

Ferme de la Sansonnière

Visits

This visit at Ferme de la Sansonnière took place in February, 2013.



Words by Jules Dressner, photos Susie Curnutte and Bonnie Crocker.

A former stone-mason, Mark has been at the forefront of biodynamic viticulture since founding his estate in 1990.

Once the entire group had arrived, we walked over to the nearby vines. The first site we visited was *Fouchardes*, the 0.5 h parcel that produces the cuvée bearing the same name.



On our way over, Mark filled us in on his plans to plant 5 rows in franc de pied at the edge of this parcel. Phylloxera has a much harder time propagating itself in very poor soils, and by planting in the sandiest area he has, Mark hopes the vines will have a fighting chance. Last time he attempted

this experiment, it was in a different plot, and the vines lasted from 1994 to 2006.

With the group gathered around him, Mark began to explain the importance of the Fouchardes parcel in the evolution of his work philosophy.



"This field showed me how to remove the wires, but also that I should make dry wines."

All of Sansonnière's vines are unwired, which is basically unheard of in cooler, northern wine growing regions.



Mark feels that liberating each Chenin gobelet gives them more freedom and air, in turn leading to purer grapes and less rot. This discovery, coupled with the fact that producing sweet wines requires either a constant gamble with nature or manipulative techniques (sulfur additions, filtration...) inspired Mark to completely phase out his AOC Bonnezeaux production in order to favor production of dry/off-dry Anjou blancs.

Next, we talked about soil.



For *Fouchardes*, the first three rows are plowed and the rest are mowed or lightly worked on a superficial level. For Mark, having constant grass balances the vigor of the vines.

"50 years ago, average yields were 35hl/h. If you stick to those numbers in this area, you are assured quality."

To assure this, vines are tied together at the top to limit vegetative vigor, and he prunes very tightly to 6 bunches per vine (thanks to [Joe D's excellent recap of the visit](#) for that detail, which I missed).

One thing everyone noticed was the large amount of worm shit everywhere.



The PC term for worm poop is "castings", and Mark explained why they are such a fundamental part of healthy soils.

"This is a sanitary filter. If you see those (castings), you know there is no poison in the soil."

If you aren't offended by Wikipedia links, read up on vermicompost [here](#).

One thing you won't find in vineyards that use heavy amounts of chemical fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides?



Or grass, for that matter.

As far as the soil's consistency (castings included):

"It must feel like couscous."



After a good amount of time in *Fouchardes*, we continued the tour by visiting by the vines producing the *La Lune* cuvée.



The vines here are 4 to 75 years old. The soils are primarily clay and limestone, but change consistency every 30 meters, in some cases drastically. This variety of age/soils adds notable depth to the blend.



At the top of the parcel, Mark's son Martial (who is now a partner in the estate) was there with an employee, burning various wood cuttings.



The group freaked out their dog Chicanita, who started nervously barking at us.



She's only a year old, and Martial explained she'd never seen such a large group of people all at once. I would be barking too if this group of note-taking hoodlums started lurking around my property:



Walking through the *La Lune* vines back to the house, Mark pointed out how free it feels to walk through vineyards without having to follow a single row.

Predictably, we ended our visit checking out the cellar and tasting wines.



We tasted all the 2011's: *Fouchardes* was nice but showing young (Mark admits this wine needs time to develop in bottle), *La Lune* was excellent and the rosé was bright, expressive and off-dry/veering to sweet. We also got to try a fun bottling of Grolleau Noir, which was an unexpected, easy drinking surprise. There are only a few hundred bottles of it, and I doubt any will ever make it stateside... We rounded out the lineup with a 97 *La Lune* and 97 *Moelleux*, both showing a similar evolution or richer, honied Chenin.

The visit ended with a big chat on natural volcanic sulfur. Sourced from Mount Etna (with a plan B from Japan), apparently you only need to use half as much as commercial sulfur because it does not

oxidize. The stuff is loaded into this little contraption, which burns it and distributes it into the wine.



Even the sulfur is natural now! Bazoom!

Three other conversations of note during the visit:

Number 1: 14 estates are now working organically in Anjou, most of which were started by young, non-locals. As a Corsican, this new energy reminds Mark of his humble beginnings in the Loire, and it pleases him to see how much things have changed since the early 90's.

Number 2: Organics are sweeping the nation! This year alone, 4000 h of vines are getting converted to organics in Bordeaux! That number is certainly nothing to scoff at, and Mark believes this is the beginning of a fundamental shift in French viticultural practices.

Number 3: Mark's Madagascar based charity is doing great! They keep finding new sponsors, raising awareness and money, and he just signed an agreement with a french paper company to replant 150 h of forest this year. In the long-run, Mark hopes to to replant 1000 h a year!