

Causse Marines

Interview

This interview with Virginie Maignien took place in Los Angeles in March 2011.

Tell us about *Causse Marines*.

Causse Marines consists of 12 hectares of vines. We grow 12 varieties and make 12 cuvées. We're at about 50/50 for red and white, which is also quite rare for Gaillac: historically white grapes dominated the area but in the 70's and 80's people started tearing white vines out to make room for reds ones, since red was in higher demand. I personally feel that our vineyards are geographically located on white wine terroirs.

As far as varieties go, we have Syrah, Duras, Braucon, Prunelard, Jurançon and Alicante for red and Mauzac, Muscadelle, Loin de l'oeil, Ondenc, Sémillon, Petit Manseng and Chenin for white. The last three we planted ourselves to make dessert wines.

What's great about Gaillac is you can do whatever you want as far as cuvées go, and we are big opportunists in this regard: we make dry whites, sweet whites, sparkling whites and even a sous-voile white in the style of the Jura with the Mauzac variety. The reds are mostly dry.

Every year we tell ourselves we are going to reevaluate everything and focus on making less cuvées, but every year we're inspired to do something new. For example there could be a vintage where the Prunelard worked out better than the Braucon so we feel like making its own cuvée. What we usually do are blends for our "basic" cuvées, and all the "higher end" cuvées are a single variety from old vines. We do 100% cuvées of our Mauzac and Ondenc in white, Syrah and Duras in red. We hope to make a Prunelard cuvée next year.

What's the history of the estate?

Causse Marines is not a family estate. Patrice moved here in 1993; he had studied oenology in Bordeaux and wanted to stay in the South West, and ended up discovering what is now the estate. As it is often the case in Gaillac, the prior owner was a farmer who owned vineyards and would sell his grapes to the cave cooperative. He also had turkeys, grew corn and cereal.

Patrice fell in love with it; at the time there were 8 hectares of vines, and everything was selection massale -no clones- and all from old vines. On top of that the house was nice, so he decided to start his estate there. He worked everything on his own until I, whom Patrice jokingly calls Zorro (**editor's note**: this is a reference to [this song](#), which unfortunately is completely lost in translation!), arrived! That was the 2005 vintage. I came to work the harvest that year; I knew Patrice through Jean Thévenet through working extensively in southern Burgundy. I came to harvest and I never left!

How do you and Patrice share the work?

The way we work is that if Patrice isn't around, I can do everything in his place and vice-versa. He'd tell you he's better with all the mechanical stuff, which is true! Patrice is more hands-on in the vines. I make all the biodynamic preparations and green work since we've converted. The cellar is a shared

experience.

More importantly, the vision is shared: these are wines we want to make and we work in a specific way to achieve them. We might not see eye to eye on everything but we always end up liking the final product.

What made you want to be a vigneronne?

I'd wanted to be a vigneronne for a long time so when I moved in with Patrice I made it clear it wasn't just to hang around in the office!

Like Patrice, I am not from a wine family. I worked all kinds of jobs when I was younger and came to a point where I wanted to experience something new. Jean Thévenet was a big influence; we spent many long afternoons talking about the life of the vigneron, and that stuck with me throughout the years.

I had no creative talent: I couldn't be a painter, a writer or a musician. But simple things like being outside, working with nature and making something new every year really spoke to me. So I moved to Beaune and studied viticulture, eventually met Patrice and here I am now!

How and why do you work biodynamically?

For me there are two sides to biodynamic agriculture: a concrete side and an abstract side.

The concrete involves working directly with the plants and with nature, and it's not as simple as saying "I don't use chemicals anymore".

On the other hand we have to understand that in many ways nature transcends mankind and by keeping this in mind we try to work harmoniously with what we have available to us in order to do what's best for our vines. This is the vignerons' personal responsibility: he must choose when to act, what to do and what he wants to obtain.

The other thing that made me take interest in biodynamic agriculture was a more personal and intimate connection of being open and accommodating to everything happening around you. It can be applied to the vineyards, but can also be applied to many other aspects of life. I feel that we are more receptive this way, that we can understand what the plant is asking of us. Instead of fighting off problems, we strengthen the plants so they can fight it off themselves.

We spend a lot of time making biodynamic preparations which is essential to this type of agriculture. We experiment and try different preparations in different places based on the soil and current climate to see what works and what doesn't.

