

Sylvie Esmonin

Gevrey-Chambertin from Sylvie Esmonin.

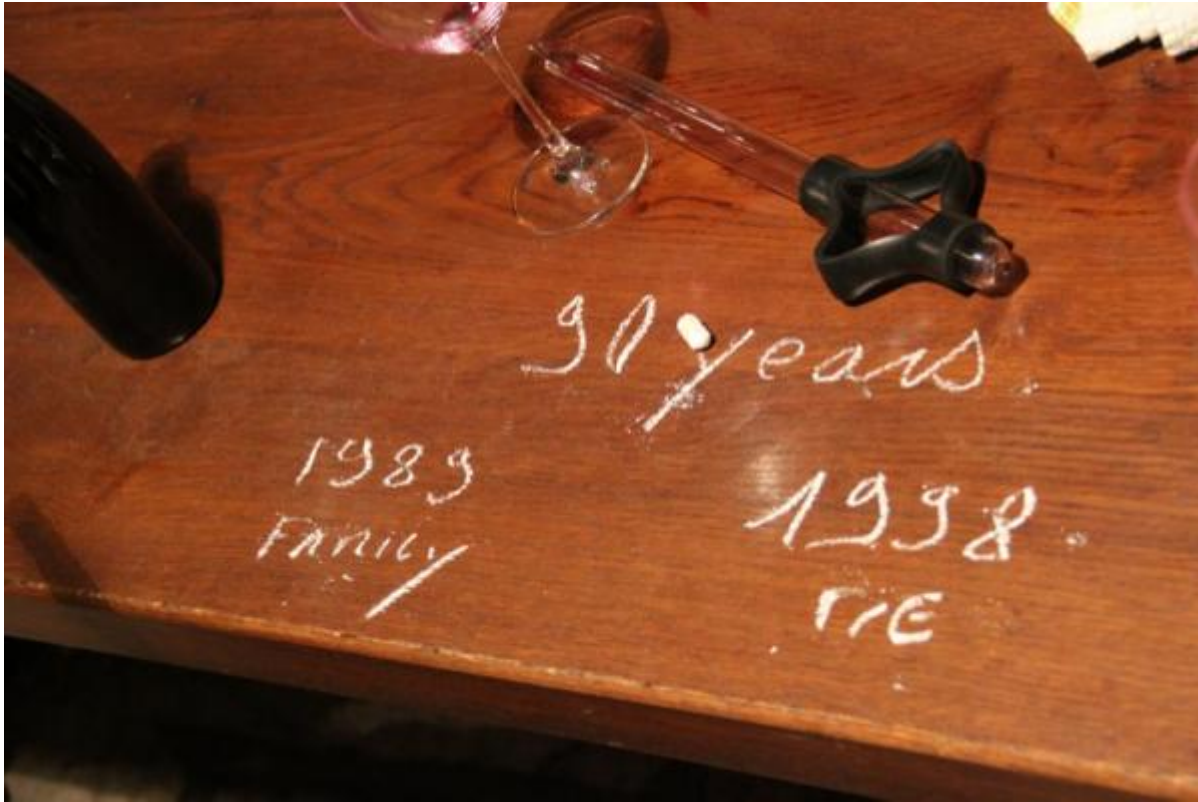


Photo by Alex Finberg.

Profile

Prior to Sylvie Esmonin heading this estate, it known as Domaine Michel Esmonin et Fille. After studying in Dijon, Sylvie worked in various capacities as a consulting oenologist. She says that she needed several years of independent work to weigh her decision and commitment to come back to Gevrey-Chambertin and succeed her father at the family estate. She came back to vinify the 1990 vintage, and from then on the whole production became estate-bottled. Otherwise, all decisions were made by father and daughter together, until progressively Sylvie assumed all responsibilities (with the possible exception of plowing, Michel Esmonin's favorite vineyard chore).

