

Olivier Lemasson - Les Vins Contés

Interview

This interview took place with Olivier Lemasson in Los Angeles in March 2011.

Explain the way that *Vin Contés* works.

The grapes I work with come from two principle sources: the first being 3 hectares of vines that I rent and work myself organically. The second is the equivalent of 7 hectares from which I purchase fruit; my team and I hand harvest the grapes from these sites when they are ready to bring back to the cellar. The furthest vineyards I purchase grapes from is 40 kilometers away from my house; this permits me to get grapes from nice terroirs i wouldn't be able to work with in my area.

How did you pick these sites you purchase from?

I'm not at all from the area. I'm originally from Brittany, where I ran a retail space. The problem with Brittany is that there are no vines! Through my work at my retailer, I came to know and befriend Thierry Puzelat, Christian Chaussard, René Mosse and all the Loire guys, and that was the first step for me moving to the Loire.

I did some research and found some parcels that weren't necessarily being worked organically, but the vigneron were still working the old fashioned, traditional way, and this initially suited my needs. Today everyone I work with has converted to organic agriculture, which is great. I've been working with the same vigneron for 9 years: there were a few kinks to work out when we first started working together but at this point I am loyal to them and trust them entirely in their good work. I stay in regular contact with them and we debrief each other on any concerns, but other than that, they work independently.

As far as what I'm looking for, it tends to be old parcels: old Gamay, old Pineau D'Aunis, old Menu Pineau, old Romorantin. Having a negociant gave me the opportunity to work with parcels from all over; they're spread out far and wide!

Have you always worked organically?

I've always been an advocate of organic agriculture. Again I wasn't from the area and finding organic grapes wasn't easy at first; the guys were working well but they were used to working a certain way and having them convert wasn't exactly a simple process. I've always been "organic" because I worked for Marcel Lapierre, and always pushed organic, or rather natural wines as a retailer and sommelier. I plan to get everything certified in the next two years so expect to see the A.B (*agriculture biologique*) label on the bottles!

What's the cellar work like?

The first step is hand harvesting the grapes from their respective sites and bringing them back to the cellar. We then place the grapes (always in whole clusters) in large vats, followed by carbonic maceration: no pigeages, no remontages. We let the grapes macerate between 10 and 30 days depending on the cuvée.

You source grapes from Touraine and Cheverny but none of your wines sport AOC labels. Instead you've chosen to only make Vin de Table (as of the 2010 vintage, VDT are now called Vin de France, and are legally allowed to display the vintage on the label). How did this decision come about?

At first it wasn't a choice. In 2006 I presented the 300 hl of wine I'd made to the AOC board and they denied all my cuvées for being "atypical". Same thing in 07. Same thing in 08. When they classified my wines as atypical, it wasn't because of the chemical analysis; those came out fine. There was no volatile acidity and it wasn't vinegar. It was just a question of taste: "this tastes different from what you usually get in the area, and therefore it cannot be classified as an AOC wine".

At this point you could imagine I was worried about selling 300 hl of wine as VDT, but it worked out really well. It's harder to sell than Touraine or Cheverny, but we were able to sell them anyway and since then I've decided to not worry about making AOC wine and continuing to work the way I want to.

Does this permit you to be more adventurous and experimental in your work?

Absolutely. At this point I take full advantage of it. But to reiterate that was never the original plan; I believe appellations are at their core a good thing and I am not crusading against them by any means. Some of my friends like fighting for their wines to be AOC wines; I just don't feel like making a big deal out of it anymore.

How do you feel about the whole natural wine debate? The term, the wines, the people making them?

If you check the AVN (*Association des Vins Naturals*) website, you'll see that we've done our best to come up with a clear definition of natural wine: organic agriculture (certification is not a prerequisite), native yeasts and hand harvesting.

It's not the easiest thing to explain which is why I feel you need to define it. If you don't define it then people will, and in my opinion already have, start taking advantage or wrongfully using the term to define their wines. I'm just worried that the work and ideas that we have all contributed to this style of wine will be mass-marketed, disfigured and misinterpreted for all the wrong reasons.

You make what you define as *vin de soif* (thirst wine) but do you make any wine with food in mind?

Yes. I think this plays more on the varietals though. My Côt cuvée "La Cheville de Fer" ages a year in old oak, as does the Romanrantin, and these I would recommend as gastronomic wines. And to be clear, when I say **vin de soif**, I'm not claiming these wines are simple; they can be complex in their own right. What I mean by that is they are easy to drink on their own. Sometimes it's the vignerons' choice. Pineau D'aunis is a good example: some vignerons make very structured Pineau D'Aunis but mine focuses more on the fruit.

Any wines you particularly like to drink?

I love the Beaujolais. My formative years in winemaking were at Marcel Lapierre's, and this whole *vin de soif* thing stems from the Beaujolais style. Even though his Morgon was very complex, beautiful wine, it was also very easy to drink! This is also what inspired me to work with carbonic maceration. If you tweak carbonic work and don't clear the juice everyday, you can still express and

define a terroir in your wines, as well as its varietal. At least that's what I try to do!