

Jean Maupertuis

Interview

This interview with Jean Maupertuis took place on his front porch in July, 2013.

Can you give us an introduction to your estate?

I'm based in Saint-Georges-sur-Allier, about 15km South-West of Clermont-Ferrand. In 1995, I took over 3.5 hectares of vines from a pre-existing estate. From 1999 to 2003, I formed a GAEC (*groupement agricole et commercial*) with two partners, which was called *Domaine de Peyra*, and together we worked about 14.5 hectares. The partnership was ill-fated, and in 2004 I started back with my original 3.5 h. Over the years, I acquired a small parcel of Chardonnay called *Puy Long*, and in 2011 I've doubled my land. These new parcels are further out, in the commune of Riom: 1.8 hectares of Gamay planted on sands (*La Plage*) and 1.5 hectares of Pinot Noir planted on marl (*Neyrou*).

You don't come from a viticultural family. How did you get involved in wine?

I came to Clermont-Ferrand as a student. I then worked as a computer scientist, but not for very long! I've always loved wine, and one day a friend proposed the idea of buying a small parcel for fun, which I was able to find in a nearby village. This was in 1992, and that following June I quit my job to study viticulture/oenology in Mâcon. I was much better in the vines than in front of a computer!

What was your introduction to minimal-intervention winemaking?

It all started with a sommelier friend who was close to Marcel Lapierre. It was a cultural shock of sorts! The wines tasted like nothing I'd ever had before.

Did you instantly fall in love with the Lapierre wines?

No. It took a while for me to familiarize myself with this approach to winemaking. More than the wines themselves, what really got me into it was the great ambiance at Marcel's. This led to visits with [Pierre Overnoy](#) and [Jean Thévenet](#), whose son Gauthier was in school with me.

One morning, I woke up and decided that if I ever were to make wine, it would have to be like the vigneron mentioned above.

Was your plan always to start your estate in Auvergne?

Setting up in Auvergne certainly felt like an uphill battle that I wanted to fight. When I started, the wines of this region were completely unknown and on the verge of disappearing. A handful of vigneron were making good stuff, but the wines didn't get much further than the region.

Though it is rarely associated with wine anymore, Auvergne used to have a rich wine history. Can you tell us about it?

The 20th century marked a sharp decline in viticulture here, but it was once one of the biggest and

most important wine producing regions in France. A good amount of wine was being produced from the Middle Ages onwards, and was extremely popular in Paris: they were wines of royalty, and Louis XVI was reportedly a big fan of the wines of Madargues. By the 17th and 18th century, many of our best coteaux had been planted in vines, and quality was even more abundant. By the 19th century, the department of the Puy-de-Dôme was the third largest wine producer in France, just behind L'Hérault and L'Aude.

The beginning of the decline was a direct result of phylloxera. For whatever reason, Auvergne was affected much later than the rest of France. This prompted local farmers to start planting vines all over the plains, which are much less suitable terroirs. And because of the increased demand for wine, high yields were emphasized to produce as much as possible. Auvergne had very quickly become a producer of bulk wine, which is never good for a region's reputation.

Phylloxera did eventually make it to Auvergne at the beginning of the 20th century, and was followed almost immediately by World War 1. By the end of the war, the viticultural momentum had been completely lost, and there was no consequent effort to replant more vines in the area. This wasn't helped by the fact that in the second half of the century, Clermont-Ferrand's periphery was growing, and people wanted to build their dream houses on the picturesque coteaux that used to be home to the region's best plantations.

All this to say that today, less than 1% of the land that used to be dedicated to viticulture is still being used as such.

How much land is left?

A little less than 1000 hectares, but only 450 are worked by full time vignerons. Half of those 450 are worked independently, and the rest all go to the cave cooperative of Saint- Verny.

How did Gamay end up in the region?

After phylloxera, it became the dominant grape for all replanting. But It's important to point out that we have a different Gamay from the ones you'll find in the Loire or Beaujolais; it's more rustic and and late blooming, with a noticeable peppery spice quality.

From our visit in the vines, the geographic landscape of the area struck me as extremely varied. Could you elaborate?

It is indeed a very interesting place. There is quite the variety of different soil compositions, almost all of the ones you find in France! Not only do we have granite, clay and limestone, marl and sand, but the shift in soil composition can often be noticed every couple 100 meters. This is largely due to volcanic eruptions of the past, which really spread everything around randomly.

In what state were the vines when you took them over?

Here in Saint-Georges, the vines were in good shape. They were already between 30 and 60 years old, and the prior owner only used a very light and rare amount of herbicide on the rows. Since I've taken over, each year I work the soils of every other row, and let grass grow free in the other. I like this approach, because the grass helps reduce vigor of the vines. Sometimes I feel like I make my vines suffer too much, but that's the way it has to go!

For the vines in Riom, it's a bit different. I've only been working here the past 2 vintages, and as of

need to figure out what works best for them. This will be my major priority over the next few years.

You bottle all your wines as *Vin de France*. Was this always the case?

No. The wines were had the Côtes D'Auvergne VDQS label for a long time, but mounting pressures from the cave coopérative and certain vignerons, specifically their aversion to unfiltered wines, forced me to change my labeling.

It got to the point where the panel would occasionally deny the wines without even tasting them: since the first test was visual, once they spotted the cloudiness of my unfiltered wine, I would automatically fail. Since I didn't want to risk ordering the wrong labels if I got denied, I decided it would be easier just to bottle everything in *Vin de France*. 2006 was my last VDQS wine.

Do you think this affects the public's perception of the wines?

Personally, I don't look to vindicate the fact that my wines are VdF. If anything, it's a bit disappointing that I can't have Auvergne on my labels. Commercially though, it hasn't caused any problem, since my customers know how to sell it.

What kind of wines do you like to drink?

I have a very eclectic palate. I just love wine.