

Renardat-Fâche

Cerdon du Bugey from Domaine Renardat-Fâche

Profile

The Bugey, halfway between Lyons and Geneva, is one of the tiniest and most obscure wine areas in France. Although the altitude is modest, the terrain is very mountainous, the roads are steep and winding as in the Alps, and the villages are built for cold winters - the houses made of gray/white limestones all bunched together on narrow streets.

The vineyards are hard to detect, little patches here and there on steep slopes looking southeast or southwest, lost in the midst of fields with grazing cows, and dense forests. The total Bugey acreage in vineyards is 170 hectares. The varietals are many, borrowed from all the surrounding areas: Gamay, Poulsard (a grape from Northern Jura), Roussette, Mondeuse (both from Savoie) and Chardonnay. Many still wines are produced, but the region's star wine is the Cerdon Méthode Ancestrale, a semi-dry, pink bubbly made by spontaneous, but incomplete, fermentation.

Alain Renardat is a respected vigneron in Cerdon, and he has been a long-time supplier of Alain Chapel's restaurant, in the Dombes. The Dombes, which, like the Bugey, is in the Ain department, is an area of ponds and marshes, known for its fish and small birds. Alain Chapel, who died several years ago, was a chef beloved among chefs, and famous for his love of wine and winemakers. A winemaker and his wines selected by Chapel are guaranteed to have great personality. (The restaurant still exists, run by his widow, and the winemakers he brought together have become friends and still meet about once a year.)

Alain and his son Elie make their Cerdon from Gamay and Poulsard, and follow the technique called "ancestral method" (in wider use is Méthode Champenoise, or else plain carbonation, the preferred method used for supermarket wines). The grapes are picked by hand, pressed and fermented in cold vats until the alcohol reaches about 6 degrees. After a light filtration that leaves most of the active yeast in the unfinished wine, it is bottled and continues its fermentation in the bottle, reaching about 7.5 or 8 degrees of alcohol and retaining a fair quantity of its original sugar. It is more vinous (with grapey primary aromas) than most Champagne, since there is neither dosage nor addition of yeast before the second fermentation.

Cerdon is to be consumed throughout the year following the vintage. It is fragile and requires excellent cellaring and transporting conditions. Renardat's is delicate, berry-scented, refreshing, and makes a delicious aperitif or dessert wine (even chocolate goes well with it).

Interview

This interview of Elie Renardat-Fâche took place in a bus from Los Angeles to San Francisco in March 2011.

Tell us about your estate.

My name is Elie Renardat-Fâche, son of Alain Renardat-Fâche! I am the sixth generation to produce *Cerdon* in the Bugey, a very small region that represents around 150 hectares of vines. We currently work with 12 hectares split between Gamay (70%) and Poulsard (30%).

Poulsard used to be the dominant varietal in Cerdon. After the phylloxera, many different hybrids were planted in the area, but when it was decided to replant "noble" grapes, Gamay was prioritized because it's easier to cultivate than Poulsard and produces much higher yields.

Having a large percentage of Poulsard in our wines is a personal choice that means a lot to us. In the last three years we've had notably low yields with our Poulsard vines, but they remain a prerequisite for quality.

Now that you are at the head of the estate, have there been any major changes?

A lot has changed since the days of my grandfather and even my father. The estate is currently in its third year of conversion to organic viticulture, and this is a personal choice I've fought hard for.

It's a challenge because most of our vineyards are on steep hills. This is why the conversion has taken so long.

What led to the decision to convert the vineyards to organic viticulture?

I studied viticulture and oenology in Beaune for 5 years. Since I was a kid I was surrounded by vignerons that worked organically. At the time my father did not have the technical resources to make it happen, but today we do have these resources, so I'm putting them to use. We've always believed in working organically, even before we could do it ourselves.

What is the work in the vines like?

Nothing too shocking. We prune in the spring, then the treillissage. We plow the soil with a tractor adapted to our hills. We harvest!

What about in the cellar?

In the cellar we're getting into something more specific because of the wine we make. To obtain a "Méthode Ancestrale" wine, the vinification must be done at very low temperatures. After we press the grapes, the fermentation occurs in temperatures varying from 0 to 10 degrees Celsius. We then let the wine re-ferment in bottle between 10 and 12 degrees. The secret to keeping the fruit so light and sweet is working at these low temperatures.

