

Domaine Louis-Claude Desvignes

Morgon from Domaine Louis-Claude Desvignes.



Louis-Benoit and Claude-Emmanuelle Desvignes.

Profile



Louis-Claude Desvignes is of the sparrow-type Beaujolais vigneron: raven-black hair that is, more often than not, standing in various directions, bright eyes and prominent nose, and a well-pitched, humorous cackle. His energy level is also twittery, and he barely stands still for a minute during a tasting in his cellars, offering a bottle of this and a bottle of that: various experimentations, filtrations, or finings, perhaps an older vintage of something educational. The seriousness of his winemaking, however, is never in doubt.

His vineyards came to him by inheritance and the Desvignes family, as the name suggests, has been making Morgon for generations. The vineyards are on the Montagne de Py in the center of Morgon, the fruit of which is of far superior quality to that produced in the outlying areas of the appellation. If there were a classification of vineyards in Morgon, Côte-de-Py would be a *premier cru* and Javernières a *grand cru*. They are located on the best exposition of the hill, with soil of decomposed schist, and Javernières is a plot within the Côte-de-Py with a little more clay.

In the past years, Desvignes has been picking the fruit later than the other vignerons in the area with a mind to get fruit of optimal ripeness. The wine is vinified by the traditional cru Beaujolais method with a *grille* to keep the cap submerged. Recently, the fermentation has been longer and more controlled than in the past in order to extract the color and material that are the most obvious virtues of this wine.

Morgon is, along with Moulin-à-Vent, the most age worthy of the Cru Beaujolais and Desvignes wines are fine examples. The wines age terrifically and take on the character of Pinot Noir, or *pinotize* (the term used in Beaujolais). When young, the character is of dark cherry, raspberry and blackcurrant. With age, the wines become more earthy, velvety with cocoa and coffee tones. At our request, the wines are bottled unfiltered some years or at most lightly fined.

Interview

This interview with Claude-Emmanuelle Desvignes took place at L'Herbe Rouge in

February 2012.

Tell us about *Domaine Desvignes*?

My brother and I are the 8th generation to work our vines. I've been here full time since 2001, and Louis-Benoit joined me in 2004. We have 13 hectares of Morgon, most of which are old vines, since their average age is 70.

In the Beaujolais you can vinify by climate, which we do. *La Voûte Saint-Vincent* is a blend of parcels from the Py climate, and the soils are sandy granite. We have three hectares on Côte du Py, where the soils are composed of eruptive rocks and schist. Finally, Jarvenières is at the bottom of Côte du Py, and is heavy in clay and magnesium.

When did you know you wanted be a vigneronne?

I was very interested with winemaking as a child. In 10th grade I decided to specialize in viticulture. After I got my baccalaureate, I spent four months at a winery in Long Island for a work internship. Then I came back and started working with my father. It's what I've always wanted to do.

What's the work in the vines like?

We eliminated herbicides in 2004 and work the soil ourselves. We work organically but aren't certified because it's too much of an administrative hassle. And I'll be the first to say that if there's a serious concern with mildew or odium (like in 2008), I won't hesitate to use some synthetic products in moderation.

Was this your decision?

My brother had a lot to do with the decision to work organically. I had experimented with 1 hectare before his arrival, but when Louis-Benoit signed on he was adamant about completely changing our work methods. He had a valid point: you can't claim to make wines that highlight terroir by using a ton of chemicals in the vineyard.

One big mistake we made was to convert everything at once. We ended up ripping out all the superficial roots by plowing everywhere, which resulted in the vines yielding half of what they usually produce. It took a while for them to recover, but we don't regret it. It's better now: the soils are alive and you can tell!

What about the cellar?

We aim to make tannic, age worthy wines, so we let them ferment and age for a long time. We're not against semi-carbonic Beaujolais; it's just not our style. My father started making wines like this, and we've continued in his footsteps. As far as vinification, you can call it "conventional", since we use a Morgon starter yeast to for the fermentation.

You recently expanded your cellar right?

Yes. Since I've taken over, we now produce and bottle all of our wine (my father sold about 50% of the grapes to a négociant), so storage became a big issue. We've always worked out of a facility built in the 60's, which had the big advantage of having cement tanks made on premises in the 70's. We needed more room, but we wanted to keep these tanks because they had such a rich history. So we

simply expanded around the original facility.

Why do you think most people have a preconception that Beaujolais can't age?

My father has a bunch really old books on wine, and many say that a good Morgon can rival anything from Burgundy. A vintage like 2009 will age 20 years no problem. That's what great about Gamay. You can make a very fruity wine, but you can also make something structured without it being too opulent or high in alcohol. It's always accessible, without ever being excessive.

What do you like to drink?

A lot of things! We always have a Morgon at the end of every meal to remind us of how good it is, but otherwise we're always drinking other wines. I'm a big fan of the Roussillon, Collioure and Banyuls. I love Loire whites, as well as the Mâconnais since we're not far. Also, Cahors!

Visits

This visit at Domaine Louis-Claude Desvignes took place in June, 2012.



Words and photos by Jules Dressner.

The Desvignes family all live on the same block in the center of Morgon. We swung by Louis-Claude's house to say hello, since we couldn't get in touch with Emmanuelle.



