

Sylvie Esmonin

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. 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 vines. 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. 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 the 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, and they 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 Burgundy'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.