

Matassa

Interview

This interview with Tom Lubbe stems from a series of emails in September 2010.

Can you give us the "facts" of Matassa?

Most of our vineyards are older (60- 120 years) so we work a lot with the traditional Catalan varieties; Carignan, Grenache (mostly Lladonner Pelut, the "catalan" Grenache) Macabeu, Grenache Gris , Muscat d'Alexandrie and Muscat de Petits-Grains. All of these may be included in the same vineyard with a few others as well as in the very old vines. The younger vineyards (25 -35 yrs old) include Mourvèdre (traditional here but not much replanted after phylloxera until recently), Cabernet Sauvignon (1/2 ha) and Viognier (1/2 ha). We have a total of 14 ha, 12 of which are around the village of Calce on schist and marl soils and 2ha of old Carignan at 500 - 600m altitude on granitic soils in the high Fenouillèdes.

Other than *Matassa Blanc* and *Matassa Rouge* the cuvées are named after their lieu-dit; Romanissa (place of rosemary) , El Sarrat, Nougé and L'Estanya; *Marguerite* is named after my wife's grandmother who was one the last people here to speak Catalan as her first language. *Alexandria* is named cunningly after its grape, Muscat d'Alexandrie which is though by some to be the ancestor of all noble grapes, harking back to the first days of the craft in ancient Egypt.

How did you end up in the making wine in the Languedoc-Roussillon?

In the interests of geographical and historical specificity I will refer more to the Roussillon, rather than the modern lumping together of Languedoc-Roussillon. They are physically separated by the limestone massif of the Corbières. Also the Roussillon vineyards are largely planted on mother-rock as opposed to the Languedoc's richer top-soils and has barely a quarter of the rainfall enjoyed by our northern neighbours (with correspondingly lower yields). Culturally, whereas the Languedoc is part of the Provençal tradition later looking to France, the Roussillon has mostly been closer to Barcelona than Paris.

Over 12 years ago I was working for a wonderful woman -Louise Hofmeyer- in South Africa who had the only estate (Welgemeend which she has since had to sell) there and then using exclusively indigenous yeasts, working with lower yields and little or no new wood. As I wanted to work with Mediterranean varieties, Louise recommended I do a stage at Domaine Gauby in Calce, which I did. Gérard Gauby invited me to come back for three more vintages as cellar helper during which time I met his sister with whom I am now married with two children.

What's your work process with the vines? What do you think of your terroirs and your vines?

Our vineyards are worked naturally without any chemical aids; we are certified organic by Ecocert and I use biodynamic techniques such as Preparation 500 and various plant fermentations to activate and nourish my soil's "life" (microbial activity). Depending on the site our vineyards are plowed by tractor, caterpillar tractor or by mule (about 5ha are worked by hand) in the interests of recreating a sustainable fertility of the soil. I also believe firmly in the old agricultural adage that the best fertilizer is the foot-prints of the owner.

The Roussillon is an ancient wine-making terroir; according to some sources it's the oldest in what is currently France. Unfortunately it has been isolated from major markets over the last century and its qualitative wine-making efforts have mostly been devoted to vin doux. Cupped between the Mediterranean sea and the Pyrénées mountains, with the physical characteristics noted above, the wines which are produced with care and passion in this region have a powerful expression of minerality beyond anything else in France (I think). The real task of the current generation of wine-makers is how to develop a wine-making style (styles) that will harness the power and the minerality in such a way that the drinker is energized by the wines and not hurt.

Most of my vineyards I bought because they were in beautiful places with great views (and steep = cheap, to buy at least), so I love being there, and mostly the views and general feeling of the place compensates for the sore back, legs, and shoulders, not to mention the wines that I eventually get from them.

What's the winemaking process like?

Simple as possible. Whites are whole-bunch basket-pressed, the first half of which I do with my feet to get a solidly packed press (it's like making espresso, the better-packed the basket the more pure the extraction, with less bitterness and off flavors) No sulphur is used until after malolactic. Aging can be quite lengthy with the Matassa Blanc (old vine Grenache Gris and Maccabeu)spending 18 months in demi-muid, none new since 2007.

