

Franck Peillot

Interview

This interview with Franck Peillot took place on a bus from Los Angeles and San Francisco in March 2011.

Tell us about your estate.

We are situated in the Bugey, a tiny appellation that represents about 550 hectares. Our story begins with my father Jean Peillot, who started a farm in polyculture with a small focus on viticulture. At the time he owned 1.5 hectares of vines, which was plenty of work since he did everything on his own. I came back to work with my father in 1985, and we are currently at 6.5 hectares of vines. All of our vines consist of small parcels. Most of them are very old and date back two-three generations, as they used to be part of farms where owners would make wine for personal consumption. A lot has changed since then, including the value of wine, and back then wine was an every day drink for the farmers with little commercial value. You'd maybe sell some to friends and family but that was it.

How do you work in the vines?

While I don't work organically, I do the best I can. We are on extremely steep hills (in some cases with 50% incline) and our tallest vines are almost two meters high, so you can imagine how incredibly difficult it would be to convert. The only solution to effectively work the soil is to use a winch and a plow, and we have yet to master this because you need to be omnipresent in order to make sure the soil is worked correctly and at the right time or else it will all sink to the bottom of the hill. This forces us to de-grass once a year, usually in the fall because otherwise it overwhelms the vines. I used to systematically de-grass every spring as well, but over the years I've managed to keep everything clean so I don't do this anymore. With the larger vines, it's very hazardous but we still plow the soil with a tractor to loosen up the soil in the winter.

I do my best to keep everything I deem harmful to a minimum: I'll do what I have to to protect my vineyards and then I'll stop, and I make sure that the last treatment is always as far away from the actual harvest as possible. I'll admit that I'm a bit of a Cartesian in that I believe what I see, and as long as there is no chemical or artificial residue in my wine, then I feel that I did my job correctly. I occasionally enter my wines at tasting events organized by [Vinnatur](#) ([Angiolino Maule's](#) association), which mostly feature organic and biodynamic wines: the analysis for my wines always qualifies so I hope that gives you an idea of how clean the wines actually are.

I'm lucky; a big part of why the wines are so clean is due to geography of the area. Not only are we in the mountains, but the parcels are all isolated and surrounded by woods and prairies so on an environmental level, you're not getting all of your neighbor's surplus chemical spillover onto your own vines.

What about in the cellar?

In the cellar, my dog Virgile takes care of everything. He's a real inspiration! But in all seriousness, I'm always looking to better myself in the cellar and I have to admit that the many great vignerons I'm met over the years have infinitely influenced and shaped my work.

Indigenous yeasts are a must, but every year I inoculate one vat just to see the results. Because if for some reason it produces better wine, then I want to know that it's possible! I used to use commercial yeasts and one day Joe (Dressner) asked me if I'd ever considered using natural yeasts. It never felt like an obligation or anything, but this stuck with me and I had to try it. The result was a revelation: it completely changed the taste of my wines for the better and I've never gone back.

The different cuvées I make try to respect the tradition of my elders while also keeping in mind the unique particularities of my estate. One of those particularities is that I work on two very different soil types. We are on a mountain that is essentially the last little bit of the Jura; this meets and ends at the edge of the Rhône. On one extremity we have heavy clay soils, and on the other gravely limestone. And unlike a region like Burgundy where you can use micro-climates to define an AOC, I have drastically different results every year with each parcel so it becomes a challenge to accurately classify my wines each vintage.

Studies have claimed that certain parcels in the area will always make the same wine, but I don't know how much I believe this. In such, I vinify all my still wines in small 15-20 hectoliter vats and let nature decide what the results will be. Only after will I blend the results together and bottle.

This is particularly true for the Altesse. With the Mondeuse, the ripest grapes will be used to make the still wine, and the parcels that were less productive or that I did not work with as well as I would have hoped will end up elsewhere. All the Pinot Noir goes to making that particular cuvée because I own less than an hectare of it and it's still a learning process.

How do you feel about your AOC, and more specifically how your wines fit into the idea of "typicity"?

I've always believed in Altesse and Mondeuse. When we were accorded the AOC, the panel asked us to make sure we kept working with these indigenous varieties, and I'm happy about that. I'm very attached to them and reinforce the Altesse in my Montagnieu bubbles with Mondeuse, which is a bit atypical (most people use Chardonnay).

I'm getting older and it's nice to see that a new generation is calling the Bugey home. I think that people are only starting to realize the potential of this region.

Let's talk about Mondeuse and Altesse, the two grapes you keep mentioning. Many people might not be familiar with them.

Altesse is the correct name of the varietal, but locally we always called it Roussette. I choose to label it as Altesse because I think the name is more eloquent and evocative. Another reason I do this is because you used to be able to make Altesse/Chardonnay blends and call it Roussette; I want people to know that what you're drinking is 100% Altesse. In France you only find this grape in the Bugey and Savoie, but it originates from Hungary.