The estate comprises 5 hectares in Gevrey-Chambertin, with a sizeable plot of the Premier Cru Clos St-Jacques as the family house "back yard", and newly added plots in Volnay Santenots and Côte-de-Nuits-Village. The average age of the vines is high, most were planted by Sylvie's grandfather, and some by her father. The winery is a large facility, with a beautiful stone cellar underneath. All grapes are destemmed, crushed and fermented in open wood vats, then put in barrels for the secondary fermentation and ageing. The barrels are of various ages to accommodate the different cuvées, with only Clos St-Jacques using a high proportion of new wood, usually 75%.

The first cuvée is a Bourgogne rouge, from vineyards outside Gevrey-Chambertin; it is light, fruity and lively. The Côte-de-Nuits-Village comes from vineyards in Brochon, a small village between

Gevrey and Fixin, from the *lieux-dits* La Croix Viollette and Les Vignois; it is smoky and peppery, with ripe tannins and sweet fruit. The Gevrey-Chambertin comes from 30-year-old vines in the *lieu-dit* Les Crais; it is quite rich and structured, with good ripeness and dark fruit aromas. The largest cuvée, Gevrey-Chambertin Vieilles Vignes, comes from various plots of 60-year-old vines; it ages in 50% new wood and has toasty oak notes, is very ripe, round and chewy, with intense berry fruit. The Clos St-Jacques, as a young wine, often tastes drier and lighter than the VV cuvée; with some bottle age, though, it shows great finesse and complexity. It is a wine of elegance more than obvious power, and it gracefully integrates subtle fruit and pleasant oaky notes.

Interview

This interview with Sylvie Esmonin took place in her cellar in July, 2015.

Can you introduce us to the estate?

When I was younger, I never thought I would be a vigneronne. I was born in an era where only the sons took over an estate, and my father -who oh-so desperately wanted a boy- ended up with two daughters. So at first it seemed like there would not be a successor after my father. But as fate would have it, the estate was destined to stay in the family.

The Esmonin family can be traced back to when the Dukes of Burgundy reigned. Our family was here before France was France! We were originally a noble family, but I don't know if I really descend from them since I never bothered to verify my family tree. I did however do a little research and you only really find the Esmonin name in Burgundy, save a few in Besançon.

As far as immediate family that shaped the estate, my great-grandfather, who is originally from Vosne-Romanée, moved to Gevrey-Chambertin to marry a vigneronne who lived here. Both were small producers with very little land, so they sold their grapes to larger estates. At the time he worked for Comte de Moucheron, one of the most important Burgundian land owners at the time.

By combining their land, my great-grandparents were able to grow a bit, which in turn permitted them to buy more land. My grandfather and grand-uncle eventually took over the estate. In the 1950's, they were able to purchase the Clos Saint-Jacques from the Comte de Moucheron.

How did you decide you wanted to be a vigneronne?

It was not at all my original plan. I went to high school because my parents desired it of me. They wanted me to have a "good job" like my sister, who went to business school and currently has 1000 employees under her. That was a real success story for my parents!

I wasn't the dumbest person in the world, so going to school was relatively easy for me. Though I was rather lazy and behaved as a dilettante in my youth, but my parents kept pushing me until I found my way. After being bored to tears in high school, I fell in love with bio-chemistry. I was still lazy at the time though, so the idea of going to university, getting licensed and writing a thesis sounded like torture. So I decided to take engineering classes instead. Those classes got me accepted into an engineering school specializing in agronomy and the food industry.

I was still more interested in bio-chemistry than engineering, so I focused on working with food. This led to a number of internships at large industrial food companies, most notably Mars (**ed note:**

producers of the candy bar of the same name, M&M's and, weirdly, Whiskas cat food). It was very interesting and I learned a lot, but I very quickly realized that this path ultimately led to being trapped in a large corporation. I felt like a lion in a cage, and no matter how captivating I found the work, the idea of working for a company of this size became too much to bear. I'm not wired to spend 10 hours a day inside a box.