Reds are now more whole-bunch ferments with one pigeage (by foot of course) in the beginning to get some juice out and start a conventional (natural) ferment as well. They are usually pressed off half-way through ferment and finish their sugar in old demi-muid where they also go through malo. Aging from 18 - 24 months. Some wines are filtered, others not while no wines are fined.

What do you think of AOC's and the AOC your land is in?

I like the theory and some of the principals of the AOC system as far as safe-guarding the specific nature of each region's produce goes. I dislike the rigid concept of hierarchy that so obsesses some perspectives of the AOC and to think if Romanée-Conti is at the very top then we would be somewhere at the very bottom! A little tough given that 95% of Burgundy made today is fairly poor to disgusting with no foundation in serious viticulture and there being little or no conception of the true nature of their terroir held by most vignerons working there today.

Unfortunately the AOC in our region is about 20 years behind this actuality (at best) and has a poor idea of what real quality can be. Thus I work in *Vin de Pays Côtes Catalanes* which is in some, but not all, ways simpler.

Have you always worked organically and with the least intervention possible in the wine making process? If yes, why, and if no, what made you change your mind?

I have always preferred gentler wines in terms of alcohols, tannins and oaking and more lively wines in terms of acidity or ideally, deeper, mineral sensations of freshness. I have been sensitized to the stink of cultured yeasts for the last fifteen years or so.

There's a big debate these days about "natural wine". What do you think: the term, the wines, the people making them... Should the process in which a wine is made be as important to a customer as how it tastes, or should the wines speak for themselves through their unique subtleties?

I like the provocative aspect of the term in that it forces people (those capable of analytic thought) to think: "but then what is unnatural wine?", and if they follow that line of inquiry with any rigor they will eventually understand that about 90% of "wine" is very unnatural. Unfortunately this includes some wines being sold under the "natural" banner even though the grapes from which they are made are farmed with chemicals.

These, for me, are problematic because they add to the confusion and general ignorance in the interests of easy profit and the concept of "natural wine" becomes just another marketing gag. The term "natural" should imply a lack of chemicals and benefits from the current positive development of organics globally. If it is just a question of high volatiles and carbonic flavors with cloudy wines then it is ultimately undermining any long-term development of appreciation of truly natural produce. In terms of the importance of process I am more with Marx than with Bismarck, so yes I do think the means justify the ends and not the other way round, however unfashionable that may be with Generation Sarkozy.

While wines can speak for themselves, very few people accurately understand what they are saying and the subtleties are often lost in translation with many tasters wanting to define wines in a single sniff and sip.

My parents told me about the whole relationship between Matassa and Domaine Majas and it sounds like a cool story. Can you tell me a little bit about how you met those guys and were able to play an integral role in shaping what they're doing today?

A guy who worked for me is from their village and mentioned that they were keen to look into changing to organics, would I be happy to chat etc... After the vineyard tour they (Alain and Agnès) asked me to taste their wines and give an honest opinion. I dislike consulting oenologists even more than I dislike *Decanter* journalists, supermarket wine-buyers, chemical salesmen with their free t-shirts and so on but I could see there wasn't much hope in just changing the vineyards to organics. So I decided to lend a helping hand both in the vines and in the cellar and now the 35 ha are worked organically and naturally in the cellar.

What are your favorite wines to drink besides your own?

Through the vintage I drank quite a lot of stuff from Julien Guillot, the 2008's from Gauby and Jean Foillard and Eric Bordelet's *Poiré*, with quite a few bottles from Patrick Meyer (Domaine Julien Meyer) rounding things off. My dislike of residual sugar and high sulphur means most German and Alsace rieslings are unpleasant prospects, but Patrick's 2002 2004 Grand Cru Moenchberg is a source of eternal wonder for me. Not so everyday bottles that have touched me include 78 Rayas (white and red), quite a lot of stuff from Clos Rougeard, older vintages from Charles Joguet (pre- 94), old Chave (the father's wines) nearly everything I have drunk from Lalou Bize-Leroy's own estate which seems to be so far ahead of anything else made in Burgundy today. Tempier from the 80's especially Cabassaou or Migoua in magnums. '61 Palmer which is delicious and also serves to high-light how badly Bordeaux has gone wrong since its heyday.