

Domaine de la Pépière

Interview

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

Tell us about *Domaine de la Pépière*.

Domaine de la Pépière is 35 hectares, and is run by my partner Rémi Branger and I. 30 of those hectares are in white, 5 in red. We are almost to the point of having the entire estate converted to organic agriculture; it's been a step by step process and currently the majority of our vines are worked this way.

Working organically has been a long term goal for you. Can we talk about this?

There are of course many factors in this decision. I think that Rémi's arrival gave me more time to sit down and really think about how I could do it. It's also a much better time to work organically from a technical standpoint.

A huge inspiration has been through you guys, through meeting all the vigneronns who were working organically. I tasted their wines and immediately felt there was something really interesting about them. I started exchanges with these guys, and through some great conversations I realized that converting isn't as hard as most people think.

Tell us your personal journey to becoming a vigneron.

My grandfather was a vigneron. At the time it was just a few hectares, spread amongst other crops (tobacco) and livestock (cows). At first, my father and uncle continued my grandfather's exploitation. But when their children were born, things had to change because the farm's production wasn't enough to feed everybody. At that point, my father became an agricultural technician, while my uncle and cousins continued the farm work.

I was going to university in Nantes at the time, studying science. I realized very quickly that these studies could only lead to a job in education, and I had no desire to be a professor. I wanted to work outside, to be in contact with nature. I also wanted to stay in the Muscadet, so I thought: "*Hey, why not viticulture?*" At the time I was not passionate about wine; it was just an idea. I found an oenological program for adults in Burgundy and I spent a year there. I was about 18 at the time, and I came back having found my true calling.

Can we talk about the evolution from making only the base Pépière to now producing a large amount of cuvées?

When I first started, there were only 7 hectares of vines. Everything was in Pépière, so the terroir was unified. As the estate grew and the terroirs diversified, I began doing what has always been done in the rest of France: I was already vinifying each parcel separately, so it made perfect sense to make different cuvées. I started making *Clos des Briords* in 88, *Clos Cormerais* in 92, etc□

And the reds?

I've always wanted to make reds. My original plan was to make red and moelleux wines. Evidently, the Muscadet is not the best place to make moelleux; we've tried but the results have been less than satisfactory. Reds, on the other hand, are perfectly adaptable to our terroirs. I had a tiny parcel at first. We then tore up and replanted a parcel at the bottom of a coteau, which was believed to have been used for vines a century earlier. We planted 2.5 hectares there in the 90's, and have been planting new vines bit by bit since then.

Have you always worked with native yeasts?

Not always. I used to yeast one or two tanks and let the rest ferment naturally. I quickly noticed that the native yeast wine was more interesting; the wines I made with selected yeasts always had simpler, more primary aromas. I decided that working with native yeasts would be an interesting way to make wine. It brought me back to the days when my grandfather made wine, and he never had any problem with his fermentations.

I come from a generation where you were told you had to yeast or the wine wouldn't ferment. I was never convinced by this argument, because as we all know wine has been made without preselected yeasts for millions of years. I knew it could be done in modern times.

Let's talk about Rémi. How did you meet, and how did you end up partners?

Rémi was born a kilometer from my house. I've known him since he was a little kid. A few years ago I was looking for some vines, and I knew that Rémi's father was going to retire. I approached him and asked if he had a predecessor, and when he said no I told him I was interested. Rémi was finishing up his studies at the time, and with the acquisition of these new vines I was also looking to hire an employee. I can't remember if he asked me or if I asked him, but he started working for me immediately. This was in 2006, and I very quickly told him that if he was interested, he could have a place at Pépière.

Let's talk about the Muscadet A.O.C, which has a bit of a bad rap (at least in France).

I have a theory on this, which is worth what it's worth... The Muscadet has always been under the influence of négociants. This was originally a good thing, but the dynamic changed when the focus shifted to bulk sales, which require a simple, uniform product. Under this influence, a standardization of Muscadet occurred. This phenomenon was perpetuated and spread by agricultural technicians, who used machine harvesting, preselected yeasts and whatever technology available to make "clean" or "flawless" wines. This soon became the norm, and everyone was doing the exact same thing.

Muscadet stopped being interesting because it was made like a *Vin de Pays*. What I mean by that is the wine's relation to terroir was completely abandoned. Technology was what mattered to people, not terroir. Like any A.O.C in France, if the vines are maintained and there is a real point of interest, you can make varied, interesting wines.

Another big problem is that people started planting vines everywhere to create a larger supply of Muscadet. The obvious results are that the vines are in soils not suited for viticulture. People forgot about terroir, and by doing that they forgot what makes an A.O.C: vigneron, grapes and soils.

Did your grandfather sell to a négociant?

My grandfather only worked 3 hectares, and sold a large part of his production in barrel to cafés in Nantes. He would deliver them himself, barrel by barrel. He also sold a bit to the négociant. In the 60's there was very little wine being bottled.

How did you decide you wanted to bottle independently?

After my formation, I worked at my uncle's for two years. When Pépière became available, I knew I wanted to take over and I knew I wanted to bottle independently. At the time, you made a good living selling to the négociant, but bottling independently felt like the only way to meet the actual people who drank the wine. I never envisioned it any other way.

Did you always want to work in Muscadet?

When I went to school in Nantes, it was so I'd be close to home. I didn't know it would be viticulture at the time, but I did know that whatever my job ended up being, I would do it here. That's why I have a tough time traveling. Your father had to really twist my arm to come to the U.S. I refused for years!

What can I say? I'm a peasant, I've very much linked to soil and to nature. I have a hard time being anywhere else.

Let's talk about "natural wine". Where do you stand?

Rémi and I have never claimed to be part of the *natural wine* family. I've always been very interested by these wines, and do envision my wines to have the same qualities. But we've always used SO₂, and we don't plan on eliminating it. At the same time, I know the term "natural" is imprecise, and that many would consider me a natural winemaker even if we use a little sulfur.

There is a technical reason we use SO₂. Pépière is all about minerality, purity and freshness. We don't want any malolactic fermentation, so after alcoholic fermentation we rack the wine to a cold, temperature controlled tank and slightly sulfur it in December and January (on average 5g total). We almost never sulfur at bottling.

I don't care how people categorize me within this debate, but I must say that when I drink sulfur free wines, I notice that you really taste the grape and the terroir. I've also realized that you can make sulfur free wine and it can still age. So progressively, we have tremendously reduced the amount of sulfur in the wine over the years.

What do you like to drink?

A lot of things. I love Loire wine, and they represent about 50% of the wines I drink. I still love moelleux, and regret the Anjou and Montlouis guys make less of it because it's hard to sell. I like the Rhône and the South a lot.