

Sylvie Esmonin

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 worse, 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.