

Bruno Duchêne

Visits

This visit with Bruno Duchêne took place in July, 2012.



Words by Jules Dressner, photos by Maya Pedersen.

Bruno Duchêne is the man. From the minute he greets you with his big smile and booming laugh (his deep HA HA HA [sounds like Falkor](#) from *Never Ending Story*), you just get good vibes from the guy. Anyone who knows him well will tell you the guy is pure energy. And as we discovered at lunch, Bruno doesn't just party: he is the party. But more on that later...

Before meeting up with Bruno, our top priority was to find a leash for Zaggy, which had been lost at some point during our [Oratoire St-Martin](#) visit. Cruising around Banyuls, we eventually found a pet shop that lured us in with its amazing wall art:



After finding a great red leash for Zag-Zag, we met up with Bruno on one of Banyuls' main strips. Banyuls-Sur-Mer is a beautiful and very touristic town on the edge of the Roussillon. It borders Catalonia (all the signs are in French and Catalan) and was built on the coast of the Mediterranean

sea. As an A.O.C, the region is known for its fortified, off dry Grenache based wines. Bruno only makes dry wines however, and as a result they are labelled under the Collioure AOC (a neighboring commune whose grapes can also legally be used in Banyuls production).

His wines have quickly gathered cult status in the States for their pure expression of terroir and extreme gulpability. Moreover, as with most things culty, quantities are extremely limited and the wines are almost impossible to find outside of New York City (although some nice retailers who ship out of state will gladly provide you with some). While I would love to tell you that we do this only to boost demand and make these trophy wines, the truth is simply that Bruno is currently working on a tiny scale. His 4 hectares produce very low yields, and the barrels below represent his ENTIRE ANNUAL production.



The area you can see in that picture covers roughly half of Bruno's "cellar", which in reality is little more than a temperature controlled garage. I'm not exaggerating when I say it's by far the smallest place I've seen wine being professionally made in. But as the old adage goes, you make wines in the vines, not the cellar[]

Speaking of the vines, Bruno owns 4 hectares spread over four parcels. They are all on schists, but each parcel has different altitudes, expositions and climates to keep things interesting. Originally from the Loire, Bruno arrived to Banyuls in 2000. Quickly realizing that he wanted to spend the rest of his life there, he quit his job as a wild mushroom distributor, bought some vines and produced his first vintage in 2002. Driving up to the vines, I asked him if it was hard for him to find land as an outsider.

"A good attitude goes a long way! It worked out perfectly."

That quote embodies Bruno's easy going nature perfectly. Never a worry in the world!

Anyhow, we only visited Bruno's biggest parcel (2.5 h), because he felt it would give us the best idea of the work he does.

"You're going to understand everything!"







As you can see in the picture below, all Collioure vineyards are planted on the steep, mountainous hills and face the Mediterranean.



Bruno produces three red wines: *La Luna*, *Pascole* and *Anodine* (*Anodine* is only available in magnum). Unlike most estates, the three cuvées come from the same terroirs, but Bruno bottles them separately to highlight different viticultural practices. For *La Luna*, he lets grass grow free.



Pascole is partially plowed by hand.



Finally, *Anodine* represents the areas that are impossible to work mechanically and where the soil work has to be done 100% by hand, except for a tiny plot where a horse has room to till and plow.



He also makes a white -*Vall Pompo*- from Grenache Blanc and Grenache Gris. All his parcels are co-planted in red and white, and because of optimal weather conditions, he only performs 3 powdered sulfur treatments a year and never uses copper. The old vines are 80-100 years old, and Bruno has replanted the other half over the last decade.



Bruno replants everything by himself, which is pretty uncommon these days: it's a very tough and precise process, so usually a vigneron will hire a pépiniériste to do this work, or at the very least heavily assist in it. Everything is selection massale, and he does it the old school way: planting an american rootstock, then letting it grow for 3 or 4 years before grafting the French foot.

"Only the elders still know how to do this, and they taught me how to do this. When you plant this way, the vines are here forever."

Sounds like those elders really appreciated Bruno's good attitude!

Another question I had for Bruno: how does wind affect your work?

"There is always air coming from the sea."

Winds from the water and/or the mountains are ever-present: over 200 days of the year are "extremely windy", with the Tramontana usually to blame.

Heading back into town, I noticed something that had stayed on my mind since [George Descombes](#) pointed it out in Brouilly: a clear difference in color between neighboring vines, apparently an easy way to tell if they are being treated chemically or not.



Basically, the darker green vines on the lower right are the result of repeated herbicide use, while the lighter, brighter ones on the top left are what healthy vines look like when left alone. Since I'm not a vigneron, I won't speculate any further, but I must say that the difference in color is undeniable...

Driving back into Banyuls, Bruno got very excited telling us about his upcoming project. Along with a dozen or so other partners, Bruno has spearheaded buying an old, soon to be disenfranchised building from the cave cooperative. It's in the heart of town, and will provide stocking rooms for a large number of vigneron, as well as 5 independent cellars (including Bruno's). We got to visit:



As you can see, it's huge. The partners plan on opening a bed and breakfast, as well as a restaurant/wine bar in the space.

"I was about to be debt free for the first time in almost twenty years. Not anymore! But you know what? An opportunity like this will never happen again, and I'm so glad I was able to find this many people to invest. The goal is to create a community spirit, a cave cooperative of independents!"

It's important to note that only 200 of Banyuls' 1800 h are farmed and vinified independently. And while Bruno understands that the little guys need to have each other's back, he's not doing this to spite or challenge the cave.

"These vineyards are extremely difficult to work. If it wasn't for the cave still being able to sell a lot of wine, I can't even begin to imagine how many of these vines would become abandoned overnight."

We went back to the cellar just before lunch to taste the 2010's. All the wines are sans soufre this vintage, and everything was tasting great, blah blah blah...

Lunch was at the great restaurant/natural wine bar *El Xadic Del Mar*. We ate like kings, and started with this:



But that was only the beginning. Bruno started ordering bottle after bottle. And since he knows everybody in town -warm greetings kept erupting from him every 10 minutes- it got to the point where he was pouring some our wine to them, they were pouring their wine to us. Look, there's even photographic evidence.



By the time cheese was done and Bruno ordered a bottle of Banyuls "*for dessert*", we were all wasted. We actually had to spend 3 hours drinking coffees and Badoit on the water before I felt comfortable enough to drive home. This was happening the whole time though, which was quite entertaining: