Domaine Bellivière

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 oxidation, which 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.