

Domaine Bellivière

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 AOC's (37 and 48 hectares respectively) 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, 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.

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 14 hectares, scattered over 65 parcels within 6 villages (sounds more like Burgundy or Champagne than a tiny, obscure appellation!) They use sélection massale 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). Though organic from the start, the Nicolas came to be firm believers in biodynamic viticulture and have been certified since 2011.

Chenin Blanc represents the vast majority of the Bellivière production. Grapes are diligently picked by hand, some years in passes if the vintage is suitable for botrytis. In the cellar, each parcel is vinified individually in barrels of various shapes and sizes, permitting Eric and his son Clément to make judicious blending choices each vintage. Fermentations are always done with native yeasts, and often they will not finish all of the grapes' sugars. Eric has chosen to embrace this reality, letting the vintage decide how dry each cuvée will be. Occasionally the wines can be demi-sec, but more often they are off-dry, with perceptible sugars that integrate seamlessly and add complexity.

For years, the barrels lived in the four little cellars carved out of the tuffeau limestone mountain behind the house. In 2015, an impressive and modern winemaking facility was built out. Futuristic in aesthetic and forward thinking in design, its three floor layout permits immaculate precision for working by gravity. The grapes are pressed on the second floor and raked by gravity to two floors (one subterranean) to barrels for fermentation and long élevages.

In Jasnières, only white wine from Chenin Blanc is produced. *Prémices* is a barrel selection of the most fruit forward wines and fermented in old barrels. *Les Rosiers* is the "middle" cuvée with vines anywhere under 50 years old, fermented in old barrels and about 1/4 new oak. *Calligrame* is the old vine selection (50+ years old) and vinified with a small proportion of new oak.

In Coteaux-du-Loir, the white cuvées are *L'Effraie* ("The Owl") and *Vieilles Vignes Éparses* ("Scattered Old Vines") and made in the same spirit as *Les Rosiers* and *Calligrame*. The indigenous and almost instinct Pineau d'Aunis is the only red grape permitted in in the appellation, and from this the Nicolas produce the highly sought after *Rouge-Gorge*. In exceptional years, a single vineyard Pineau d'Aunis will be produced from 100 year old vines called *Hommage à Louis Derré*. In addition to the appellation wines, some offbeat Vin de France are produced, including a sparkling Chenin Blanc called *Les P'tits Vélos* and a Gamay called *Pollux*.

In 2017, following the arrival of Eric and Christine's son Clement to the business and a series of very difficult bouts with frost, the Nicolas family started a négociant label called les Arches de Bellivière. Sourcing from biodynamic vineyards in the Loire and beyond, they have so far produced three wines from the sub-label: a Chenin from Anjou called *Confluence*, a Cabernet Franc from Anjou called *Castor* and a Carignan/Grenache blend from the Southern Rhône called *Raisins Migrateurs* ("Migrating Grapes").