

Domaine de L'Oubliée

Interview

This interview with Xavier Courant took place in his Saint-Patrice cellar in June 2011.

Tell us about *Domaine de L'Oubliée*.

I work 6.4 hectares of vines in Bourgueil, mostly Cabernet Franc but I also own a 0.74 ha parcel of Chenin Blanc on flinty clay soils. The Cabernet is spread over three terroirs: *Merci la Vie* is made with grapes from sandy gravel soils, *Notre Histoire* from calcareous clay and *Tenue de Soirée* from flinty clay.

The estate was started in 2009, which was my first vintage.

Before you took over in 2009, what was happening with the vines?

My vines used to be part of a larger estate spread over 18 hectares. Because I wanted to start small and have the parcels be relatively close to each other, I decided to only purchase the 6 hectares in Saint-Patrice.

Before I took over, the vines were being treated chemically. And while I'm hesitant to say that they were "reasonable" in the quantities of chemicals used, the truth is that it could have been a lot worse. In other words, they were conscious that what they were doing was bad and did it anyways, albeit in a limited capacity **(laughs)**!

I'm currently converting the entire estate to organic viticulture, which will undoubtedly lead to biodynamic practices in the future. When I eventually reach this point, I plan on being completely hands-on in the process and making all the preparations myself.

What's the work in the vines like now?

I think the biggest change involves working the organic matter of the soil, something that was never taken into account by the prior owner. The analysis I've conducted has led me to conclude that there just isn't enough organic matter for the vines to work with, and I plan to rectify this through extensive plowing (reasonable plowing!) as well as with green fertilizers. It's a slow process, but I don't want to rush anything because otherwise it would be too much of a shock to the vines.

What about in the cellar?

Not much! We bring the grapes to the cellar, put them in a tank and go back to the vineyard! Zero sulfur during the winemaking, a tiny bit at bottling.

The grapes are never mechanically tamped with, and it goes without saying that we hand harvest. We vinify in concrete tanks with zero thermo-regulation. Because of the concrete and the slow evolution of temperature, fermentation tends to be rather long. And of course zero oenological products!

What were you doing before 2009 when you started your estate?

I do not come from wine background, and no one in my family has ever worked with wine in any capacity. I don't know if this is a good or a bad thing, but at least I can say that the influences in my winemaking are my own!

I studied hospitality in school, and I come from a restaurant background. I was working all over Paris in hotels and restaurants, mostly high-end places, and through my various positions I met a lot of interesting people that got me more and more into wine.

I eventually opened a wine shop in Fontainebleau where I was working exclusively with organic and biodynamic wine. This brought me even closer to the source, since I was in constant contact with the vignerons I was working with. This urged me to take it one step further and pursue becoming a vigneron myself.

I studied viticulture for a year then worked with Romain Guiberteau in Saumur for a while, which helped me unlearn everything I'd been taught in school! Once I felt that it was time to move on, I started looking for vines to purchase to start my own estate. My only stipulation was that I wanted to work with Cabernet Franc.

I was really looking to start small, no larger than 6 hectares. I have help, but I still do the vast majority of the work myself so anything bigger would have been overambitious.

Why did you name your estate *Domaine de L'Oubliée*, which for our anglophone translates to "Domaine of the Forgotten"?

In Saint-Patrice, the village I am based in, the vast majority of vineyard work was abandoned after World War 2 to favor agriculture, mostly cereal and now a lot of corn. I think people have forgotten the potential of the terroirs from this region.

It also helps that there is a consonant similarity to Bertrand Blier, whom I am a huge fan of!

You are such a huge fan of Blier that each of your cuvées are named after films of the same name, correct?

Yes, that is correct!

Can you tell us why you chose each title?

Blier made a lot of films so I couldn't pick just any; the titles had to correlate with how I felt about each cuvée!

Merci La Vie ("Thank you Life") is a lighter, fruity wine where where you can just open a bottle and drink it with lunch or whenever the mood strikes. You can thank life for being at a table with some good food and some good wine!

Notre Histoire ("Our Story") is already more complicated to explain! It's like a couple going to the restaurant with the man planning to propose. They're a whole story behind it!

Tenue de Soirée ("Evening wear") is when you put your tuxedo on and things get serious! It's also a reference to the barrel aging of the cuvée, the wood being the tuxedo!

Il Existe en Blanc ("It Exists in White) is not a Bertrand Blier film, it's a Bertrand Blier novel! The entire book focuses on a man that's obsessed with women's underwear. He spends hours in front of bra shop displays! I don't think this really reflects in the wine at all; it's more of a reference to the fact that only red wine is produced in the Bourgueil appellation, but believe it or not, there is Chenin Blanc out here!

How do you feel about your A.O.C, and more specifically how your wines fit in to the concept of the A.O.C system? Are they "typical" of Bourgueil?

I've talked about this with my fellow organic vigneron in Bourgueil, and we've come to the conclusion that what we're doing is in our opinions the best representation of the appellation! Our wines are definitely a "typical" product of Bourgueil! But unfortunately, we are the minority. It is far more "typical" to use selected commercial yeasts, to chaptalize, to de-acidify etc... It's a total rip off!

I don't trust the A.O.C system. The panels that judge the wines are constantly denying vigneron who work organically and don't intervene in the cellar for "atypicity" when our work is the most honest expression of an appellation's terroir.

Have you had any problems with your A.O.C?

Yes. I've received numerous warnings about the wines. I still don't quite understand how their rating system works, but there are 4 classes and my wines were a class 2, which led to a reprimand. But I'm only just getting started and I look forward to future tensions with the panel!

Do you consider yourself a "natural" winemaker?

For me "natural wine" is wine without sulfur. Which means that there's very little natural wine being made! When it's good, it's really good. But technically, it's near impossible to do it every year.

Working organically leads to a more natural style of wine, with lower PH levels and vines that are able to resist illness on their own without adding sulfur in the vineyard. Whether you want to call that natural wine is up to you.

What do you like to drink?

I love wine. I love wine because of its sheer diversity, and not just French wine. I recently tasted some amazing New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc that really blew me away. Unfortunately though I don't have a great culture for foreign wine because in France we tend to stick to our national stock!

I love Burgundy; it's a really special place, particularly for reds. For whites I love Chenin Blanc and Riesling.

Oh I just thought of something that has nothing to do with your question! It has to do with Bernard Blier! As a youth I'd always wanted to sneak a bottle of wine in to a movie theater, and pair wine with film like you would with food! You can also do this with music. You can even do this with a book, but if you end up drinking the entire bottle I doubt you'll read it all the way through!

So did you ever sneak a bottle into a movie theater?

You bet!