

Georges Descombes

Chiroubles, Morgon, Brouilly and Régnié from Georges Descombes.



Georges in his Brouilly vines. Photo by Maya Pederson,

Profile

Located in Vermont, a tiny hamlet in Villié-Morgon, Georges Descombes is the unofficial fifth member of the iconic "Gang of Four": Marcel Lapierre, Jean Foillard, Jean-Paul Thévenet and Guy Breton. In his teens, Georges worked with his vigneron father in the vines as well as a local bottling company. Hopping around from cellar to cellar gave him a chance to try a large amount of different estates, and the first time he tasted a Lapierre wine, young Georges was blown away by its purity and elegance. Then and there, he decided he would try to make wines like Marcel's.

Georges took over the estate in 1988, and immediately started shifting viticultural and oenological practices forward. Though his father had always worked traditionally in the vineyards and cellar, Georges decided to push things further by practicing organic viticulture (certified by Ecocert) and eliminating all entrants or manipulation during vinification. A minuscule dose of sulfur -less than a hundredth of what an organically certified vigneron is legally allowed to use- is added at bottling to help preserve the wines.

In total, Georges owns about 15,5 hectares of land spread over 5 AOC's : 7,5 hectares in Morgon, 3,5 hectares in Brouilly, 2 hectares in Regnié, 0,5 hectare in Chiroubles and 2 hectares of Beaujolais Villages. Grapes are hand-harvested, then stored in a temperature controlled container before being placed in 60 hl cement tanks. A traditional, semi-carbonic maceration occurs, and the wine ferments from its ambient yeasts. For each Cru, Georges produces old vine cuvées which are vinified separately, then aged in barrel six months before bottling.

Georges is a firm believer that his wines benefit from time in bottle, and always releases them up to a year later than most of his colleagues.

Visits

This visit with Georges Descombes took place in June, 2012.



Words by Jules Dressner, photos by Maya Pedersen.

In the little hamlet of Vermont, if you follow this very narrow pathway, you will find yourself in George Descombes' front yard.





Right as we were pulling in, none other than [Damien Coquelet](#) was hopping off his tractor to take a quick break before getting right back on to spread a treatment on his vines. After greeting us, he went to go grab Georges in the house, and we were ready to start the visit. The first question was the obvious one: how's 2012 going? It's been a challenging vintage around their parts: they've suffered from hail and frost since early May, but the big fight has been with mildew. With the same sunny/rainy day alternance that the [Desvignes are experiencing](#), they are averaging one sulfur treatment a week against mildew, which is way above average for them. While they remain confident that it won't affect quality, it's looking like another small harvest.

Unfortunately, Damien had to go get some tractor parts replaced and then hit the vines, so we barely got to see him. Fortunately, we were in good hands with Georges, who gave us a thorough tour of most of his vineyard sites. We hopped into his 4x4, and drove through the Morgon vines by the house before doing the same in Régnié.



The bulk of our time spent in vineyards was in Brouilly, where Georges owns a good amount of land. Our first stop in the Cru was a very old vineyard, the first piece of land Georges inherited from his grandmother. The vines are close to a 100, and a lot of them are missing; they actually just got a complaint from the INAO about it "*not being dense enough*". On top of that, the yields are tiny, so they are seriously considering tearing them out.

After visiting the flatter vineyards, it was time to put the 4x4 to use to check out the first ultra steep Brouilly site.



But that was nothing compared to where Georges was taking us next:



At 500m in altitude, George has a a quasi monopole of this hill.



It is STEEP!



Here's what it looks like from the bottom:



From the top, it's a beautiful view:



Also at the top, this mini parcel is one of the steepest in Beaujolais.



When [Noella Morantin](#) came to visit him last year, she said that she could never work these vines because they gave her vertigo! Georges uses a tractor to spray treatments on parts of the hill, but large portions of it, for example the bit from the above photo, cannot be worked mechanically. In fact, when Georges acquired them in 1993, he didn't own a 4x4 yet, so he'd walk to the top with bags of sulfur to do the treatments!

