

Olivier Horiot

Interview

This interview with Olivier Horiot took place at L'Herbe Rouge in February, 2013.

Tell us about the *Domaine Olivier Horiot*.

Vines have been in the Horiot family since the 1600's. I come from the side of the family that were inn-keepers, but my grandfather replanted vines post-phyloxerra, so you could say I am the third generation to subsist from viticulture. My father and grandfather always worked with the cave coopérative, and we still sell a part of our production to them. I decided I wanted to independently vinify my own wines upon joining my father in 1999.

We produced the first estate wine in 2000. We own 7h, and I vinify the equivalent of 2h. The rest is sold to the cave coopérative and to négociants. We jokingly call it the "Champagne Equilibrium", and don't plan on entirely modifying this system, at least for now. This balance gives us the opportunity to have more fun with the stuff we vinify independently, to craft them more to our taste.

What inspired you to started making your own wines?

An anecdote that has always stuck with me was during my time in US, vinifying in the state of Washington. Where I worked, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Riesling and Chardonnay were all planted together in the same vineyard! It struck me as odd that they thought they could produce quality wine this way, but I later realized that they were simply trying to figure out what grape was best suited for this terroir.

When I came home, I had a revelation. My family's land already had established grapes grown on established terroir. I also realized that with just one grape (Pinot Noir), you could produce many different styles of wine and still have them be reflective of a place. I hadn't originally planned to come back or even to vinify my family's vines, but from that moment on I knew I wanted to make Rosé des Riceys and Coteaux Champenois.

Everyone makes Champagne, but we are only 15 who continue to make Rosé des Riceys. It felt like a worthwhile tradition to continue. And that was the idea from the beginning. In fact, the first four years I only made rosé and Coteaux Champenois. Our first sparkling was produced in 2004.

Most regions of France don't have this versatility. The magic of Les Riceys is that with Pinot Noir, you can make quality rosé, red, white, white Champagne and rosé Champagne. This makes it a truly unique place.

Can you elaborate on Les Riceys and its history?

You should probably get some historians on the case, but I'll tell you what I know! Historically, still red wine was produced in Champagne well before bubbles. The region of Champagne used to be extremely densely planted; vines were 40 centimeters from each other. There was no way to get a horse in there, and all the work had to be done by hand. These reputedly were amongst the best red wines of France in medieval times.

The Riceys AOC was created in 1945. But prior to this, an insatiable group of growers had always produced rosé because it was THE local wine. Today, we are between 15 and 20 for a total production of 70 000 bottles a year. It's tiny! And in years like 2001 or 2007, no one made any because the quality wasn't there. So instead, everyone made bubbles. We are definitely lucky to have the luxury of this option!

Is there a big difference between making bubbles instead of still?

Making bubbles is easier. Your grapes don't need as much maturity, so it's a lot less risky as far as potential rot. You can also work with higher yielding vines than if you were to produce a quality still wine.

A great rosé is complicated to make, and requires low yielding, older vines. You are working on a 4, 5 day maceration, sometimes filling the tank in the middle of the night and watching over them in a way I've never seen anywhere else. Even if we don't all work the same way in the vines, there is true passion behind everyone's desire to make this wine.

What's the work like in the vines?

We work biodynamically (not certified), and are the only ones in our region to do so. Prior to my taking over in 2000, my father still used herbicides. I progressively started working the soils to eliminate this practice, starting with the vines that I wanted to vinify myself. Then we slowly started doing the same for the négoce vines. After that, we realized it was stupid to only do part of the estate this way, and converted everything.

So the Rosé de Riceys vines have been worked biodynamically since 2002, with the others following in 2004, 2005 and 2006. And yes, that means that what I deliver to the cave is grown biodynamically. They do not pay me more for this, and that's fine since I do this for peace of mind and not profit.

But I'm optimistic that we can change ideas in the long term, and hopefully get the ball rolling. We don't want to be the people yelling: "*We work in biodynamics, you guys are evil and doing it wrong!*". Instead, we'd rather lead by example, and valorize quality. A lot of growers who work really well sell to the coop, and the wines don't necessarily reflect the quality of the grapes.

