

Domaine Bellivière

Jasnières and Coteaux-du-Loir from Domaine de Bellivière.



Eric Nicolas. Photo by Guillaume Gerard.

Profile

The AOC Jasnières and Coteaux-du-Loir were, until very recently, languishing; the vines had been all but wiped-out by the intense frost of 1956, and only a handful of tenacious owners held on to their vines, usually keeping the wine they made for their personal consumption, while making a living thanks to other agricultural revenues.

Located about 30 miles north of the city of Tours, these small vineyards (37 and 48 hectares re-spectively) are isolated, at the edges of three provinces, Maine, Anjou and Touraine. They are also the most northern viticultural areas in the west of France (in the east, only Chablis, Champagne and Alsace are further north). Fortunately, the river Loir replicates some of the micro-climactic conditions of its big sister, the Loire (watch your French: *le Loir*, along with *la Sarthe* and *la Mayenne*, form *le Maine*, a tributary of *la Loire* which it joins in Angers).

In the 1970s, the winemaker Joël Gigou pioneered a renewal of Jasnières and Coteaux-du-Loir as

viticultural areas. Eric Nicolas, who is a city kid without any roots in either the region or in agriculture, developed a passion for vines and wines, and after studying oenology, he looked in the Loire to acquire vineyards, mainly because he had met several passionate winemakers there.

Seven years ago, Eric and his wife Christine found an estate with some vines, but mostly grazing fields, trees and grains. They nurtured the existing old vines and did a lot of planting, to get to their current 9 hectares, scattered over the territory of 6 villages (hence the name of their cuvée of Coteaux-du-Loir *Vieilles Vignes Éparses* or Scattered Old Vines). They now use *sélection massale* (cuttings from old vines) rather than clones, and plant at a density of 9,300 vines per hectare. They also planted an experimental plot where the density is 40,000 vines per hectare, to observe the development of the root system and the influence of terroir on botrytized grapes (one grape per vine).

In Jasnières, only white wine from Chenin Blanc is produced. *Les Rosiers* is sec, a blend of all terroirs, and in favorable years, Nicolas makes a moëlleux called *Discours de Tuf* and a late harvest called *Elixir de Tuf*.

In Coteaux-du-Loir, the white cuvées are *VV Éparses* (the vines are 50 to 80 years old), and *L'Effraie* (the Owl, a denizen of the farm), made with younger vines.

For his red, called *Le Rouge-Gorge* (the Finch), Nicolas is partial to the varietal Pineau d'Aunis, an old local varietal of great finesse, which he is replanting. Nicolas is also replanting small parcels of Cabernet Franc and Côt (or Malbec).

Interview

This interview with Eric Nicholas took place at the *Salons des Vins de Loire* in February, 2012.

Tell us about Bellivière.

***Bellivière* is an estate we founded in 1995. It started with 3, 5 hectares of vines in Coteaux du Loir, and little by little we acquired more, including the parcels in Jasnières. These two appellations are in the Sartre, which is 40 km North of Tours. In the 17 years of our existence, we've accumulated 14 hectares of vines, spread over the two A.O.C's (about 50/50%). Some vines we planted ourselves, some we rent and others we've purchased. Everything is white and Chenin Blanc in Jasnières; it's also Chenin in Coteaux du Loir, but we also grow a red grape there called Pineau D'Aunis.**

What was your personal path to becoming a vigneron?

I have no family that did this before me. It's a passion that came from finding joy at the dinner table, first with family and then with friends that cooked really well. They made me discover all types of delicious wines, as well as some great pairings. I began reading a lot about wine, and my wife Christine proposed I seek out a program to study oenology. I found one in Montpellier that lasted two years, and after a five year stint working in the petroleum industry, I decided I wanted to work with nature.

Why did you choose to start your estate in Coteaux du Loir?

First and foremost it was a choice of terroir. But it also brought me closer to my Picardy origins, since I'm originally from there. I discovered Coteaux du Loir wines through a friend of mine from Sartre. We met during my studies in Montpellier, and originally, we had envisioned being partners.

You are known for "*letting nature decide*" how dry or sweet your wines are each vintage, without indicating anything on the label. Why?

Chenin Blanc can go many different directions: you can make bubbles, dry wine or dessert wine, and traditionally the final product was a result of the vintage's natural circumstances. So if we have a very humid vintage that promotes noble rot, we're going to orient the wines towards more residual sugar. This is done by multiple passes during harvest, followed by sorting and organizing the grapes in the cellar. The wines usually end up more or less dry, and we have had some fun experimenting with bubbles. This might not be in accordance to the A.O.C, but we really try to let the grapes guide us in our decisions.

Pineau D'Aunis, which is actually a cousin of Chenin, is just as capable of producing a wide variety of wines.

The dry wines often have have RS though...

This is because we are in a region where you can really let the grapes ripen fully. If it wasn't for this particular micro-climate, I doubt these A.O.C's would even exist!

So yes, there is a sweeter side to the dry wines. These are of course natural sugars, as we always let the wine reach its full alcoholic fermentation. It's really about the choices we make in the vineyard, and waiting for that window of optimal maturity. We're more focused on making something precise and pure than dry or sweet.

What's the work in the vines like?

For me, the real work of a vigneron is in the vines. We are very meticulous with how we work the soil, and always have been. We decided very early that we wanted to convert to organic viticulture, but it wasn't until 2004 that we felt we had a expert grasp on the treatments and felt comfortable asking for certification. We've always been organic, since a big part of our philosophy is not to hide or alter the grapes' qualities. The less we treat, the purer the grapes.

All this led to an even sharper focus when we decided to convert to biodynamics in 2008. This is obviously just the beginning: even though I've already noticed some positive changes, I know the effects will be long term. This is especially true for the vines we've re-acquired, because they've gone through many generations of chemical work.

What about in the cellar?

The cellar is also a natural process. We only use native yeasts, as we don't want to cut the wine's umbilical cord: all the effort in the vines needs to be come through in the vinification. There is zero temperature control at any time, because we work in tuffeau cellars that offer a natural and traditional setting for wine making. Fermentations are different in length every year, which in turn contributes to the personality of each vintage.

We've always worked with a little bit of sulfur, and it's the only product we use to prevent possible oxidation that could alter aromas we hope to conserve in the wine. We add sulfur at pressing, when the juice makes first contact with the air. After that, everything takes its natural course, and then we add minimal doses of sulfur at bottling to stabilize and age the wine. Every year, serious thought and effort is put into figuring out how to use the least amount possible.

Can we talk about "*Natural Wine*"?

Some people would tell me that I am not a "*natural wine*" producer because I use sulfur. This is the only argument anyone could have against our wines being natural. But we stand by our choice to use it.

This doesn't mean that I'm against sulfur free winemaking, and don't envision doing it myself one day. I have nothing to critique, because I feel there is room for every type of wine. People appreciate specific things, but also many different types of things. I'm more focused on the work in the vines and the quality of the grapes, because that work is much more complex.

Obtaining juice that is very resistant to oxidation and where the wine can age is the key to working without sulfur. Wines here can last 10 plus years, but you need that quality juice. So if I'm going to work without sulfur, it won't be a cellar decision. It will result from perfecting our work in the vines. When I reach this point, and if the wines bring me as much pleasure as they do now, then we'll see!

People need to realize that everything starts from the vines. Nature guides everything. My job as a vigneron is to be aware of this so I can adapt to conditions as they come along.

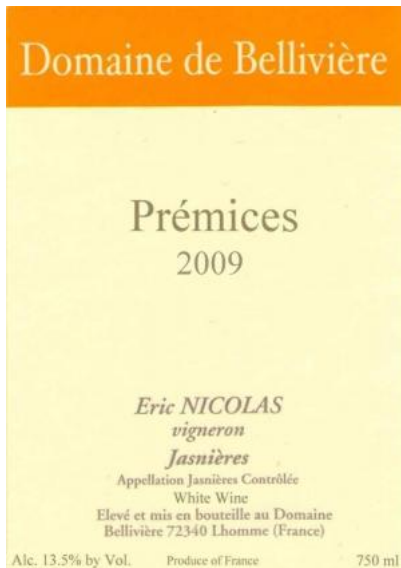
How do you feel about A.O.C's, and your wines in relation to this system?

The A.O.C system needed to exist, and it had to evolve. Now whether that's been a good or bad thing, it's evident that there has been a disconnect with the original point of the A.O.C, which is simply to highlight a wine's origins. All the political stuff bores me to tears, but I do have to say that somewhere in those politics, people started forgetting about terroir. When you start encouraging cave cooperative work and you neglect the vines, that link to a region's tradition is lost. A grape variety doesn't just randomly get planted on any terroir; for me, the only way to express your A.O.C is through good viticulture.

What do you like to drink?

It's always hard for me to talk about a wine I particularly like, because so often those moments are defined by particular circumstances. You might like a wine because you met someone you appreciated that night. Often there is an emotional connection with the wine itself, but the context always plays a part. One of the reasons I love making wine is that I get to meet new people all the time. Whether it's our customers or other vignerons, it's always incredibly motivating.

Wines

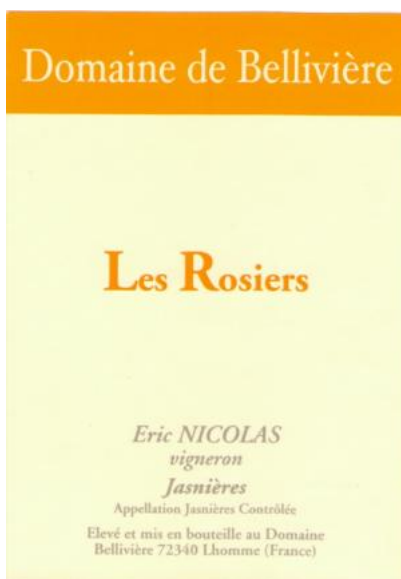


A.O.C Jasnières "Prémices":

Soil: Flint and clay on tuffeaux limestone.

Grape: Chenin Blanc

Vinification: Fermentation in barrel. Aged in barrel for 10 months.



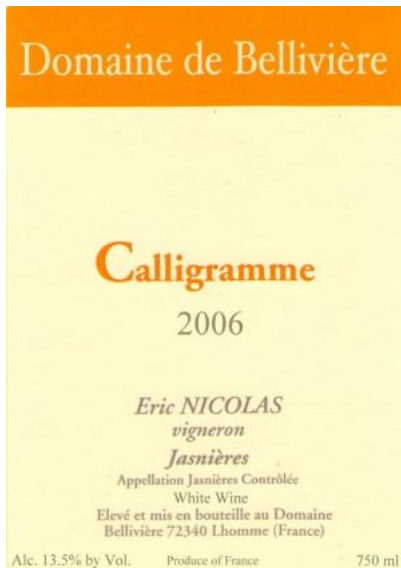
A.O.C Jasnières "Les Rosiers":

Soil: Flint and clay on tuffeaux limestone. Four different soils from 2 communes with varying types of clay and various proportions of clay and silicious clay.

Grape: Chenin Blanc

Vines: Selection of vines under 50 years old.

Vinification: Natural fermentation in barrels that have produced 1, 2 or 3 vintages along with a small proportion of new oak. Aged 12 months in barrel. Depending on vintage, can be sec or demi-sec.



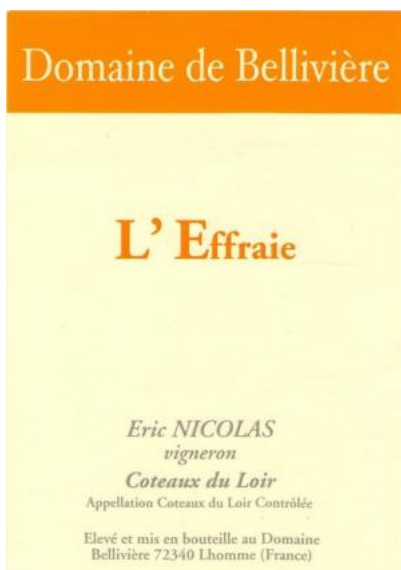
A.O.C Jasnières "Calligramme":

Soil: Flint and clay on tuffeaux limestone.

Grape: Chenin Blanc

Vines: Plot oriented south/south-west to south/south-east in the middle of Jasnières. Slopes overlooking the Loir.

Vinification: Natural fermentation in barrel. Depending on vintage can be sec or demi-sec.



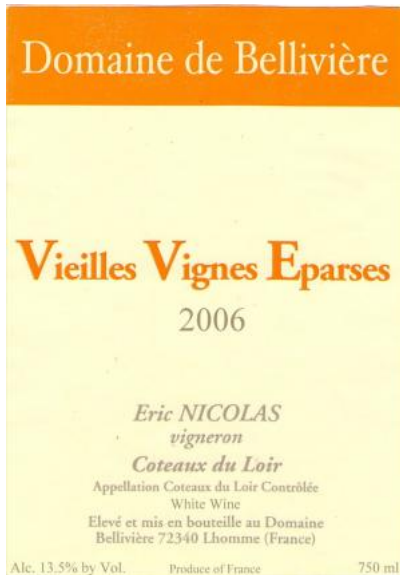
A.O.C Coteaux du Loir "L'Effraie":

Soil: Clay and flint on tuffeaux limestone. Assembled from 6 parcels spread through 3 communes. Each parcel has various types of clay and the flint varies in size, from pebbles to sand.

Grape: Chenin Blanc

Vines: Less than 50 years old.

Vinification: Fermented naturally in barrel. All terroirs are fermented separately then blended before bottling. Depending on vintage can be sec or demi-sec.



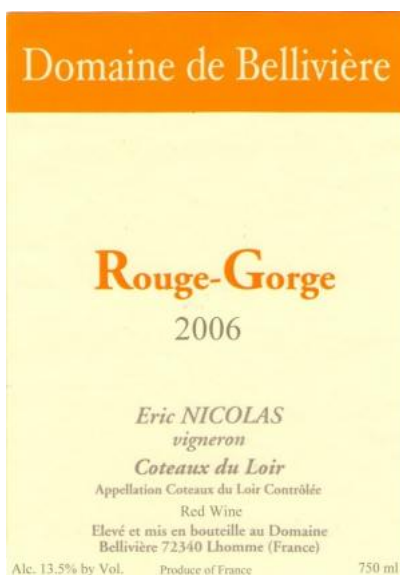
A.O.C Coteaux du Loir "Vieilles Vignes Éparses":

Soil: Clay and flint on tuffeaux limestone. Less heavy clay than "Les Rosiers", which tend to produce thinner soils.

Grape: Chenin Blanc

Vines: Various parcels that range between 50 and 80 years of age.

Vinification: Natural fermentation in barrels that have produced up to 3 vintages, with a maximum of 1/4 new oak. Aged 1 year minimum in barrel. Each parcel is fermented separately then blended together before bottling. Depending on the vintage can be sec or demi-sec.



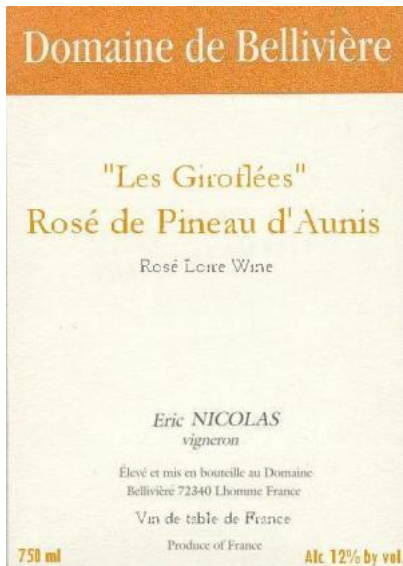
A.O.C Coteaux du Loir "Rouge-Gorge":

Soil: Clay, silicious clay and flint on tuffeaux limestone. The heavy clay soils are preferred for red wines.

