

Catherine et Claude Maréchal

Interview

This interview with Catherine and Claude Maréchal took place on their back patio in July, 2012.

Tell us about the history of the estate.

Claude (CL): I started the estate in 1981, a memorable year since the entire region was completely decimated by frost! I started by renting 4 hectares of vines; of which I produced only 35 hl of red and 15hl of white! The first appellation we worked under was Auxey-Duresses, both in red and white. In 1984, I was able to acquire some vines in Ladoix and Savigny-Les-Beaunes. In 1985 and 1986, I started working with two parcels of Pommard. Over the years, the estate has expanded to about 13 hectares, and we make wines from the following appellations: Bourgogne Aligoté, Bourgogne Blanc, Savigny Blanc for whites, Gravel, Pommard (*cuvée Catherine*), Ladoix, Chorey-les-Beaunes, Auxey-Duresses, Savigny Les Beaunes, Savigny 1er Cru, and Volnay for red. Most of the vines are rented, but we do the entirety of the work.

How did you go about expanding the estate?

CL: Simply by taking advantage of various opportunities. For example, we acquired the Volnay vines in 2003 because the owner asked us if we wanted them. A year later, his daughter (who works in a bank), asked us if we'd be interesting in taking care of her inherited parcel so she could sell the grapes. When she realized it wasn't exactly a lucrative plan, she decided she's rather sell off the parcel, so we bought it from her.

What was going on in your life before you started the estate?

CL: My father was a peasant. He worked in polyculture, and from a very young age I found winemaking to be fascinating. But since we were flat-landers with vines on lesser appellations, my father never pushed me to focus on viticulture and winemaking. Instead, I studied electric technology in university, which wasn't completely useless since it helped me set up all the wiring in my cellar!

I got my degree and performed military duty, which was still mandatory at the time. When that was done, I decided I'd much rather be a vigneron than an electrician, so I decided to study oenology, a skill I'd never acquired in my youth.

Catherine, how did you get involved?

Catherine (CA): It's a complicated story, the two of us! Claude and I have known each other for a long, long time. When we were very young, we were a couple for about 5 years, but never lived together because of our age. Our university studies took us to different parts of the country, at which point we went our separate ways.

By complete coincidence, we bumped into each other at a Saint-Vincent party in 1992. We got back together and were married by 1994. In 1997, I took a hiatus from my job as an electronic goods

salesperson to follow the same oenological formation Claude had in the 80's. I quit my job, and we became partners. My first official day on the job was July 1st, 1998.

How do you split the work?

CA: However we can! I'm not in the vines nearly as much. I only show up around harvest time to bust some chops! But we share all the vinification work and decisions. I'm not always welcome, since this is such a man's game!

CL: I disagree. I think that Catherine's sensibilities in the cellar add a nice feminine touch to the wines. In the last few years, I feel the wines have gotten softer, less extracted. Women often have a heightened sensibilities of flavor. Their gustative approach is important and has to be taken into account, especially since they participate in drinking wine just as much as men!

What's the work in the vines like?

CL: In the 80's, I wasn't at all thinking about stuff like organic viticulture: I was young, I didn't understand everything and just didn't have enough experience. So when I started, I worked like everybody else: I harvested when everyone else harvested, and followed everything my oenologist would tell me to do. This lasted about 5 years; around that time, I bumped into an old vigneron friend who told me that I should maybe start rethinking my work methods. He invited me to come with him to taste around France that April, and we got to meet some really influential vignerons: Auguste Clappe, a very young Thierry Allemand, Jacques Reynaud from Rayas and many others.

The trip ended with a return to Burgundy, where we visited [Jean Thévenet](#) and Henri Mayer. With the vignerons from other regions, I could tell myself "*It's not the same varieties, it's not the same thing*", but Jean only works with Chardonnay and Henri almost exclusively with Pinot Noir. Compared to what I was making, it was a revelation: it was like eating in a supermarket cafeteria your entire life and suddenly, you are tasting dishes from a 3 star restaurant.

This led to a shift from conventional agriculture, to a work philosophy that is more respectful of our environment, but also to the quality of the wine itself. I think the most important change was actually reflecting on what we were doing in the vineyards: focusing on lower yields, making sure we took the necessary steps to harvest optimally ripe grapes each vintage. In such, it made me realize that you don't make wine with techniques, you make wine with grapes. If you harvest ripe, healthy grapes, the wines will always be exemplary. With the focus shifting from quantity to quality, we also stopped using all chemical fertilizers.

