

Catherine et Claude Maréchal

Visits

This visit with Catherine and Claude Maréchal took place in June, 2012.



Words by Jules Dressner, photos by Maya Pedersen.

Burgundy is suffering in 2012: they've been hit with winter and spring frost, hail, and the constant rain since May has made mildew and oidium a huge issue. For [Catherine and Claude Maréchal](#), it was an especially bad year to begin a 100% conversion to organic agriculture; the experience has left them demoralized and defeated, leaving them to question if they will give it another shot next year. What really stuck with me from our visit was a sobering reality, one where organics aren't always in one's best interest, where priorities change as a vintage progresses and choices have to be made. Though today's post will be decisively serious in tone and less cheerful/humorous than the last 13, my goal is obviously NOT to prematurely badmouth a region's vintage before the grapes have even been harvested or to critique the Maréchal, who for years have used no chemical fertilizers, pesticides or herbicides in their vineyards and who craft delicate, elegant wines with minimal intervention.

Quite the contrary: their decision to attempt organics was whole hearted, but after struggling in a losing battle against mildew, they finally caved in to systemic products to save their crop. I am not a vigneron, nor did I experience this extremely challenging vintage every day head on; in such I don't know what I would have done in their place, but after seeing the state of the vines, I can certainly understand their choice.

After a quick coffee and chat, we set off to visit some vines. It was a dark, overcast day, the sky shifting from partially sunny to menacing clouds that threatened to unleash rainy fury on us.





This is what an average day has looked like this summer in Burgundy. Our first stop was the Chorey vines, where Claude showed us some of the problems they were facing.



Before even getting into the mildew stuff, 9 of their 13 hectares were hit with hail. The damage is done:



Showing us the bunches, Claude told us that a classic, good harvest was 8 good bunches a vines. He has about an 8th of that this year. This does not mean, and I can't overstate this enough, that the grapes that ARE there will be of poor quality; in fact I'm sure they will be of excellent quality because they are being taken care of by a great vigneron. There will, however, be very little of them to harvest.

In the photo below, you can see the spots of mildew on the leaves.



In the early stages, you can spot little stains on the top of the leaf. On the bottom, little grey-ish spores form, which if left unkempt spread throughout the leaf, eventually killing it. At the time of our visit, the mildew Claude was showing us was the 18th recontamination this year! 18th!!! Some quotes about dealing with such a frustrating situation:

"We were spraying one treatment a week, every week for months! When you spray that much, can you call that organic?"

"It felt like going to war with a bow and arrow."

"There comes a time when mildew is so bad -50 spots on a single leaf-, that you have to use products if you want to save the vines."

To prove his point, Claude showed us some vines that belong to a neighbor who chose to stick it out organically this year. It wasn't pretty:





"I don't understand. They did all the pruning work, and now it will have been for nothing."

In that statement, Claude was bringing up a simple but important point: to keep making wine, you need to make money. He estimates needing to earn 600 000 euros a year just to stay in business. And when you're at the mercy of nature like in 2012, having no wine to sell could easily be the beginning of the end for your estate...

Though they got hit pretty bad by hail, the highlight of the visit in the vines were the beautiful Pommard parcels.





Even amongst all the bad news, it was really soothing to be at the top of this coteau, simply enjoying the view. I decided to help out by de-rooting some pesky plants competing with the vines.





After the vineyard visit, it was time to hit the cellar to taste the 2011's.



No bad news here: all the wines were tasting splendid. Highlights: Chorey and Auxey-Duresses for

white, Savigny and Volnay for reds.

After tasting, we sat down to do our interview with Claude and Catherine while drinking an insanely good 2010 Savigny-les-Beaunes.



Speaking of the interview, why don't you [go over the the Maréchal profile and read it](#). Find out about Claude overcoming his flatlander roots to become a vigneron, how Jean Thévenet and Henri Mayer inspired him to make better wine, how the two dealt with 2012 and much more. Seriously, [go read it](#) or their pet cat Fluffy will be mad at you!