In the cellar we closely follow the lunar calendar.

In my personal experience I feel that well made biodynamic wine expresses a purity and an essence that I wanted for our wines. Have we succeeded? I don't know. But in the last 7 or 8 vintages there is a change in our wines, an evolution that can't be denied.

At the same time we are realists and accept the world we live in. We can't deny ourselves a resource as important as electricity for example, but we still feel very lucky because the estate is surrounded by 40 hectares of forest that blocks all outside pollution. In such we've done our best to create a

microcosm of nature, with animals, migrating birds, flowers in bloom□ Our estate is its own entity and has its own life force.

What's the work like in the cellar?

Every year we have a new group of interns that work with us, and I like it when they arrive in the spring so they can realize that the real work isn't in the cellar but in the vines. If you have good grapes and you're being attentive to the vines, there shouldn't be any problems. We make certain cuvées sulfur free, for example, "Préambules" where we use CO2. We always use very little sulfur, but depending on the vintage we will adjust the dose. Of course no inoculation, all native yeasts.

We're not big fans of new oak, which is great because we can't afford it! Older barrels are harder to find but they're much cheaper! For many cuvées we'll use tanks and vats. For others we have old 400 liter barrels. We work these wines in a Burgundian style (bâtonnage), which lead to interesting aromatics.

For the reds it's very simple. We de-stem everything. Fermentation is rather long. Pigeages or remontages.

We filter the whites for our basic cuvées, because we're in the South West and don't want to lose any acidity. In such we also avoid malolactic fermentation. We prefer doing this than having to bombard the wine with sulfur later.

For the reds we filter the juice from the press to lighten the load a little bit. Certain vintages we'll do fining with biodynamic egg whites on our basic cuvées.

You were explaining that in Gaillac you can do "whatever you want". How do you use this freedom?

Our three basic white cuvées are all AOC Gaillac. However all wines we know will be deemed atypical we label Vin de Table. At first it wasn't really a choice: the jury would systematically turn us down. They would argue that the fermentation on the whites wasn't finished, that we didn't age our wines in barrels, that we were working too closely with single varieties□ Even the cellar work was criticized.

But in the end we're happy. If everything we made was AOC Gaillac, we couldn't work with L'Ondenc or Prunelard, two varieties with a lot of personality and that we feel deserve their own cuvées. And I'll admit that it's not like a Gaillac AOC is necessarily going to help you sell more wine. This isn't Chablis!

Many people would categorize your wine as "natural wines". How do you feel about natural wine?

I'm not a very authoritative person and don't feel like you should impose rules on everything, but I feel that if we don't make certain things clear then we're asking for trouble. I'm not a big adept of the term "natural wine". What's important to me is the work in the vines; if the grapes are organic or biodynamic, then yes the wines are going to be natural. There isn't one without the other. So I guess it's a question of natural wine and grapes.

Anyway, I'm all for people making natural wine, but it's of the utmost importance that the work is there both in the vines and in the cellar. It's not just about how much or how little sulfur you add at

bottling; the difference between 40mg and 60mg isn't going to significantly change the final product enough to make a big deal about it.

It's funny because our 2 year old recently started having food allergies, so I've had to pay close attention to ingredients on back labels. Wine should be the same. It might be crude to say, but at its core it's something we ingest. And I think many people assume that wine is simply fermented grape juice and don't think about what else could be in that bottle. Wines should have an ingredient back label with every product used to make it: sulfur quantities, which yeasts were added, etc. If you make a conscious choice of working this way, then you should not be ashamed and should own up to it. Then we could maybe talk about "natural" wine more concretely instead of simply using a term to describe it.

What do you eat with Gaillac wine?

For the reds, charcuterie, rabbit or a slow cooked lamb would be good examples, but the reds tend to be very rustic so don't shy away from richer foods. I think they also go great with spicier dishes.

The whites are great for the aperitif as a warm up to the meal, but of course they pair well with fish or richer foods like foie gras.

What do you like to drink?

Patrice and I really like Riesling. They're a certain noble quality I like about it. We drink a lot of white. I really like Chenin Blanc from the Loire. And being from the Jura, I can't get enough of oxidized whites. And I mean intentionally oxidized, not because someone wasn't doing his job correctly in the cellar!