Like all forgotten varieties, there is a lot to rediscover with Altesse. In other words, there had already been a lot of work done by our ancestors, but nothing was ever noted or transcribed. It's a varietal that can be completely diluted and boring, because it's not very aromatic and doesn't produce high yields. I'd say that 9 times out of 10 it grows best in the clay and limestone soils of the Bugey.

I like it because working with Altesse because it requires a lot of finesse. A lot of people work with Chardonnay in the Bugey, but I find myself incapable to do so because a) I find it to be out of place

in our soils and b) it's so blatantly aromatic and I feel I can't get anything other than stereotypical aromas out of it. So to get back to Altesse, there is so little aroma and flavor provided by the varietal itself that a great Altesse is essentially a wine that expresses great terroir.

It's not my style to use complex winemaking techniques, so I don't try to use absurd technological innovations to get something original or new out of my Altesse. When you bite into a ripe Altesse grape, it has a very particular flavor: the flesh is pulpy, the seeds are ripe and tart and you can taste the acidity in the grape. I hope to transfer this into the wine.

As for Mondeuse, it is the most rustic grape I've ever worked with. I have 100 year old Mondeuse vines that still produce 100 hectoliters per hectare just on their own. To me it's an ancestor, it's a Gaul with a big mustache, and just like our ancestors, they are firmly rooted in the past. This is how I approach working with Mondeuse. All the work is in the vines with Mondeuse: you have to take good care of it for it to take good care of itself. Aging it in oak could be an option, but I don't.

I think my Mondeuse is very hit or miss with people. I tried making a more Beaujolais style Mondeuse once by harvesting and vinifying earlier in hopes of softening the tannins, and it was undrinkable. I am very experimental and have had many failures over the years, both in the vines and in the cellar, but none as unforgivable as that one! So maybe my Mondeuse isn't for everybody, but at least it's authentic.

What's your stance on natural wine?

I don't think there will ever be a clear cut definition of "natural" wine that we can all agree on. I think that a lot of the arguments in the natural wine debate are a bit all over the place. For example, to say that if it wasn't for human intervention, wine would naturally be vinegar. This is obvious: if you let grapes spontaneously ferment and don't intervene during the vinification process, your grape juice will turn to vinegar. What I think should be emphasized is a mastery of the yeasts you're using to ferment your wine or how to protect the juice while it's becoming wine as to avoid a complete catastrophe in the cellar.

But then the question can be asked: is acetate an integral part of wine in the first place? Now you're starting a real debate! If there is one thing we're stuck up about in France, this would be it. Depending what side you are on, some are going to want to over-protect their wines while others are going to let theirs turn to vinegar. I find myself somewhere in the middle. I drink a lot of wines by my colleagues that I love, but have a level of volatile acidity that I could never tolerate in my own wines. But that's only because my wines couldn't handle it. It's a question of balance. If you have a 12% Pinot Noir with heavy notes of acetate, it's the death of that wine because Pinot Noir is a transparent grape and can't handle it.

Everyone speaks of Jules Chauvet these days when it comes to "natural" wine. Though I could have, I never had a chance to meet him. When you're reading his work you have to remember that he was a bio-chemist. He wasn't a goofball quack, he was a scientist who was passionately in love with wine. The bottom line is you can't do whatever you want with "natural" wine, and you can't do whatever you want with "conventional" wine.

For me the biggest risk of the "natural" wine debate is to make or drink wine because it has recently become fashionable. It's a vicious cycle, because a lot of wines now being billed as "true" natural wine are full of flaws, namely elevated acetate and brett. Once your wine is contaminated with brett, it will taste exactly the same as any other wine with brett.

If you push things too far you're killing terroir just as much as someone who bombards his vineyards with chemicals and intervenes heavily in the cellar. The wine will certainly be in a natural style, which people now describe as "barnyard". When I step into a barnyard, it smells like a barnyard. And that doesn't bother me because it's an odor of nature, not a product crafted consciously by a human being.

So again I am worried about people pushing "natural" wine to its extremes. If you blind taste 10 "natural" wines and can't guess where any of them are from, there's a serious problem there. I try to stay open minded and drink these wines often. I once drank a bottle with my father and he told me that the wine tasted like the leftovers in the barrels after they'd gotten infected because they hadn't been washed out correctly. He said it would be one thing to drink it for fear of being wasteful, but for 50 euros a bottle, he'd look elsewhere!

What do you like to drink?

I love wine. I love complexity and finesse at the same time. So in a way I shy away from heavier, more viscous wines. Over extraction is another deal breaker for me.

I'm a big fan of Loire Valley wines and Beaujolais.