

Dominique Hauvette

Interview

This interview with Dominique Hauvette took place in Bordeaux in June 2011.

Tell us about the history of your estate.

I started my estate with 2.5 hectares of vines. After 5 years, it doubled to 5 hectares, then 7, then 14. I'm glad I started small because it gave me the opportunity to stay afloat economically in the beginning and to grow at a steady pace. If I had started with 14 hectares, I doubt I'd be here 30 years later.

I came to Provence in 1980 for what was supposed to be a month long vacation and never left. Back then my parents had a hotel in Val-d'Isère and I was a ski instructor. My dad eventually left the Alps around 1986 and bought a house out here and I moved in with him.

By 1988, I'd been in Provence for close to a decade living off whatever little job came my way and decided I couldn't do this for the rest of my life. I made the decision to leave Provence and move to Paris. Right around this time, my father told me that our neighbor was selling his house and 2.5 hectares of vines. He was thinking about buying the house, and told me that if I was interested, I could work the vines and make wine.

I said yes, and started out with no idea what I was doing; no viticultural/oenological studies, no experience at another estate, no tasting experience, nothing! When we'd buy wine for the hotel in Val-d'Isère, the sales guy would tell us: "*This is good.*" and we'd say "*It's not bad. Let's buy it.*" It didn't go any further than "*I like it*" or "*I don't like it*". We knew what we liked and what sold in the restaurant, but that was it.

That was in 1988. The first few vintages were a bit complicated. I learned by getting my hands dirty in the vines and reading oenology books every time I had a problem, which was pretty much all the time. By 1994, I realized this approach just wasn't enough and decided I needed to study oenology. I got my degree over the next four years in Montpellier.

What was the work in the vines like back then?

From day one I've worked organically. At the time the decision was more about being a late blooming hippie than an actual work philosophy. But it also just so happened that Noël Michelin -one of the pioneers of organic viticulture- was my neighbor, as was Trévallon. Not only did their work correspond to what I wanted to do at the time, but having them as neighbors showed me that it was possible.

It took a while to convert those 2.5 hectares because the previous owner was obsessed with microbiological disease and insects, so the vines had been heavily treated with chemicals. To give you an idea of how bad it was, I threw out 7 truckloads of left over chemicals when I took over!

I've been certified organic since 1988 but refuse to put it on my labels. Back when I started in the late 80's, people thought you were joking if you told them you worked organically. It was

marginalized, as if you were a guy who tried raising goats in Larzac, failed miserably, and decided you'd try making wine instead.

Do you think certification is important?

I do, because "*organic*" is a legally protected word that not everyone can claim. Biodynamic, on the other hand, is not, and anyone who wants to say he works biodynamically can, because there is no way to refute this. I believe that if you say you do something, you need to be able to prove it. In my case, organic viticulture is a work philosophy and not a marketing tool.

What's the work like in the vines?

We work the soils, but are very careful in not overworking them because otherwise you invert soil profiles. I say this because the living layers in the soil vary greatly: micro-organisms that are 5cm deep will be completely different than those at 15cm or 30cm. If you shift these microorganisms from where they belong, they have to migrate back, and this traumatizes the soil.

This is relatively new information: in the old days everyone worked "*organically*" because there was no alternative, and this included plowing the soil in the vineyard. Now we make an effort to work the soils, but only on the top layer as to not upset its balance.

And in the cellar?

I work with indigenous yeasts. I never sulfur the vines or the juice during vinification. If the fermentation goes well, with no more malo on the sugars and if the volatile acidity is stable (which is almost always the case), I don't sulfur at all save for a very small dose at bottling.

I use wood, which replaced clay amphoras in the Middle Ages. We cypher in one or two barrels of new oak each year in each cuvée. The goal is to age these for an average 20 to 30 year life cycle, not to add wood flavor to the wine. Heavily oaked wines are not my thing.

Around 1800, cement tanks were created (I consider these a part of wine making's history at this point) and I use these as well. Unlike wood, they don't add a flavor to the wine, and I like that the wine remains neutral.

Both wood and cement containers are magnetically neutral, so I use these over stainless steel tanks, because all stainless steel containers generate magnetic fields. Wine consists of suspended particles that contain either positive or negative electric charges. As soon as these particles come into contact with a magnetic field, they are aromatically affected, and I don't want that.

How do you feel about the French AOC system and the idea of a region's "typicity"?

"Typicity" is a recent concept created by the *INAO* because they need arguments to defend the appellation system. In my region, wine dates back to 1840: it's not Bordeaux or Burgundy, two regions with a millennium of winemaking to fall back on. In Provence, vineyards were initially planted for personal consumption. In such, people started making wine here by planting varieties from other regions. It was a question of planting what they wanted to drink.

Nowadays everything needs to have a context and be classified. I think this is foolish because in doing so you're closing the door on all possible evolution for the future. Wine is where it is today because people took risks, tried new things and things evolved from what we had then to what we

have now. In my eyes, the AOC system is the death of progress and evolution in French winemaking.

For someone that has been making wine from indigenous yeasts and farming organically since 1988, how do you feel about the recent "natural wine" movement that many people would include you as a part of?

It's complicated because the term has been galvanized and a lot of people will tell you a lot of different things about natural wine. For me, natural wine is a wine that reflects a terroir, a variety, a vintage and the individual who made the wine. I would also add that a natural wine would be a wine where no mechanical or chemical intervention was made to alter, modify or nullify the four factors I just listed.

Today I feel there are two distinct types of wines, the first being industrial wines. These wines are standardized as to not shock or disappoint the consumer. Every bottle tastes the same, you know exactly what you're getting, you're not taking any risks, and in turn you get a wine with zero personality.

Then there are "natural" wines: maybe a better name could have been conjured, but it's always hard to find an adequate designation for something with such subtlety and nuance. These are wines backed by the personality and the emotion of the person who made them, and when you work with this philosophy, you hope that you will give your consumer a distinct emotion or feeling they couldn't have gotten anywhere else but in that glass of your wine.