

Renardat-Fâche

Cerdon du Bugey from Domaine Renardat-Fâche.



Elie Renardat-Fâche. Photo by Alex Finberg.

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 treillageage. 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 considered 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 vigneronns 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.

Visits

This visit at Domaine Renardat-Fâche took place in June, 2013.



Words by Jules Dressner, photos by Maya Pedersen.

Elie Renardat-Fâche is huge!



If he was American, people would ask him if he plays in the NBA all the time. Fortunately, he lives in the tiny mountain village of Mèrignat, population 100! Located in the heart of the Bugey, this relatively obscure region of France is known for its sparkling Cerdon. Universally referred to as "*breakfast wine*" by happy go lucky (and borderline alcoholic?) fans of the style, Cerdon is the result of a *méthode ancestrale* fermentation, and is always light in alcohol, high in sugar and giving in fruit. But great Cerdon also packs the heavy minerality and acidity to really uplift the bottle.

Domaine Renardat-Fâche is widely considered to be one of, if not the best Cerdon currently produced, and the way we started working with them is a cool story: at a birthday dinner for my

grandfather at the original [Daniel](#) (now [Café Boulud](#)), Daniel himself came out to wish Sam a happy birthday and to complement him on his son's accomplishments (my grandpa was very proud that day). This was around the time Daniel was prepping his second restaurant, and for the opening, he told Joe he wanted the Cerdon that legendary chef [Alain Chapel](#) was serving in Mionnay.

Joe and Denyse didn't want to call Alain Chapel's restaurant just to ask what their Cerdon was. So Joe, as a pioneer of the world wide web, found a link to an Australian restaurant in the Bugey called [Le Boomerang](#) (France's first and only Australian restaurant, which sadly closed a few years ago) and asked owner Rose-Marie Perkins if she had any leads. She told him that she worked with someone else, but that Chapel's Cerdon was from none other than, you guessed it, Alain Renardat-Fâche! Joe got in touch with him, and the rest is history.

SIDE NOTE: We actually ate at Le Boomerang once, and had ostrich steaks. I remember it being really good.

Our visit started in the Renardat-Fâche tasting room, which brought back vivid memories from my childhood.



At the time, my sister and I were obsessed with Cerdon because, well, it's SO DELICIOUS! We'd drink as much of it as our parents would allow (which was probably way above the average of NONE), at any chance we could get. Anyway, while scoping the room out and remembering my youth, I spotted this oddity:



Turns out they've been making a Chardonnay for years, but it's always been in tiny supply. It also turns out that 2006 was the last year they made it, so I guess that's that.

2012 factoids: Budding was very good but unfortunately, it's looking like a low yielding year for the Poulsard. The Gamay suffered from a lot of mirandage, a term that does not exist in the English language but means tiny berries as a result of difficult flowering. No hail, a bit of frost... And if you didn't know, after a six year conversion the estate is finally certified organic as of the 2011 vintage! Also, for the first time EVER, Elie is offering up MAGNUMS! He feels that you can actually age these a bit, which is rarely the case with 750's. Made to order, so contact us if you're interested.

Our next stop was to the cellar, where Alain and Elie broke down the incredibly technical nature of making Cerdon: everything starts at harvest, where they intentionally don't pick at optimum ripeness (10-11% potential). The grapes are destemmed, then fermented in temperature controlled, stainless steel tanks. After press, they add 40-50mg of sulfur and let the wine go through a slow, 3 week cold maceration. Elie has experimented not using sulfur this early on, but the length of maceration has always led to oxidation...

A spontaneous, semi carbonic fermentation occurs, which they stop at around 6% alcohol. After that, they lower the temperature of the tank between 0 and 20 degrees celsius. This helps block the fermentation without sulfur, a major innovation in methode ancestrale winemaking (Elie brings up not-so-found memories of his grandfather's extremely sulfury Cerdon in [his interview](#)). Alain and a few of the guys he went to school with were the first to use this technique in France.

At this point the yeasts are dormant, so they gently filter the wine before rebottling and letting it referment in bottle. In Champagne, a wine can be disgorged because it is dry, but since there is so much sugar left in a bottle of Cerdon, they always keep the storage cellar at 5 degrees; otherwise, the yeasts would become over-active, resulting in deviant wines and exploding bottles. Also unlike

Champagne, bottles are stored standing up rather than on their side.