So I shifted my energy to agronomy, and had an epiphany: what did I know the most about in that field? Obviously it was viticulture. I was born in it, I spent my summers working in the vines and through my parents had been taught to understand and appreciate wine. So I began specializing in viticulture. I actually remember my professor telling me: "I'm not worried about you, you're going to end up back in Gevrey-Chambertin."

And I would always answer: "No way! I'll never return to the family estate!" I was maybe 25 at the time. But, well, I'm clearly here now!

So what happened?

I started working for other vigneronns. But the problem with working for someone is that you have to follow their philosophy and point of view. That philosophy is not necessarily yours. As I started to develop my own opinions, it seemed logical to go back to a family estate that was waiting for me.

Was your father still active at this point?

Yes. What happened was that I would often come home to see my parents on the weekend, and while I was there I would analyze the wines, taste and give my opinion. At one point I think my father kind of figured out: "Wow, she can do this!".

So he asked me if I wanted to join him, at first proposing to do administrative work and sales. My father had always sold his juices to other estates, and from the very beginning, I told him that if I were going to join the estate, we were going to go all the way and bottle the wine from our land. So my father started bottling his wine in 1987, and the first vintage of Michel Esmonin et Fille was in 1989.

When did the transition to Domaine Sylvie Esmonin happen?

In 1998, when my father "officially" retired. I mean, he was retired but basically worked just as hard as when he wasn't! Still to this day! But of course he is almost 80, so his workload has slowed down considerably. He's on the tractor less, but he was in the vines pruning with me all winter. It must be a family thing: my grandfather worked the vines until he was 90.

What is the size of the estate at this point?

The estate represents 7.8 hectares. We own half and rent half. 80 ares in Bourgogne Rouge, 60 ares in Côtes-de-Nuits. 10 ares in Bourgogne Aligoté, 20 ares of Bourgogne Blanc, 20 ares in Volnay-Santenots, 1.7 hectares of Clos-Saint-Jacques (which we own) and 4.4 hectares in Gevrey-Chambertin.

How has your work in the vines and cellar evolved since your beginnings?

I don't think it's possible to be static in this line of work: you age, you meet people, you taste things and gain experience you didn't always have. You become more aware and sensitive to everything around you.

In my beginnings, I was simply following in the footsteps of my father and grandfather, both of whom were alive at the time. What I quickly brought to the equation was the process of aging and bottling our wines, something they'd never done. But my goal was never to revolutionize the estate. However, I will say that a very important step forward was eliminating herbicides in 1990. This naturally led to cutting out anti-rot chemicals and pesticides.

We focused instead on contact treatments, and haven't used systemic products in a very, very long time.

Where did the inspiration to eliminate these products come from?

Because I drink my own wine! And I'd been involved in bio-chemistry for a long time, which naturally made me weary of chemical products. I don't want to poison myself, I want to drink something pure. And I also felt that I couldn't play sorcerer's apprentice with the vines.

There is an anecdote I often tell from an early morning in 1990. I was in the vines with my father in September, maybe around 6am. Harvest was getting close, and we were simply observing the vines to decide where we were going to start picking. We get to a very rocky parcel, and I remember that morning was a bit misty from the humidity. While walking through the parcel, my father asks me: "Do you smell that"? I answered that yes, I could smell something peculiar.

We had both instantly recognized the smell of Round Up, the infamous herbicide that at the time was labelled as "ecologically safe". I distinctly remember a TV commercial around that time with a dog burying his bone, the master treating the land with herbicide and the dog happily extracting his bone on the clean, bare soil. This was on TV! And I also remember that it was explicitly noted that the traces of the product are very short lived after use.

But here's the catch: the last time we'd applied Round Up was in July! To us, it was clear we were being lied to.

Was your father in agreement with you about eliminating all these products?