"That only lasted a year though! It made buying a truck a major priority!"

For soil work, they have a system similar to Julie Balagny's which I explained in the last post.

As we drove back to the house, Georges filled us in on some imminent changes, as he is planning to downsize his 18 hectares. He's getting rid of 1,5 h of Beaujolais villages because the conditions are too "*harsh to work organically*" (he didn't elaborate), but also giving about 3 h of his Morgon vines to his 20 year old son Kevin, who will work alongside his father for a few years before becoming completely independent like Damien.

We got back to the house, where we got to taste through Damien and Georges' 2011's.

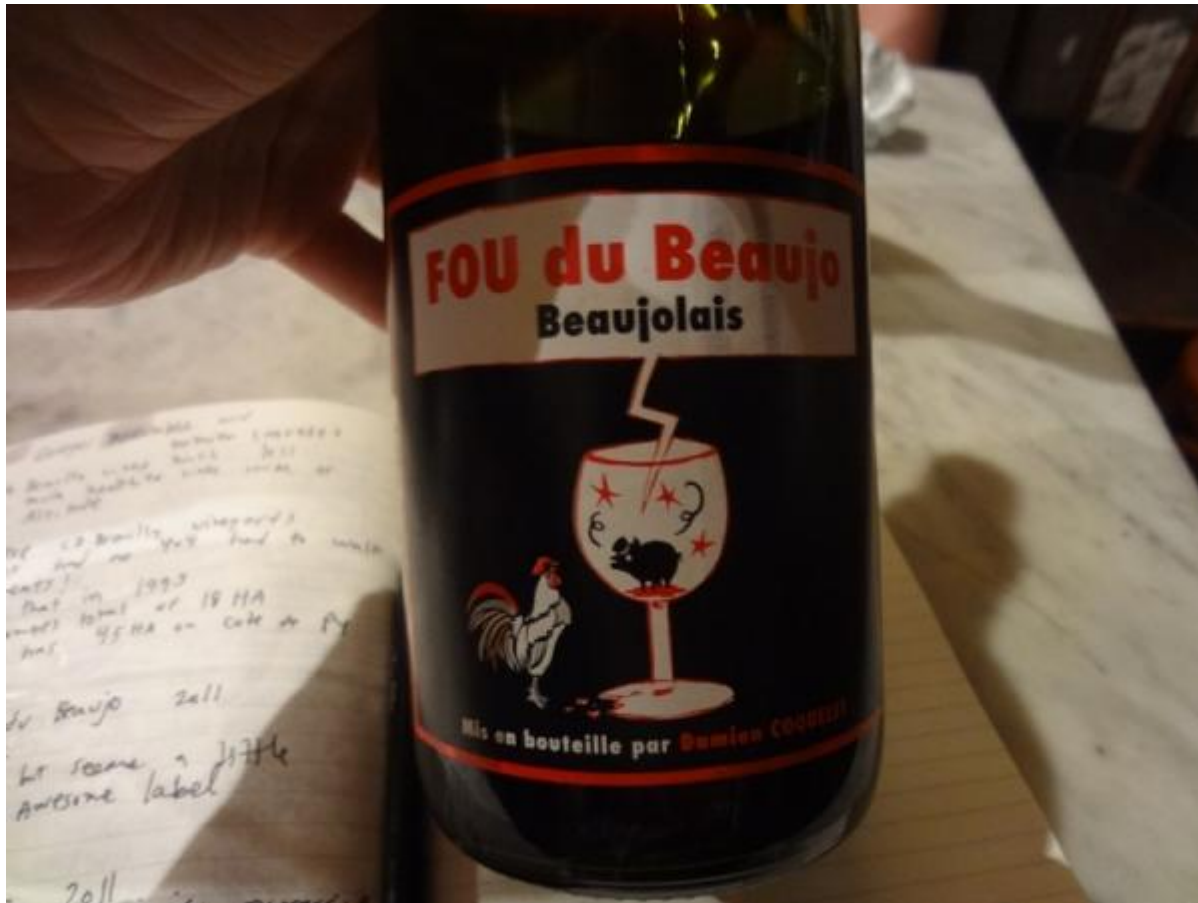


They have a really cool tasting room full of old school Beaujolais memorabilia.



Notice the saussicons hanging from the rafters.

The 2011's, some of which are already bottled, others that were tank samples (Damien's V.V cuvées), are unsurprisingly showing great. To reiterate what I'm been saying in the last four visit recaps, 2011 Beaujolais is da bomb. We got to rediscover Damien's "*Fou du Beaujo*", something we'd tasted for the first time at the Dive Bouteille in January:



If you ever wondered what kind of incredibly professional notes we take while on these trips, you can spot Maya "Mayhem" Pedersen's apt observation: "*awesome label*" to the left of the bottle. In my professional opinion, it's hard to disagree.

While tasting, a few interesting conversations ensued. The first was about "*organic wine*" which officially exists now. Up until now, wine could only be made from organically grown grapes, but new European laws have passed stating that the wine itself can be organic, meaning there were no chemical additives added. However, since preselected yeasts and enzymes are not chemicals, they are fair game. Also, up to 150 g of sulfur can be legally added in bottle; Georges typically uses less than a gram at bottling, if any... Even [thermo-vinification](#), an increasingly popular technique in the Beaujolais, is allowed.

I wasn't familiar with thermo-vinification, so Georges explained: it involves heating the grapes whole-cluster up to 158 degrees, cooling them down, then pressing the juice. So instead of doing the traditional semi-carbonic maceration, which takes 40 days on average, you can get similar results for color in 48 hours. It is beneficial in that it saves a ton of time and space, but it also gives the wine a displeasing, cooked taste. One thing's for sure: it's doesn't involve chemicals!

These permissive laws for winemaking strike Georges as rather strange, since the same associations are very strict about viticulture. In fact, he had to leave us halfway throughout the tasting because he had an appointment with an [Ecocert](#) official; we later found out that she made him visit EVERY SINGLE vineyard site and thoroughly investigated the cellars for any chemical products. This leads him to believe that "*organic wine*" is little more than a misleading title to boost sales. And while I won't deny that it's a positive thing for the consumer to know that no chemicals were used in the winemaking, it's clear that many qualitative factors were not considered when drafting these laws.

We ended the tasting with Georges' son Kevin pouring for us. He's a nice kid, and he's looking

forward to his first harvest with the family this September. It was fun tasting the Descombes V.V wines from barrel with him, since he had no idea which was which.



"I think this one's Morgon. Or maybe Brouilly..."

I'm not sure which was which either, but they were all good.

Next up, our visit with the legendary [Sylvie Esmonin](#) in Gevrey-Chambertin!

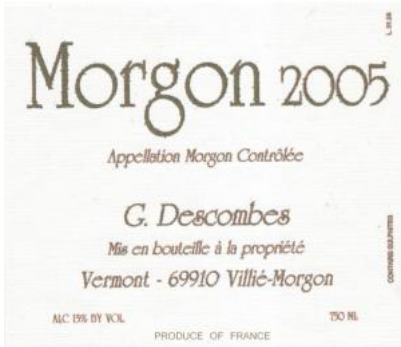
Wines



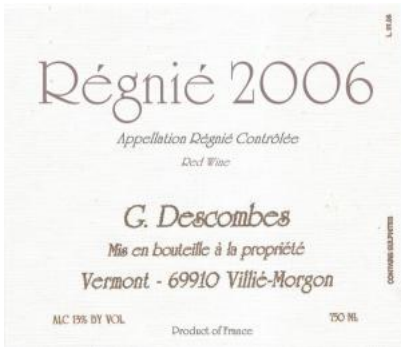
A.O.C Brouilly



A.O.C Chiroubles "Viellies Vignes"



A.O.C Morgon



A.O.C Régnié