If they were laid down, the bubbles would become bigger, stronger and more violent and that would not be a good thing. Out of curiosity, I asked if it wouldn't be simpler for them to just have all of the wine in one big vat instead of bottle by bottle. Alain responded "*of course*", but that they don't do it for two reasons. The first is that historically, a French sparkling wine had to ferment in bottle. But more importantly, all the fruit aromatics of the Gamay would be lost.

They then empty each bottle by CO₂ and gently filter out the deposits left from the re-fermentation. This is done 8000 bottles at a time, with everything poured into a blending vat. The content in the vats represents a blend from 5 or 6 separately vinified parcels, bringing balance and elegance to the final wine. In the end, they make sure the final fermentation is never over 7,5% alcohol, because even at 8% you'd lose a lot of fruit. The blended wine is then rebottled and corked. Did you know that Champagne corks look like this before they are bottled:



Who knew?

Seeing what Alain and Elie are doing in the cellar makes it easy to understand why their wines

qualitatively stand out of the pack. Few go to such lengths to produce this style of wine in the region; though it technically can't be labelled as Cerdon, the majority of regional sparkling, sweet, low alcohol wine is being produced with hefty doses of sulfur to halt fermentations and using the chermat method to add carbonation. These practices are is large part responsible for why the region has developed a bad reputation in France.

After our oenology lesson, we set off to our first vineyard site!





We began by visiting this 3 hectare parcel, which happen to be the first vines Alain bought when he was only 14 years old! It is steep!





Because they don't use herbicides, these inclines make soil-work decisions very important

"We're only 5 years into working organically, and it's still a learning process. We're the only ones to plow here, and maybe this year we should have done less"



The vines are spread over 25 zones of the village, and range from 250 to 500 meters in altitude. Combined, the parcels face every type of exposition possible. Everything is hand harvested.

A big part of why Alain and Elie's Cerdon is so unique is that they are among a tiny percentage of vignerons who blend Poulsard into their Gamay. Other than the Jura, you won't find Poulsard anywhere else. Still, it only represents a tiny part of Bugey's vines: only 8 hectares are planted, and the Renardat own 3. Though it was traditionally planted in the region, Poulsard is fragile and low yielding so people ripped it out to favor the more productive Gamay.

We continued the visit with Elie wanting to show us an "*experiment*" they'd started in the Spring. It involves a trial with biodynamics on 10% of the estate: 4 parcels have been split 50/50 between organic and biodynamic viticulture to observe any differences.



Only a few months into the comparison, the major thing Elie has noticed is that on the biodynamic vines, the leaves seem to naturally spread out more and curve themselves inward to better absorb the sun.



Why? That's beyond them. Alain, who has always been a man of science, has been pleasantly surprised by the whole experience:

"I don't understand it, but I see the results and it makes me want to pursue things further."



Elie then pointed out:

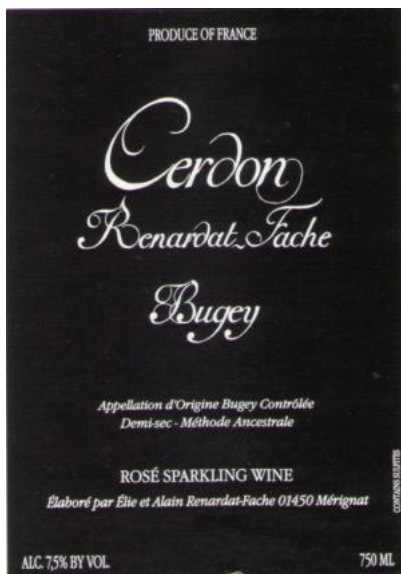
"Human beings have lost the inherent instinct of being in sync with nature. An animal knows when a storm coming, where to find the food he needs... For some it's never left, but it's something most of have progressively lost. But I believe it's slowly coming back."

We finished the tour of the vines, then got to taste a bunch of pre-blended Cerdon before eating lunch. I was very excited, because Elie had promised me that we would taste the dry, still Gamay they make for personal consumption. I'd actually been thinking about it for over a year now (when he'd [mentioned it in his interview](#)). It did not disappoint: 11% alcohol, light and fruity but it still has a cool expression of terroir that differed from the Beaujolais. It was quite easy knocking back an entire magnum; Elie is actually considering bottling and selling small quantities of it in the future, and I certainly hope he does!

After lunch, Maya snapped some pics of the Renardat-Fâche's dogs Rapunzel and Guinevere:



Wines



A.O.C Bugey "Cerdon du Bugey"

Soil: Jurassic limestone

Grapes: Gamay, Poulsard

Viticulture: Certified organic by Ecocert

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.