My father was always reticent to modernism. He was late to the party with herbicides (I think he started using them around 76), and even then he used them very lightly. So he was with me in eliminating all the chemical products in the vineyard when I proposed it to him. But the truth is that these products, at least from a manual labor perspective, make life a whole lot easier. I remember my father once saying: "Well, maybe we should buy just a little bit of herbicide this year..." and I said NO!

I just think he was worried that we wouldn't be up to the task anymore. But no, I never looked back and we've been working this way ever since.

Would you be eligible for organic certification if you wanted it?

I'll explain to you why I've never requested a certification. In my beginnings I was very close to asking for it. At the time I was part of a tasting group called *Les Vins Authentiques* (Authentic Wines). There were quite a few certified organic wines at these tastings, and I remember 9 out of 10 of them not tasting good to me. So that experience made me distance myself from organics: I didn't want to be part of that family.

To be fair, my point of view has obviously evolved over the years. As far as I'm concerned, I work my

vines with my soul and conscience, and do what I think is best for them. So with this recent flavescence dorée episode, I was forced to use an insecticide for 2 years, though the one I used is certified organic. I didn't hesitate, because if that's what it takes to save my vines, I will do it. I refuse to be dogmatic and pig-headed about issues like this.

If you know me, you know I am ecologically conscious. For the entire estate, I consolidate my garbage to send it out every two months. I divide everything up: cardboard, metals, glass, plastics; it's just my way of doing things. Unfortunately, in France ecology is usually little more than paper work, not by actual work in the vines. There is a huge disconnect: I know growers who are certified organic that I don't consider respectful of nature. I've seen certified organic producers green-harvest with tractors emitting hot gasses that burn off the leaves. If that's considered organic, then no thanks!

I believe there is a philosophy that goes beyond the products you do or don't use in the soils. I green harvest by hand! I hire people to do this with me!

How about in the cellar? Any major evolutions or changes?

The biggest change is that my grand-father and father de-stemmed the grapes. I'm not a mystical person (in fact I'm an atheist!), but there was something almost supernatural the first time I left the stems on the whole clusters. I'm a pragmatist that believes in what I touch and what I see, but I'll never forget the bottle that changed my life: a 1911 Clos Vougeot. It was so fresh that it marked me for life. How could a wine travel through so many decades (it was about 90 years old at the time) and still taste this youthful?

So I looked into it, and deduced that it had to be a cellar choice and not vineyard work. Coincidentally, I went to taste wines at Romanée-Conti about a month after trying the Vougeot, who happen to make whole-cluster vinifications. So I tried it for myself, and I think you really gain more complexity, specifically floral aromas. This was lost in the cold carbonic macerations of the 80's and early 90's: you could taste cassis, red fruit, blackberry fruit, maybe even a little spice but no flowers. The flowers in the vines weren't transported into the bottle.

I've always loved reading old books about Burgundies's history, and I remember many wine descriptors mentioning roses, violets... I thought to myself: these flowers are in our vineyards, so why can't we taste them in our wines? The subtle way the flowers play with the fruit and the spice, now that's a great wine!

How do feel about the current state of Burgundy?

In the 26 years that I've been doing this, I feel that the job of the vigneron has drastically changed. Personally, I feel that Burgundy is bastardizing itself. We're becoming more and more like the Bordelais: we want to everything to be "perfect". But we are human and what is man other than a bunch of imperfections? Wines with "imperfections" also have more character, are more interesting and marvelous than the reassuring, in-the-box and "flawless" wines that to me are just sad.

The other parallel I draw to Bordeaux is the fact that estates are getting bigger and more disconnected with the land and even the very essence of being a vigneron. You've got people hired to work the vines, people hired to work in the cellar, to sell the wines, etc... Where is the vigneron who knows how to do it all, and even if he isn't the best in one task he makes up for it with another? In the end, he may not be perfect at every task, but the wine you taste will be unique for those very reasons! You'll taste the vigneron's character in the wines.