CA: When I became part of the estate, I had a lot of new ideas that I wanted to implement; Claude's oenological formation had been 16 years prior, and a lot had changed since then. I was personally against using herbicides, a decision we implemented and in no way regret.

CL: Just an interjection. Not using herbicides entails a huge economic investment. You need to purchase a tractor and plows, which cost about 100,000 euros, just to maintain the soils!

CA: But we still made it work. And today I think we will find ourselves working in a [lutte raisonnée](#) model. This year, and maybe we picked the wrong one (for better or worse), we decided to completely convert the vineyards to organic viticulture, and we had to give up.

I know you should never say never, but we are in a region with a very challenging climate, with varieties that are charming but fragile. On a global level, and this applies to everything, there is

always a financial factor that indirectly influences all our decisions. When you work in our region and decide to do so 100% organic every vintage, you have to be ready to accept a very real possibility of not harvesting anything at the end of the year.

CL: Another interjection, one that must be taken into consideration. When you find yourself with an estate where most your vines are on very rocky and steep hillsides, the organic approach takes a different dimension. Let me give you a concrete example: 24 hours ago, we just got hit with a big storm, and you need to do a sulfur treatment against mildew. Earlier, I showed you some vines in the plains where it is currently impossible to use a tractor right now. And if the rain is severe (as was the case with this storm), it means you can't get in there for two, three days. So we decided to do a treatment by hand, with backpacks. Of course, this takes much longer to perform than with a tractor. The same night, we got hit with another storm that washed that treatment right off. So in the end, the results we are getting are exactly the same as our neighbors who didn't do a pass at all. Let me put it this way: mildew declared war on us this year, and its attack was too strong for us to fight back only with contact products.

CA: Maybe if we had started working organically in the very hot 2003, we wouldn't have this outlook. That year, we barely did anything because it wasn't necessary! In the end, it's about prioritizing. I have nothing against people who work organically, and if they make it work, I'm happy for them.

What about in the cellar?

CL: There are certain traditions in Burgundian winemaking, for example aging the wines in barrels, that have been proven to be beneficial to the wines. It's therefore of utmost importance to have a proper cellar, and to temperature control it if you don't want to use a lot of sulfur.

Did you ever use preselected yeasts?

CL: At the beginning, I was following everything my oenologist told me, so yes. But we stopped, because we quickly realized that we were buying what we already had. I think things have changed a little in the way these methods are taught; nowadays, actual vigneron come to lecture oenology classes. But when I was in school, it really felt like the instructors were teaching you something by the books, with no actual experience themselves.

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

CA: What is it?

You tell me...

CA: Can anyone give a clear definition of what natural wine is? I certainly can't.

CL: If I cut some bunches from the vines and leave them in a bucket at the bottom of the hill, will they become wine? If you're talking about not using preselected yeasts and doing spontaneous fermentations, can this be called natural wine?

If you don't put fertilizers in the vines and you're not using herbicides, you get quality fruit. When you have quality fruit, you don't need to rectify it any which way. Everything is balanced. Is that what people mean when they talk about natural wine?

I'm never quite sure, which is why I like to ask this question in the interviews. Everyone's

got a different definition or opinion.

CL: To complete my thought: if you harvest too early, you're going to need add enzymes to work on the grape's pectins. Optimally mature grapes naturally contain the enzymes to do this on their own. So I guess you can say that making wine with perfect grapes is the the way to make a "natural" wine, since you already have all you need. With proper hygiene to keep those elements alive, you're on the right track.

What do you like to drink?

CL: Everything! No, that's not true... I like my friend's wines, because it turns out you make a lot of friends who make wine when you're in this line of work! Maybe we find ourselves in a circle of vigneronns who are on the same wave length, so it's easy to appreciate their efforts.

CA: Claude always says I'm a pain in the ass when tasting wine. But going back to our early days of tasting, we were exposed to the best of the best! When you start that high, it's hard to start lowballing it! I don't have any favorite regions. There are great wines being made in every part of France. And I'm slowly getting exposed to international wines as well. I was pleasantly surprised by how much I loved some Oregon Pinots recently.