

François Pinon

Interview

This interview with François Pinon took place in a bus travelling from Los Angeles to San Francisco in March 2011.

Tell us about your estate.

I work about 13.5 hectares. It's stayed in the family and has never changed in size. In the last three years, we've focused on highlighting our two distinct terroirs: on our slopes we have a rocky flint soil, and the rest is clay. In both cases, about 1.5 meters below the two soils is a layer of chalky limestone. So these are our two principle cuvées: *the Silex* (flint) and the *Trois Argiles* (clay).

The sparkling wines are produced from grapes on more "neutral" soils as well as our youngest vines. The weather of the vintage will affect the amount of sparkling we make each year: if it was a rainy year, we'll make more sparkling because in drier years, the grapes reach a nicer maturity and I'll want to incorporate them into the still cuvées.

For the demi-sec, we've picked out 3 specific parcels both from the flint and clay so the wine comes from 6 different parcels.

How did you end up becoming a vigneron?

Before making wine, I used to be a professor. This led to a career in psychology and psychoanalysis. When my father retired, I took over the estate. I was 35 at the time. It was a point in my life where I wanted to start over, to fully invest myself in something new.

When I was 20 year old, I wasn't ready to work with my father. It was petty teenager stuff. And though we never worked together, I was always able to stay on good terms with him. The year I took over, we worked together so he could show me everything, but after that I was on my own. If I had any questions he would gladly answer them, but it was up to me to get the work done.

What's work like in the vineyards?

We work closely with our soils through extensive plowing. We do our best to not dig very deep, so grass grows back faster and we are basically always plowing. This is fine during dryer spring seasons, but if it's humid out, it makes life a lot more complicated. Every year we slightly modify our techniques in accordance to the weather.

What about in the cellar?

In the cellar my approach is to intervene as little as possible, or as "nicely" as possible. Before any work can start in the cellar, it's imperative that we harvest our grapes at optimal maturity. This is easier said than done: a few days could change everything.

When I vinify, my main focus is to not lose any of the juice's potential. We do everything very slowly and methodically, and make sure that no oxygen reaches the juice. Again, this is easier said than

done, and requires a lot of thought and effort. For example, when you rack your wine, you can't do it alone. You need another person to hold the other end of the pipe so that he can lift it and avoid any air getting in contact with the juice.

The wine's maximum potential comes with optimal maturity and nothing can be added during the winemaking to make the wine better: it's already all there. So instead of adding anything I make sure to not detract anything.

We use CO2 gas tanks to initiate the grapes prior to pressing them into the vats. We also occasionally use CO2 to give the natural yeasts a boost if they need it. Again I do all this so that I don't have to manipulate the wine later.

Are you certified organic or biodynamic?

We started converting to organic agriculture in 2003. As of 2007 most of the estate is worked organically and I anticipate having the estate certified by the 2011 harvest.

I've always worked this way, but it came to a point where I felt it was time to get certified so the work would be clear to the consumer. This way, it confirms what I do and avoids confusion or doubt.

It's simple: if you voluntarily use chemicals in your vineyards, you might be making your work easier, but you're voluntarily polluting the ground, water and the air. I see guys in the vineyard wearing space suits to protect themselves from the chemicals they are spraying on their own land. If they're taking those precautions, then they know it's bad. Yet they'd still sell you their wine and continue to harm the planet. It's hypocritical nonsense.

How do you feel about Vouvray as an AOC, and more specifically do you feel your wines fit in to the notion of "typicity" of a region?

I'm rather comfortable with the Vouvray AOC. As long as you're using Chenin Blanc, anything is possible. We're the only appellation in France where you can produce the wine you want on any given parcel. Sparkling, still, sec, demi-sec, dessert wines: the choice is the vigneron's.

I think that Vouvray is an AOC where if the work is being done right, you will end up having wines that reflect their vintage. I go back to the example I used earlier about making more sparkling wines some years than others. Because there is no AOC based specifically in sparkling wine from the area, the vigneron can make a conscious choice to produce more sparkling wines that year and not be reprimanded for quantity.

As far as the general state of the AOC system, I think most regions are getting bombarded with paperwork, with rules and legislation on how to make their wine when all anybody should be doing is making authentic wines. When you are being told that your wines need to be this or that way to be accepted as AOC wines, I can see why some vignerons would feel obliged to manipulate them in the cellar so that they fit a certain profile.

What's your take on the whole natural wine debate?

This term has become popular because of an excess of chemical use and cellar manipulation. I think the original point of defining these wines as "natural" was to point out just how many artificial additives were being put in "conventional" wine. An appellation will tell you that its goal is to express terroir, but vignerons are somehow legally allowed to use commercial yeasts that are not

indigenous to the area and will modify the wine in a way that terroir will be lost.

So to me, "natural" wine is a reaction to wines that are too sulfured, too concentrated, over extracted, over filtered... Over-everything! It makes sense that certain people would want to let the world know that you can make great wine without manipulation.

I still think "natural" wine is a flawed term. Man makes wine. The grapes can be natural (organic or biodynamic) but the minute you decide to make wine, a process of intervention begins. From the harvest to the cellar, human decisions in the winemaking will affect the final product.

What matters to me is to intervene but not manipulate. Of course I use indigenous yeasts because I want my wines to reflect their terroir. So maybe we should talk about wines of terroir instead of "natural" wine!

What do you like to drink?

Locally, I really enjoy the balance of demi-sec Vouvray: the Chenin's acidity and the residual sugars work harmoniously. Outside of the Loire, I'm a big fan of Rieslings.