In brief: money ruins everything! Estates like mine are an endangered species on the brink of extinction.

What do you like to drink?

The first wine I think of when I'm drinking from other regions is Didier Dagueneau. I love his wines, I love how it seems light and airy but yet feels so rooted: a total contradiction that somehow makes total sense!

In Burgundy we have a ton of great vigneronns and I love tasting my colleagues's wines. I have a soft spot for Chambertin: I'll even say I think they are the best wines in Burgundy, but in this regard I'll admit I'm a total chauvinist!

In a completely other style, I also really enjoy Sauternes. I like that it's not a wine you open every day: it's so rich that you can only taste a little bit of it at a time. It's like having a cognac, you only need a tiny bit to get what its about. An Yquem from 2001 (my daughter's birthday!) immediately comes to mind.

Visits

This visit with Sylvie Esmonin took place in June, 2012.



Words by Jules Dressner, photos by Maya Perdersen.

It's always a pleasant surprise when you imagine someone a certain way and they prove you completely wrong. Maybe it's that I'd only drunk her wines a handful of times and that they strike me as "*very serious*" Burgundies (they are, and that's a good thing), but I always imagined Sylvie Esmonin to be, well, somewhat elusive and very serious. I'm talking stern, never laughs at anything serious. But she turned out to be warm, friendly, funny, passionate and insightful. While I'd envisioned her greeting us in a [fancy-schmantzy pantsuit](#), she showed directly from the vines up in her "*work outfit*", consisting of boat-shoe loafers, purple soccer shorts, a t-shirt and a shiny, puffy silver-jacket that reminded of [late 90's/early 2000's rap fashion](#). This description probably has you imagining Hillary Clinton dressed like Puff Daddy, but [Sylvie actually looks like this](#).

Sylvie's most notorious vines are just outside of her house; she is one of only five to grow grapes on the lieu-dit Clos Saint-Jacques.









Here's a bonus pic of me petting Sylvie's dog Réglisse.



Sylvie was, as aforementioned, a little late because she was coming directly from her vines, which

are keeping her very busy this year. Undoubtedly due to the extra attention she is giving them in this challenging vintage, her 8 hectares are not suffering from any significant illness problems. Though it will be another very low yielding vintage, quality should be high.

"It's been yet another very rainy summer, the 7th in the last 11 years. It rained 18 days in June! This is a fairly recent phenomenon in the region, one that people still haven't and need to adapt to."

For Sylvie, the current effects of global warming worry her less than recent and significant shifts in climate, namely warmer, drier winters and rainier summers. In her father's days, if there wasn't some kind of catastrophic weather incident, every vintage tended to be more or less *"by the books"*: seasonal temperature and snow/rain/sun conditions of course varied from year to year, but the vigneron was rarely thrown major curveballs. But Sylvie says that over the last decade, her job as a vigneronne, which in her mind boils down to taking the best care of your vines as to produce the highest quality grapes (and thus the highest quality wine), has become an unpredictable, constant form of adaptation.

To illustrate her point, she described her experience of the 2011 vintage. That year, it was a very hot and dry spring, resulting in extremely precocious budding and flowering. But after that, nothing grew, and the vines began stagnating due to the ongoing dryness. This led many vigneronns to suffer from what Sylvie has coined *"2003 syndrome"*: that year, there had been no rain and heavy sun from March to October. In the summer, it is traditional to do an *effeuillage* to separate the grapes from each other and air them out as to not spread illness. By routinely doing this in 2003, many vigneronns completely burned their grapes in the process. So for 2011, the dryness made them panic, and imagining a 2003 repeat, everyone chose not to do an *effeuillage*. And lo and behold, it rained all of July and August! Of course, illness spread violently. Even worst, September was absurdly hot, and people found themselves having flash fermentations (california style), which according to Sylvie, *"Pinot does not like"*. All of Sylvie's neighbors thought she was crazy for instinctively doing an *effeuillage* in 2011, but it would have been a disaster otherwise.

