Thomas-Labaille

Profile

Years ago, we visited an old vigneron in Chavignol who had made fabulous Sancerre before his retirement: old-vines vineyards in Monts Damnés (Sancerre's greatest vineyard site), *élevage* in old *foudres* and unfiltered bottlings. We asked him who continued to work in that style and he said "Cotat and my friend Claude."

One thing led to another and we were off to meet Claude Thomas, who was busy pruning his vines in the rain. His wife dragged him into his cellar where he stripped off mud-caked boots and served us several vintages. Thomas was then 73, and wished to retire, but he was holding on in the hope that his daughter and son-in-law would take over. This finally happened when Jean-Paul Labaille, son-in-law, quit his civil servant job and became a full-time vigneron (for the previous ten vintages, he had taken his vacation during the harvest to be the assistant winemaker to Claude Thomas).

Only minimal changes have occurred. The vineyards remain among the best in Chavignol, with a large proportion of old vines. The old barrels are not in use any more, but the vineyard and cellar work follow the same time-honored techniques. The Monts Damnés plot is too steep a slope to ever consider machine harvesting, which is now the norm in the appellation, and it requires intensive, non-mechanized vineyard work. But drainage and exposure are excellent and ensure the best ripeness for the vintage. Labaille has somewhat tidied up Thomas' facilities, which used to be in sharp contrast to most cellars in the area: instead of a hyper-hygienic room, with wall-to-wall tiled floors and stainless-steel vats, his was a Burgundian type of cellar. Some cuvées still age in large concrete vats, others in stainless-steel, and the oak barrels have been re-placed by newer ones, mostly second-hand, 2 to 3 years old, not in order to impart any oaky character to the wine, but to let it breathe and evolve slowly on its lees.

The resulting wine is sensational: rich, fat, round, with layered aromas, a subtle nose and a long finish. Not a typical bistro Sancerre, but a graceful wine meant for ageing and pleasure.

Les Monts Damnés.