

Domaine du Closel

**Savennières from Domaine du Closel -
Château des Vaults.**



Evelyne de Pontbriand.

Profile



Chateau des Vaults in Savennières dates back to 1495, and was inherited by Michèle de Jessey in 1962 from her childless aunt Madame du Closel. Michèle and Jacques de Jessey turned the small family estate into *Domaine du Closel*. The entire vineyard is located on the most western hill of Savennières and includes some of the best parcels in the AOC: *Les Caillardières* and *Clos du Papillon*. The topsoil is shallow, very warm and consists of purple/green schist and sandstone, enriched with volcanic rocks (quartz, phanites, rhyolites and spilites) in the best areas.

Evelyne de Pontbriand, Michèle and Jacques' daughter, took over the estate in 2001 after a first career of teaching French literature to adults all over the world. As a lover of botanics and nature, she quickly adopted organic viticulture, which continues to be an experimental learning process. She is constantly searching for cultural practices best adapted to the austere terroirs of Savennières, and has deeply changed vinification practices in the cellar. Vinification is done very naturally and with indigenous yeasts; sulfites are only added in tiny doses when needed. The wines are raised on lees from 12 to 26 months. The rhythm of fermentation is always respected.

Today the entire estate has been converted to organic and biodynamic practices in order to best express the different terroirs, each producing unique, original and delicious wines. With the help of a Belgian geologist Valerie Closset, all of her parcels have been inventoried and analysed to understand them better (which ultimately led to each cuvée sharing the name of the parcel it came from). A lot of energy has recently been focused on understanding and dealing with fungal illness in the vines. For esca, replacements are done in 2 phases: the first consists of planting the rootstock. About 2 years later, a "selection massale" of chenin is grafted from a healthy vine. New plantations are done with material from Lilian Berillon, the first and only organic pepinieriste in the world. (<http://www.lilian-berillon.fr/>)

The other experiments have focused on pruning: new plantations are pruned in the ancient style gobelet, allowing the vine to grow bunches all around and have more exposure to sun and wind. Instead of being cut, the growing branches are now gently wrapped around the top wire. Evelyne believes that foliage thinning is traumatic to the vines, as leaves are the plant's vital organs. She has quickly noticed a change in the aromatic palate of the wines. Much focus has also been dedicated to soil work. Different plants, such as cereals and cloves, have been used as green fertilizers; the idea is to let indigenous vegetation grow in order to reestablish an authentic biodiversity in order to help fight insects and pests.

When not making delicious wines, Evelyne enjoys pairing them with her friend's cheeses, cooking the garden's vegetables with Loire fishes, reading, travelling to visit other vineyards, and promoting the Savennières AOC (of which she is president).

Interview

This interview with Evelyne De Jessey took place on a bus from Los Angeles to San Francisco in March 2011.

Tell us about *Domaine du Closel*.

Domaine du Closel consists of 16 hectares: 13 hectares of Chenin Blanc to make Savennières, along with 2 hectares of Cabernet Franc and 1 hectare of Cabernet Sauvignon reserved for Anjou and Anjou village.

I took over the estate in 2001. At the time, though I had drunk a lot of great wine, I had another profession and had never made any! Since then I have less time to drink but more time to make it!

I took over for my mother; the vigneronne before her was an aunt, and before her another woman, so as you can see there are a lot of women in Closel's history!

Do you work organically?

We do. We've always worked very traditionally, but I was the one who pushed that we get a certification and work in this fashion. We started converting the vineyards in 2006 and have been certified as of 2009. Recently we've experimented with biodynamic agriculture, but are far from mastering it and aren't certified.

From the beginning of my tenure I began working more or less organically, but at the time it didn't seem that important to be certified. Over time I came to realize that it gives the consumer a solid reference point, so I decided we should get certified. Certification or not, working organically reflects my attitude towards nature. I've raised my children this way. My children are certified organic!

Were the vines in good shape before converting?

The vines were always in good shape, except that a lot of them are dying from esca! We're constantly replanting, and recently we've purchased graft holders from Southern France; we will attempt the whip and tong graft method in hopes of ridding ourselves of esca in the future. The grafts will of course be selections massales.

What's the work like in the vines?

It's hard! We work the soil a lot, and we've evolved in that we let everything grow around the vines: we used to let grass grow high, then we started growing various cereals that would later incorporate themselves into the soil, but now we let all of the indigenous flora grow because it really helps us out with insects.