Grapes: Pineau D'Aunis

Vines: 25-45 years old.

Vinification: Alcoholic fermentation for 1 month in open vats with regular pigeages. Natural malolactic fermentation in barrel. Aged for 12 to 18 months in barrel.

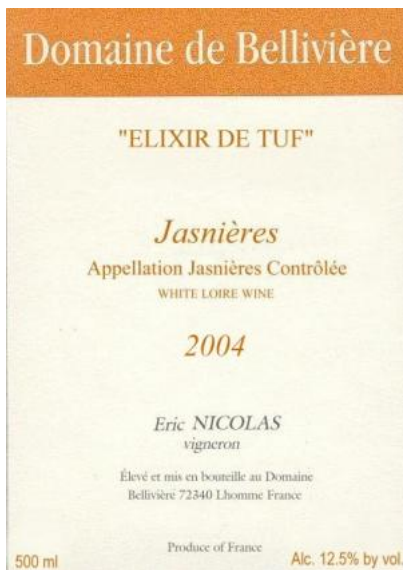


VdF "Les Giroflées" Rosé Demi-Sec:

Soil: Clay and flint on tuffeaux limestone.

Grapes: Pineau D'Aunis, a touch of Grolleau.

Vinification: The wine is made in vats in cellars at low temperatures. The wines are bottled in the spring following the harvest.



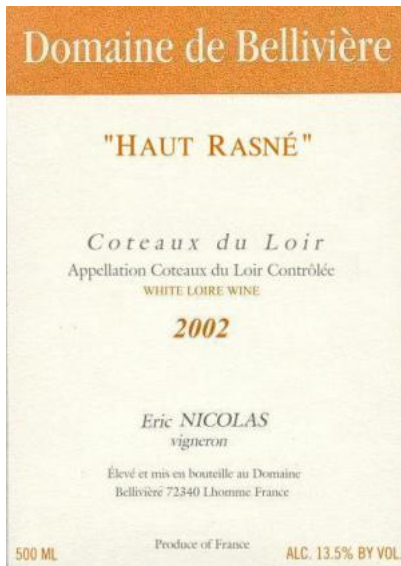
A.O.C Jasnières "Elixir de Tuf" dessert wine:

Soil: Flint and clay on tuffeaux limestone.

Grape: Chenin Blanc

Vines: Parcels oriented south/south-west to south/south-east in the middle of Jasnières. Slopes overlooking the Loir.

Vinification: Natural fermentation in barrel. Residual sugar levels vary by vintage.



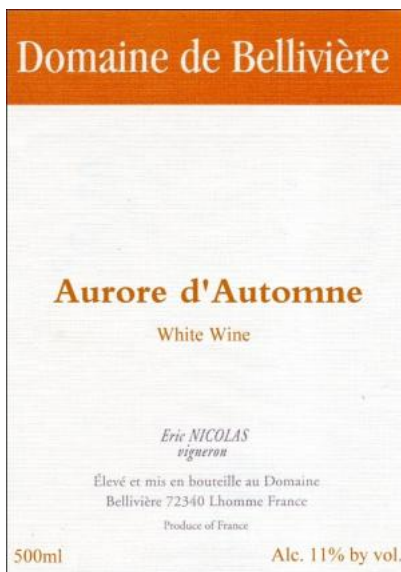
A.O.C Coteaux du Loir "Haut-Rasné" dessert wine:

Soil: Clay and flint on tuffeaux limestone with filtered sands.

Grape: Chenin Blanc

Vines: Young vines less than 15 years old.

Vinification: Natural fermentation in barrel. Aged 12 months in barrel. Residual sugar levels vary by vintage.



VdF "Aurore D'Automne":

Soil: Clay and flint on tuffeaux limestone.

Grapes: Pineau D'Aunis with a touch of Grolleau

Vinification: The wine is made in vats in cellars at low temperatures.