Even in his mid 70's, he's kept his raven-black hair (no word yet on if it's "au naturel" or not...). He came to greet us at the front door with some intense news: Louis-Benoit had suffered a light fracture and multiple stitches on his index while planting a new parcel in Javenières that morning. Emmanuelle had driven him to hospital, which accounted for her not picking up her phone earlier. Louis-Claude had better luck reaching her, and she told us to meet them in the Javenières parcel where it all went down.

We hopped into the Louis-Claude mobile and drove over to the beautiful Jarvenières parcel.



Louis-Claude's grandfather purchased these: they are all planted on sand and limestone in the traditional Beaujolais goblet style. Most of them are over 100 years old!





The other vines that complete the parcel were planted in 1989 and 1999. The Desvignes, who work organically, are the only estate to work the soil here, which they feel is a pity since it's such a great terroir.

Emmanuelle and Louis-Benoit -arm slung with a bandaged hand-, greeted us at the bottom of the hill where their team of two was actively planting 2000 vines over .8 hectares of land.



When I asked if they were in selection massalle, Emmanuelle looked at me like I was crazy.

"Of course."

We started chatting about 2012, and Louis-Benoit informed us that they were struggling with mildew: in the *"tropical climate"* they've been experiencing, rainy and hot, humid days have been trading off since March; this is a perfect recipe for mildew to grow and spread.

"Not only that, but you spray a treatment on a hot day, then it rains and washes everything off and you have to start all over again."

Though there is no legal repercussion in organics for retreating with copper as necessary (and the Desvignes are, even at this rate, well below the authorized treatment levels), Louis-Benoit worries that constantly re-applying too many copper treatments might do more harm than good in the long term. This is one of countless struggles one faces in a challenging vintage, organic or not: at the end of the year, you need to harvest grapes, and it is the vigneron's responsibility to protect his vines as he sees fit. In a statement that echoed Thomas Morey's in an earlier visit, Louis-Benoit pointed out that guys working conventionally were struggling just as hard as they were, and in many cases their vines were looking way worst.

After our tour of Jarvenières, Louis-Claude drove us to the Côte du Py site on the way to the cellar.



We couldn't access the vines because we needed a 4x4 vehicle to get there, but to give you an idea their vines are by the house in the middle of the picture.

In the cellar, we started by tasting many of the separate lieu-dits that go into the *Voûte Saint-Vincent* cuvée, including *Les Champs*, *les Plâtres* (aka plaster, because after it rains it gets hard like...), *le Pré Jourdon*, *Peru* (how exotic!) and *Roches Noir*. The decisions on the exact blend vary from year to year and are done entirely on instinct. Bottling also varies by vintage, and this year the *Voûte Saint-Vincent* and *Jarvenières* will be bottled around harvest. The *Côte du Py*, on the other hand, had just been bottled, and was tasting great. 2011 turned out to be one of the few regions in France to experience an excellent vintage (with almost everyone else's varying from good to very good). The Desvignes wines always need time, but you can already taste the expressive, concentrated fruit and balanced tannic structure in the tank samples.

FUN FACTOID: The Desvignes use a deep fryer to melt the wax for the top of their very limited [Les Impénitents](#).



We ended strong by revisiting the 2010's. They were delicious. Our dog, and *Official Canine Companion* (O.C.C) Zaggy took a liking to Louis-Benoit and took a nap on his lap for the entire tasting.



I wasn't kidding about that index! For those of you that don't know, Louis-Benoit is an avid drummer, and he was bummed because he was supposed to perform at a 14th of July concert. I told him it might be time for him to start messing with some drum-machines...

Wines



A.O.C Morgon "La Voûte Saint-Vincent"

Soil: sandstone and disintegrated granite

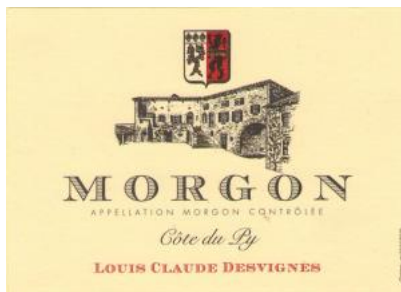
Grape: Gamay

Age of Vines: 45 years

Exposition: South East on small coteaux

Name of Climate: Douby

Vinification: traditional (Burgundian), with 50% of the grapes destemmed. Fermentation for 13 days in cuve, then aged 10 months in concrete tanks.



A.O.C Morgon "Côte du Py"

Soil: schist and igneous, disintegrated rocks

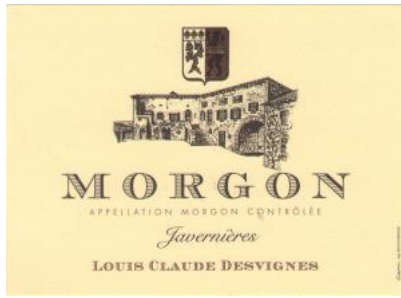
Grape: Gamay

Age of Vines: 70 years

Exposition: North on coteaux

Name of Climate: Côte du Py

Vinification: whole cluster, traditional style (Burgundian). Fermentation for 12 days in cuve, then aged 13 months in concrete tanks.



A.O.C Morgon "Jarvenières"

Soil: bottom of the Py hillside, deep clay soils with iron oxide

Grape: Gamay

Age of Vines: 65 years

Exposition: South-East

Name of Climate: Côte du Py

Vinification: Traditional (Burgundian), with 50% of the grapes destemmed. Fermentation for 13 days in cuve, then aged 9 months in concrete tanks.