

Domaine Marcel Richaud

Interview

This interview with Marcel Richaud took place in Bordeaux in June 2011.

Tell us about your estate.

From a very young age I was passionate about viticulture and winemaking, and dropped out of high school at 17 to study viticulture. I've always felt a very special energy in the vineyard, that my life was here in Cairanne, that wine from the region could be something special, and that I was destined to make it.

The estate was already in the family when I took over. When I first started I was working 14 hectares of my aunt's vines and I eventually inherited my father's land when he retired, an additional 15 hectares. This gave me a chance to save up a little money, and my first investment was to build a proper cellar. Once the cellar was finished, I then purchased some parcels with different terroirs than the parcels I already owned. One example would be L' Ebrescade, a clay terroir at the border of Rasteau. Over the years I've purchased about 20 hectares of vines, so I now find myself with around 55 hectares.

I own most of these but choose only to farm others. The vines I've inherited from father, for example, were also inherited by my three siblings, so I refuse to buy these because they are as much a part of them as they are a part of me. The same goes with my aunt's land that I started with. I prefer buying nice Cairanne terroirs that have no family tie so that I can carve out my own independence.

When you were first started, did you follow in your father's footsteps or use your own approach?

My father sold all of his grapes to a cave cooperative. The rules and politics of production meant high yields, mechanization and none of the work I do today: choosing to work with specific parcels and varieties, working organically and biodynamically, etc. So you could say that I fundamentally changed everything about the estate.

After deciding to break off from the cooperative, I was able to make my own wine that I could sell because of its high quality and production value. I also became heavily involved in what is now referred to as natural wine in France and abroad. As an advocate and member of the A.V.N (*Association des Vins Naturels*), I've believed for a long time that real wine is wine that sees no chemical treatment, no filtering, no commercial yeasts and no other technique that would specifically alter a wine.

I took over from my father at 20 and I've worked organically since day one. That was 37 years ago. At the time, I wasn't thinking about marketing or selling wine. What I was doing was accomplishing a childhood dream: to make a wine the way I wanted to make it with my name on the bottle.

In my early years, my father would often tell me: "You'll come back to selling to the cooperative when you're done having your fun." It took him a very long time to understand what I was doing and why I was doing it; for the first ten years, my family was very worried that I wasn't making wine like

everyone else, that it was too much of a risk and that it could never work economically.

What's the work in the vines like?

We work organically so no chemicals, herbicides or pesticides. We work the soils. For me the vines are an entity that you cultivate, that you guide like you would a friend or fellow human being. Some people treat and heal others. My job is to treat and heal the earth and the vines. You need to take care of both because healthy soils lead to healthy vines.

And in the cellar?

The cellar is the accumulation and the payoff of what we've been doing all year in the vines. My grandfather used to say something that I find very simple and beautiful: "The Earth only gives you what you make." He was right. You can't treat the earth like an entrepreneur. You have to work with it, to learn to love it.

In the 37 years of winemaking, I've tried everything. Pigeage, remontage, carbonic maceration, oak, cement, stainless steel[] you name it. And through years of constant experimentation, putting myself in question and trying new things, I've come to the conclusion that what really matters are the yields, the age of the vines and the terroir. If you want to make wines that express their terroir, wines that offer the customer a taste of a region, then you need to have excellent quality grapes, but you also need to make sure that the expression of those grapes that won't get altered with sophisticated vinification techniques.

How do you feel about the AOC system?

I am personally convinced that the AOC system is a very beautiful thing. The original idea of the AOC was a system that would highlight the culture and history of a region's agriculture, and I believe in its virtues. The problem is the way that most AOC's are run. The heads of the the AOCs are technicians that confuse the vigneron's work as a fitting within a category. In cases like mine, when you work with native yeasts, low sulfur and higher acidities you will often be penalized for deviating from a certain path, when in fact they should be encouraging us for making something you couldn't find anywhere else!

You mentioned earlier how you are part of the natural wine movement. As a vigneron who'd been making natural wine decades before there was even a term to describe it, how do you feel about the current climate of natural wine?

It's a movement I defend, but in no way am I a radical or an extremist. I acknowledge that nature does not always give us all the elements to respect the criteria to make a natural wine. On the other hand, the philosophy of working this way is a virtuous one worth defending. What we have with natural winemaking is artisanal winemaking as opposed to industrial winemaking. I think that customers are really starting to notice that compared to standard industrial wine, natural wines are original, rich and full of character.

I believe that in the future, we should be forced to put sulfur amounts on bottles. The customer has the right to know! And not just sulfur, but everything that goes into a bottle of wine. After all, we are obliged to list ingredients for every single nutritional product in the world. Wine is the only exception. This is no coincidence: a lot of people don't want you to know what goes into their bottle of wine.

If you use the legal limit of sulfur in my appellation, 190 mg per liter, you can make wine with rotten grapes. And why are we allowed to do this? Because this ensures that vigneronns can continue to machine harvest, not worry about the quality of their grapes and keep big businesses running. So that's why I defend natural wine.