And in the cellar?

We want to valorize wines of terroir, so the first step was really focusing on the vines. The cellar was a logical extension: first we decided to vinify parcels separately, then we decided to ferment the wines off of their native yeasts.

For only 2 hectares, you produce a lot of different cuvées. Could you describe them to us?

If someone analyzed this purely from a commercial standpoint, they'd probably say: "*You guys are crazy!*" But those who overanalyze never end up taking action, and we decided to do this off of feeling. In 2000, we produced Rosé de Riceys and Coteaux Champenois from the *En Valingrain* site, because we knew that quality wines had historically been produced here. As far as the *En Barmont* site, no one was producing still wines from here, but I had a good feeling that these clay soils would produce something of quality. Still wine hadn't been produced from this site in over a 100 years.

Originally -like any good Champenois- we were planning on blending both sites together. But they both ended up being so good and different that we bottled them separately. It was the beginning of

our "complications"! If we had had just one rosé, it would have been a lot easier to sell. But this instinctive decision led us to realize that *En Barmont* was more suited for reds and *Valingrain's* marl lends itself better to rosé or whites.

We then took this approach to the bubbles. We release 4 sparkling cuvées, but in the cellar vinify our 8 terroirs separately before blending. *Métisse* and *5 Sens* are blends, but *Sève Blanc* is all from *En Barmont*. It's a learning process: by doing this we also realized what we did and didn't want to sell to the négoce.

As far as the Coteaux Champenois Blanc, we have Chardonnay and Pinot Blanc in the rosé hills. Initially, we'd go harvest these later to produce bubbles, but we soon realized that it was a shame just blending it into a Champagne. So there's only 500 bottles of it, but it's still worthwhile for us to do.

How do you choose what will go to the cave, the négoce and your own wines?

Some terroirs, for example *En Barmont*, are always going to be used to make rosé and the *Sève Blanc*. Some terroirs are simply a question of vintage. In a hot year, we will keep the grapes from cooler, higher points of the hill. Vines go from 160 to 320 meters here, so it gives you a lot of wiggle room; between a side area facing East and a hill facing full South, the maturities and freshness vary greatly. So in a year like 2009, we were still able to produce something fresh making these type of decisions.

You have a majority of Pinot Noir, but you grow a lot of other grapes...

We have the typical Champagne grapes here, but we also have varieties that are typical of the Aube. Arbane has been here for a long time, and is believed to be Gewürztraminer and Savagnin's distant cousin. Pinot Blanc is also an Aube grape, and was also planted in Chablis before phylloxera. We recently planted some Petit Mellier and Pinot Gris, and though they are still very young, I hope to produce something interesting with these.

How do you feel about the Riceys AOC?

We are very lucky in Champagne because of the flexibility we are accorded. We'd probably get in trouble if we made PET NAT, but otherwise we're in the clear.

How do you feel about the term "natural wine"?

I never claim to make biodynamic wine, nor have I ever claimed to make natural wine. This was something I never really thought about until realizing that all my importers (US, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Italy) specialize in this style of wine, and that a lot of the shows I go to have people who claim to be natural winemakers. So I guess that lumps me in. I do in fact work without chemicals in the vines, use native yeasts and very little sulfur. But for me this is just making wine.

But I'm not blind to what is happening either. I know that certain people will seek my wines out because they deem them "natural", whether I claimed it or not. We have customers who want to drink our wines because they come from biodynamic vineyards. But it's our house philosophy to never bring this up unless asked: we want people to come to the wines because they are good. If they stay because the wines are biodynamic or natural, then great.

I will also point out that while natural wines are very popular right now, in the long term I hope this

will change people's perception of wine. Winemakers and consumers now have the opportunity to think twice about cultured yeasts, chaptalisation (we're very bad with this in Champagne!) and the process that goes into making a wine.

What do you like to drink?

Everything! I could go for a Loirette right now!