After our chat, we stepped into Sylvie's beautiful, classicly Burgundian cellar. It's spread out over a smaller room:



And a larger one:



All the wines are fermented and aged in barrel, which are marked with what they contain.



We got to taste all the 2011's from barrel, which will be bottled right after easter 2013. The cellar is naturally cool, but not temperature controlled; in such, a very slow fermentation takes place, so Sylvie always waits two winters before bottling. We also tasted some 2010's in bottle. The wines

always strike me as very drinkable young, but are invariably marked by oak, which I imagine would fade around the 10 year mark. Don't get me wrong: the oak is noticeable but never overbearing, always feeling like a fully incorporated, integral part of the wine.

After the tasting, Denyse asked how Sylvie's father Michel was doing. At 75, he still rides the tractor everyday to work the soils and take care of the vineyards.

"He's bored to tears retired at the house. He doesn't know what to do with himself besides work."

Sylvie envies him; back in his day, a vigneron's job kept him in the vineyard and the cellar, which is where she wishes she could spend the majority of her time. But times have changed, and now she feels constantly bogged down by administrative and commercial duties.

"Sometimes I feel like I spend more time in the office than in the vines."

Sylvie wishes she could hire somebody to take care of these duties, but in the reality of working a small, 8 hectare estate like hers, the administrative and commercial side of things have become an extension of an independent vigneron's duties. The real problem, however, is that the administrative laws in France for estates producing wine are the same for everyone, regardless of size. What may seem trivial to a large instillation who can hire someone to take care of paperwork becomes a time consuming endeavor that keeps the small, independent vigneron out of the vines where they belong.

We also talked about the current state of Burgundy, which Sylvie has a hard time being optimistic about.

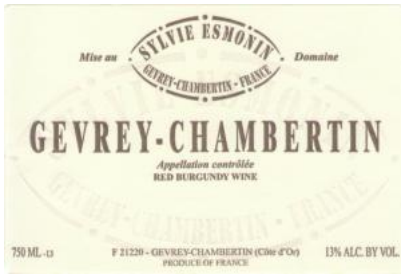
"Burgundy is becoming like Bordeaux... I've seen two of my colleagues (not my competitors!) in the village go out of business in 2012. They were both about my size; one was purchased by a rich Chinese couple, the other by wealthy Canadians... No one else can afford the land, and less people can afford the wine."

Sylvie feels that Burgundy has lost touch with its peasantry roots, resulting in inflated egos and a loss of camaraderie that still existed a generation ago.

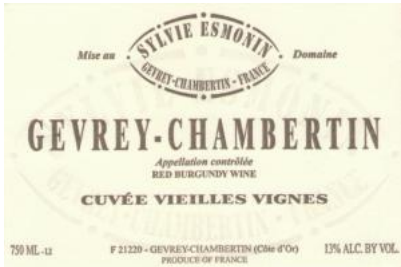
"The code of honor between vignerons here is gone. In my father's days, if a neighbor accidentally broke one of your pillars with his tractor, he would call to tell you, then fix it. Now a guy doesn't call, and even though you see the fresh tractor marks going into his rows, he tells you it's not him."

Sylvie's pessimism was tough to accept but based in reality, and I could tell her frustrations stemmed from a true passion and care for a sense of place; she knows that she will be able to continue working on a small, traditional scale in her lifetime, but worries her daughter might be thrown insurmountable economic and administrative hurdles if she chooses to continue in the same path. In the end, all Sylvie wants to do is make the best wines possible from her terroir, and nothing else. While she's succeeding at just that, no one's making it any easier for her.

Wines



A.O.C Gevrey-Chambertin



A.O.C Gevrey-Chambertin "Cuvée Vieilles Vignes"



A.O.C Gevrey-Chambertin 1er Cru "Clos Saint-Jacques"