the early 90's, we would go to the forest together and chop wood in the winter (we

didn't have electric heaters). Both my grandfather and father taught me that you cut wood by following the lunar cycle.

Similar principles were also applied in farming and garden work. My grandfather had a horse, hens, cows, rabbits... He was a man that coexisted and contributed to the cycle of nature: he grew oats to feed the horses, beets to feed the rabbits, and all this following a lunar calendar.

But my grandfather had no idea what biodynamic farming was, and all of this is to say that from a very young age I was accustomed to working with nature. There was no philosophy behind it like there is today; it was simply what was transmitted from generation to generation. So when I started hearing about Rudolf Steiner and Maria Thun's lunar calendar in 1996, it all seemed totally normal to me.

How did your family react to this?

When I decided to start working biodynamically, I started off very small. That first year I started converting 60 hares of vines, and at first it was to convince myself it could actually work. Like Bordeaux, Champagne has a rather difficult, humid climate; every year there is a risk of heavy rain in May and June while the vines are blooming, and therefore it makes it much harder to work organically or biodynamically here.

Once I was convinced that it could work, I decided to propose converting the entire estate to my family. A decision this important had to be mutual, and to stay diplomatic I approached them as wanting to experiment with biodynamic viticulture on a small scale, hoping they would see the results and follow suit. They agreed, but asked to limit it to 1 hectare.

I respected their wishes, and for the first 2-3 years I limited my experiment to 1 hectare of vines. By 2004 I was fully convinced we could convert the entire estate, but my brother and sister were against it. The main hang up was that it required too much extra manual labor. But for me there was no other way to work. So after trying my best to convince my family, I decided to claim my 3 hectares of vines, start my own estate and make the wines that I wanted to make.

So when did your estate, *Francis Boulard et Fille*, officially start and what can you tell us about it?

We officially started as of the 2009 vintage. We find ourselves today with 2,75 hectares of vines and I source fruit from my family's vineyard in Mailly-Champagne. Though I do all the work in those Mailly vines, they are officially property of the *Raymond Boulard* estate, so I have to pay my siblings at harvest to buy the fruit.

It's a strange and complicated situation but I felt that I didn't have a choice. In such I also have a négociant license.

Tell us about your daughter Delphine's involvement in *Francis Boulard et Fille*.

Delphine started working with *Raymond Boulard et Fils* 9 years ago, and decided to work with me when I started my own estate. She originally had no intention of being a vigneronne and had gone to university for interior design. After a few years of designing kitchens and bathrooms for large French corporations, she was bored to death and asked me if she could come work with us.

Her first year she studied viticulture, then she followed a professional oenological program and her third year she studied administration and business. During her studies, she was of course working

with me in the vines every day; she's very hands on and prefers being outside working with nature than cooped up in the office. We work on a very small scale and she is completely integrated in every aspect of the estate.

What's the work in the vines like? Is it hard working biodynamically in a region as dense as Champagne, where everyone around you is using chemicals?

I pay no attention to my neighbors. It's easy to criticize others, to talk about what they're doing wrong to valorize yourself. I'd rather valorize my work by telling you what I'm doing rather than what my neighbors are.

As far as having to deal with their chemical overlap, this doesn't really concern me because most of my parcels are distanced and isolated from those of my neighbors. *Les Rachais* for example is 1,7 hectares, which is quite large for a single parcel in Champagne, and it's separated from all other surrounding parcels by roads and paths.

It's true that I do have some smaller parcels that are completely surrounded by my neighbors. What I do in that case is approach them and ask them if they'd mind me working their first three rows bordering my vines for them so that what they do to the rest of their vines doesn't affect mine.

And they're ok with that?

I've been working in the area for a long time and my neighbors have always respected my work as a vigneron. When I started working biodynamically, they knew that if I had made this choice, it was because I felt it would make my wines better. So no, they don't have a problem with it. And it's not like I harvest the grapes from those rows or anything; I work them like they're mine but it's their grapes.

What about in the cellar? Are there any fundamental differences from when you were still working at *Raymond Boulard*?

Not really. I've always worked with indigenous yeasts. Keep in mind I became a vigneron in 1973. Back then, to the best of my knowledge, commercial yeasts did not exist. So I always laugh when younger people like yourself are shocked and in awe that I've always worked with indigenous yeasts!

For me working with indigenous yeasts is the only way to make your wine stand out. Commercial yeasts mark wine too strongly and make one hard to distinguish from the other. If your neighbor happens to be using the same commercial yeasts as you, you are both essentially making the exact same wine.

Another thing I like to put forward is that I always look for optimal maturity in my grapes. Making a 11,5 or 12% Champagne doesn't scare me at all. In 2003 when everyone was saying the vintage was a complete catastrophe (the alcohol was too high, there was no acidity...), I wasn't too concerned. These aren't the things I care about. What matters to me is to keep the vines in good shape so that the grapes are healthy and reach optimal maturity, which obviously varies from vintage to vintage. The natural degree of alcohol of a vintage will always make the best wine.

You mentioned earlier that at first you were experimenting with working biodynamically. Can you give us some insight on this experiment?

The first test was very straightforward and was to simply see if it was possible to not use chemicals

in the vineyards and still have healthy vines. The second was much more interesting, and involved comparative vinifications.

On the the *Les Rachais* parcel, I converted 60 ares to biodynamic viticulture while another 60 remained in conventional chemical viticulture. When it came time to vinify, I fermented the biodynamic grapes separately from the conventional grapes and the result was that even in the early stages of fermentation, the wine from the biodynamic grapes was much more expressive and complex. I did this three consecutive years and the results were always the same.

This led me to conclude that this was the best and only way to express a terroir.

What's your take on the "natural wine" debate?

I think that most vigneronns who get categorized as "natural" winemakers are great people who have strong ideas and principles. What shocks me is the media's take on natural wine.

For example, categorizing my wines would lead to a lot of confusion; some consider me a natural winemaker, but others wouldn't because to them, natural wine means wine without sulfur. I personally don't know how to make white wine without sulfur. So because I need those 20 to 35 milligrams of sulfur at bottling I'm somehow at the heart of a debate on what natural wine "really is".

This leads me to believe that the term is a little too vague. If there were some stricter rules or a chart or something then I would be fine with it being a legitimate term. And you know what? What really matters to me is when someone tells me: "*We drank three bottles of Boulard last night and none of us had a headache!*"