What about in the cellar?

We don't do anything in the cellar! I just tasted wines that we haven't touched in four months: they taste much better now! We bring in the grapes and everything's already on them so the fermentation process happens naturally (in *barrisques*) and doesn't need me around! We still taste them every once in a while just to make sure everything's ok. The fermentations are rather long: the *Papillon* for example ferments in its' *barrisques* for almost a year. This freaked out my mother when I first started doing this. But now that she realizes it works just fine, she doesn't care anymore!

How do you feel about Savennières as an AOC?

The AOC is getting better and better since I'm now its' president! (laughs)

When I was first elected, I wasn't too sure what I was supposed to do. So I decided to gather all the *vignerons*, get them drunk, and asked what they expected of me. it worked out great. We debated on what we expected of our appellation, and I suppose this is the role of the president: to create an identity and to communicate it to the rest of the world. Another role is to have everyone work together, and I feel that there is a great ambiance between everyone in Savennières.

10 years ago there was a vote that permitted *vignerons* in the commune next to ours to make Savennières. This upped the amount of growers from 12 to 36, and since then we've had no choice but to work together to help our appellation grow healthily. I'm very happy, because a big group of our *vignerons* are orienting themselves towards organic and biodynamic agriculture in order to make wines that reflect their *terroir* and taste like the area. They aren't bombarding their wines with tons of sulfur anymore and I can proudly say that there are more and more delicious Savennières on the market.

What's your stance on "natural wine"?

I think that everyone's priority should be that the wine be good. I'm not quite sure what "natural wine" means; so many people claim to be making it, but they're all doing it differently.

Wine should taste good, but it's important for the *vigneron* to be happy with what he's doing. It's one thing to express a *terroir* or an appellation, it's another to express *joie de vivre* in what you do.

At the same time, I'll admit that I make and drink wines made in a certain fashion. But there are already so many rules that concretely defining these wines seems arbitrary to me. If the wine is good people are going to buy it.

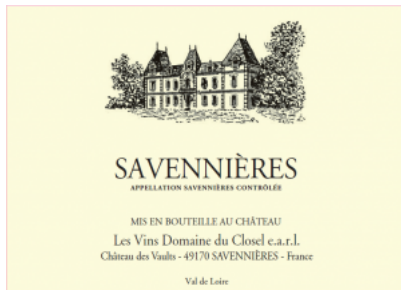
If anything, it should be conventional wines that mention that they use chemicals on the labels. I find it strange that we're the ones that should alert the consumer that our wines are "pure" and "natural" and others don't have to warn that they are "chemical" or "poisonous".

What do you like to drink?

I'm a fan of Burgundy: they have an elegance and a finesse that fascinates me.

I also love to travel and discover new wines that reflect a terroir and a place. Switzerland, Austria and Italy are countries where I've discovered some truly original wines.

Wines



A.O.C Savennières "Jalousie":

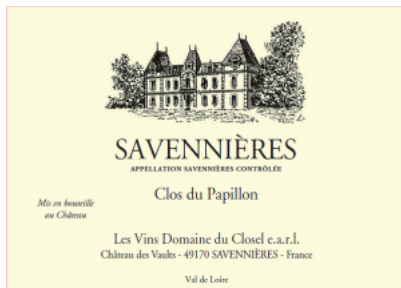
Soil: quartz schist and sandstone, decomposed schist

Grape: Chenin Blanc

Vines: 15-20 years old

Yields: 35 hl/ha

Vinification: aged 12 months on the lees.



A.O.C Savennières "Clos du Papillon":

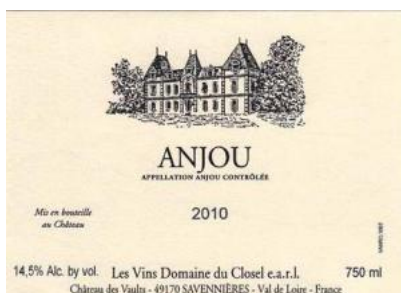
Soil: quartz and volcanic stones on clay, sandstone and schist

Grape: Chenin Blanc

Vines: 45-60 years old

Yields: 25 hl/ha

Vinification: Aged on the lees for 24 months in barrique.



A.O.C Anjou Red