

Jean Manciat

Interview

This interview with Jean Manciat took place in his dining room in July, 2012.

Tell us about your estate.

I'm from the Mâconnais in Southern Burgundy, working off of 9 hectares of vines. 90% of my production is Mâcon, with a few different cuvées, but I also make a tiny bit of Saint-Véran and Pouilly-Fuissé. Fernand Raynaud was a humorist in the 70's, and one of his routines involved comparing himself to those in the top of the heap, because he was at the bottom of the ditch. Sometimes this is how we are portrayed in the Mâconnais, but we are an appellation with a great price/value ratio. We work with the internationally known Chardonnay, and while we might be more modest than our noble neighbors in the North, we still have particularities and microclimates here (as they exist everywhere). I have been making wines in this style since my beginnings, most notably with my *Franclieu* cuvée.

How did the estate start?

The first vines were inherited. They were originally my grandfather's, then they were split between my father and uncle. But when my father got married, his wife was from the humbler terroir of Charolet, while my uncle's wife hailed from the noble Pouilly-Fuissé! I guess my uncle lucked out, so my father got to keep his small property in the Mâconnais. He always made the wine independently, which was not the norm at the time since most viticulturists sold their grapes to the cave coopérative. But this was always a hobby, since he earned his keep raising Charolet cattle around Cluny.

I was always more interested in the vines. It seemed a lot easier to sell your wine than to negotiate beef prices at the fair! Grapes are also a lot easier to handle, and you get to harvest them every year! So I decided to work in viticulture, and was lucky enough to go to school with some big guns (or who guys who later became big guns): Dominique Lafon, André Ostertag, Etienne Grivot, etc. These exchanges really opened up my mind.

1985 was my first vintage. It was a disaster: I had unknowingly purchased bottles that had spent who knows how long sitting around in a parking lot, and they were very dirty. Some even had pieces of straw in it! We had to unbundle and rebottle everything, and even then I had a very hard time selling it. 1986, on the other hand, was much smoother, and got some positive press which helped me sell the wine and start building a reputation for myself. I started with 3 hectares, and now I'm at 9, which is still very small for the Mâconnais. Of the original 3 hectares of vines, only 75 ares of old vines remain. There used to be reds, which I ripped out. But I missed it so much that I bought a tiny parcel of Gamay. I also was able to acquire some parcels in Pouilly-Fuissé and rent some in Saint Veran.

What's the work in the vines like?

I practice sustainable farming, which means I use little to no herbicide. This year we had so much grass because of excess water that I felt obliged to use some in a few parcels. It's too bad because I

hadn't used any in three years. I still privilege working the soil, and while I use conventional treatments , the doses are very low. Everything is handed harvested.

And in the cellar?

We never use preselected yeasts to ferment the wine and the only thing I add to the wine is sulfur. I hope to one day make a wine without sulfites; Romans used to preserve bottles by putting a little bit of oil between the cork and the wine. I'll need to try it out one of these days to see if it works.

Has there been an evolution in this work over the years?

My father used to plow with a horse. And when the first herbicides came out, it was a benediction for him! We have clay and limestone soils, and as you know you make pots with clay. The soils get extremely tough when imbibed with water, and once the sun comes out it becomes hard as a rock.

So by the time I started, herbicides were common and I used them. Stupidly enough, at the very beginning of my career I must of forgotten to treat a parcel, and noticed that even though I'd messed up, the grass still hadn't grown. I couldn't understand how this was possible! I thought about it long and hard, and decided it might be best to start plowing the soils again. After many, many years of trial and error, I bought a new tractor in 2008; prior to then I only owned one that could work the soil, but this second one applies treatments. This way I can work the soils without using herbicide.

What about spontaneous fermentations?

Wine has fermented all by itself since the dawn of time! I never felt the need to use preselected yeasts and magic powders to help shape my wine. Even rotten grapes can make excellent wine (for whites). You can't show anyone a picture of what they look like, but it's doable!

You've jokingly brought up Mâcon's status and reputation. How do you feel about the A.O.C system, and how do your wines fit in that system?

The A.O.C system is always being criticized. I remember a conference a few years ago where a representative of an extremely popular magazine was asked if the A.O.C still represents a qualitative image. She openly answered: "No." I've got to say that the few vigneronns who truly follow the principles of the A.O.C produce good wines. But most don't, and you end up with a derivative product. To put it simply: it's a great system if you respect it!

The bottom line is that it doesn't matter what a panel of your peers thinks. The real judgement is delivered by the consumers. When a consumer is used to drinking your wine and you change your techniques, you won't need to tell him a thing. He's going to know right away! I love selling wine directly to my customers because it guides you; you immediately know if people appreciate your work.

How do you feel about "natural wine"?

We can't forget that man's touch makes wine come into existence. You need a minimum of intervention, but you also need to have the utmost respect of what you are producing. In a way, industrial methods will only make people appreciate finely crafted wines more.

In my experience, It's more difficult to regularly obtain a quality wine by not intervening at all. The charm of a vintage are its subtleties, not its draconic variations. So I totally agree with the

philosophy of natural wine, but we can't let the juice turn to vinegar either. And when I talk about minimal intervention in the winemaking, this also means a lot of work in the vines to preserve the integrity of the grapes. When you have healthy grapes, you don't need to fall back on industrial products and modern oenology.

What do you like to drink?

I'm very cosmopolitan! I like to drink everything! When I go to the restaurant, I never order local wines because that would be boring. There is good wine in every region of France, and in every region that produces wine in the world!