Can you explain "Méthode Ancestrale" to those who might not be familiar with it?

There are currently 4 appellations that produce "Méthode Ancestrale" wine under their AOC: *Clairette de Die*, *Gaillac*, *Limoux* and *Cerdon*. Cerdon was not always a region that produced sparkling wine and was originally known for its reds. "Méthode Ancestrale" used to be family wine: after vignerons had finished their harvests, they would make a softer, sweeter wine by bottling the juice while it was still fermenting. They soon realized that once in the bottle the fermentation continued and this made a sparkling wine. The quantities were minimal and were always for personal consumption.

The way my grandfather did it was to remove the fermenting juice from its wood vat, filter it and bottle it. At that time he didn't have the ability to keep the cellar as cool as we do now so he had to sulfur heavily at bottling. I'll admit they were hard to drink and could easily cause a headache. Instead of trying to master the refermentation in bottle himself, he'd even go as far as selling the wine to customers before it had actually occurred. When the customer saw the deposit at the bottom of the bottle, they knew it was ready. The customer was basically doing half of the work!

By the time my father took over, there was a lot of effort made to improve our work process, most notably the idea of vinifying at very low temperatures. By bringing in this "industrial" cold, he was able to not have to sulfur during fermentation.

Have you ever considering making still wines?

We do make still wines! But they are "P.N.G": Pour Notre Gueule (all for us)! We only make still Gamay simply because we don't have enough Poulsard. They are very light, 10-10.5% and they go down easy!

How do you feel about your AOC, and more specifically how do your wines fit in the idea of an AOC?

I hear a lot of people criticize appellations these days. Our appellation is very recent; it's only been two years since we were granted the AOC. And I have to say I'm rather proud of the Cerdon AOC because it was created by its' own vigneron and they made sure not to impose too many work limitations on themselves. There are no rules for residual sugar levels, color, aromatics, etc. Of course there is an outside panel that tastes the wines before they can be commercialized, but I've yet to hear someone being flagged for making an "atypical" Cerdon.

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

What matters to me is how the consumer feels with that glass of wine in them. My philosophy is simple: I think that natural wine is a good thing and it's great that people are talking about it. Unfortunately not everybody is willing to make natural wine, because working naturally is a risk: it's a lot more work and it doesn't guarantee you will sell more wine.

Minimizing all intervention in the cellar is a good thing. But you have to remember that nothing is perfect and you will occasionally encounter problems. If you keep that in mind, then I have no problem with anyone making natural wine!

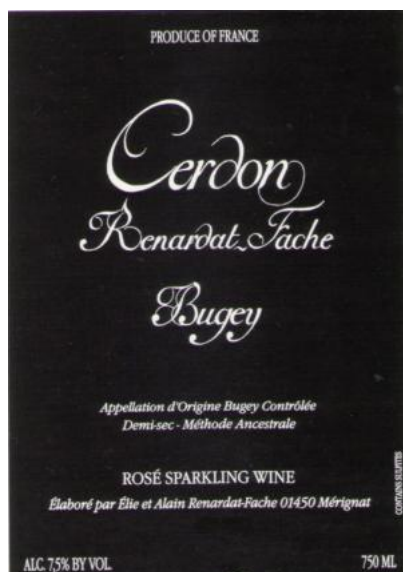
Cerdon is obviously a great aperitif wine but what food pairing would you recommend with it?

Around our parts it's really simple: a sugar cookie! Or a brioche. Cerdon is a wine to drink. It's great for dessert but you can drink it whenever!

What wines do you like to drink?

I love Champagne, and I love the Jura. Overnoy wines are some of my absolute favorites.

Wines



A.O.C Bugey "Cerdon du Bugey" New Label

Soil: Jurassic limestone

Grapes: Gamay, Poulsard

Vinification: grapes are fermented at low temperatures in tanks to obtain a sweet, low alcohol wine. This partial fermentation preserves the softness, aromas and color of the grapes. Because the alcoholic fermentation has not yet peaked, the wine retains its yeasts and fermentation continues after bottling. Once this second fermentation occurs, the remaining yeasts are filtered out and the wine is rebottled.



A.O.C Bugey "Cerdon du Bugey" Classic Label