

# Clos Roche Blanche

## Interview

**This interview with Didier Barouillet took place in the *Clos Roche Blanche* living room in June, 2011.**

**Tell us about the history of *Clos Roche Blanche*.**

The history of the estate is rather interesting. Good question! Thanks for asking!

It turns out that the great-great-grandfather of my partner Catherine Roussel was a local politician. He was the depute and mayor of Saint-Aignan. At the end of the 19th century, the phylloxera crisis had demoralized a lot of vigneron, and he wanted to set a good example to bring back morale by replanting 15 hectares in an area that had never been used before for any type of agriculture. Those are the 15 hectares right up the hill.

He found the most competent people he could to work on the vines but also on building a cellar. He was insistent on doing this not just anywhere; it had to be in optimal conditions. This took about 5 years, with two people working full time on the cellar. You have to remember there weren't any jackhammers at the time, so it was a little more time consuming... And with the stone they extracted, they built the house we are in right now.

They were pretty crafty about everything, particularly having an outside press. Working with gravity was not common at the time.

This great-great-grandfather didn't live in this house; he lived in Saint-Aignan and his workers lived here. He did however reserve this very room we are sitting in as his private space.

As far as how Catherine and I became part of the estate, it's a bit more complicated. Catherine inherited the estate because her father was adopted by her grandfather. Her father worked here and helped pick up the pace at a time where the estate was struggling economically.

**What was Catherine's work like before you showed up?**

Her father died in 1975. Catherine and her mother took over the estate, because her brother wasn't interested and her sister even less! So it was two vigneronnes, another infrequent occurrence! To be honest, everyone was convinced they wouldn't be up to the task.

Her father was one of the first vigneron -dare I say pioneer- to bottle his own wine and sell it directly in this region. He'd hop on his mobylette to show samples left and right, and created a loyal customer base for himself. He sold a lot of wine to *Les Halles* in Paris and in Lyon. When he died Catherine took over.

This is when I first met Catherine; right around the death of her father. There were two employees at the time. I used to come harvest here and help out wherever I could. In 1981, I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life anymore. This coincided with Catherine's decision to buy a harvesting machine because she was sick of having to take care of the pickers.

She thought it was real progress! Her main employee drove it, and to pay off the machine she started harvesting with it for other vigneronns. This became a full time job for her this employee, who didn't have any more time to do his old job of making wine in the cellar. So Catherine asked me if I wanted to give it a shot and I said yes. I decided to try it for a year to see if I liked it. 30 years later I'm still here, so yes, I enjoy this line of work!

### **So before you took over, were the vines treated chemically?**

It was machine harvested and treated chemically. This was the early 80's, when herbicides had truly begun to change the French viticultural landscape. Bit by bit, the entire estate was treated with herbicide and whatever new chemicals were introduced at the time to combat systemic molecule illnesses, which are diseases transmitted through the sap. This meant that when the vines grew, they were already protected. It was incredible!

Chemicals caused a complete revolution in French viticulture, a revolution we gladly went along with. Machine harvesting is half the price of a harvest team, you know!

### **And was your cellar work also influenced by this wave of technological advances?**

It was, because the whole process is a vicious cycle. If you start using chemical products in the vines, to combat mildew for example, it also significantly decreases your grapes' native yeasts. After a while you start realizing the wine isn't fermenting properly, and you think: "Shit! I need to use a commercial starter yeast!".

Commercial yeasts were introduced to the market at the same time as all these chemicals we've been talking about. Most of the time they were manufactured by the same companies!

You end up not having a choice: if you don't inoculate, things aren't going to work out.

I remember working with all types of crazy yeasts, particularly 71-B, which is what exacerbates banana flavor in *nouveau* wines. People loved it, and would go as far as using it twice: once to get the fermentation started and then again to make sure it was working hard on the wine!

I've always been curious by nature, and one day I tried using 71-B in the Sauvignon Blanc. It tasted like bananas! This proves to me that a yeast like 71-B doesn't aromatize a wine, but rather it exacerbates an aroma that exists somewhere, somehow in grape juice.

It was still fun to have a Sauvignon Blanc that tasted like bananas!

### **So how did things begin to change?**

Well, by becoming conscious of what I have just told you. It didn't seem normal to me that by adding a yeast, you could have one flavor instead of a palate of them. This frustrated me because I felt that the wine I was making was one dimensional, and that I couldn't get it past a certain quality level. It was pretty good, but I wanted to take it to the next level and every year was pretty much exactly the same thing.

So I decided I wanted to change everything. I wanted to start from the ground up, literally: to focus on where everything begins, which is the soil. My initial intentions were simply to make a more authentic beverage. I don't mean a better one; a wine that uses conventional chemicals and is well made has its public: a public that likes to consume "flawless" wine. But these wines don't express the

soil and the earth they came from, and they weren't the wines I wanted to make. So what were my options to start over? Organic agriculture?

Organic is far from perfect, as the vines are still treated with products that incorporate themselves into the soil. I'm talking of course of copper and sulfur, which are legally allowed in organic agriculture. Let's not forget that copper is the product most at fault for the lack of microbial activity in the soil, especially when people were making their Boullie Bordelaise themselves. They were using ten times too much: If the vines weren't completely blue then you hadn't done a good job! This completely killed all microbial activity in a lot of soils for the better part of 50 years (from 1900 to 1950, before the introduction of synthetic products).

And sulfur, which is also allowed, isn't too good either because it acidifies the soil. When it hits the ground, and let's not kid ourselves by saying it only goes on the vines, with a little bit of water it turns into sulfuric acid. There are many examples in Algeria of soils that have become STERILE because of sulfur.

So organic agriculture is far from perfect, but for me it's the least harmful option at my disposition to make a product that interests me. People need to stop treating organic agriculture like an ideal, but as a means to produce the least harmful agricultural products possible... So then the goal becomes working organically, but making it the least harmful possible and using the lowest possible amounts of copper and sulfur in the vines.

20 years later, I've succeeded. But this takes time. It's a long process.

### **What were you doing before you started working at Clos Roche?**

I specialized in mathematics and worked as a chemical engineer.

### **How did this influence your approach to being a vigneron?**

A scientific approach to winemaking is beneficial because it forces you to take a Cartesian stance. It makes you understand things very quickly. I didn't know anything about viticulture or winemaking 30 years ago. Not a thing. All I did was read books. When I took my agriculture BAC, I showed up as independent candidate; I'd never taken a single class.

It makes maintaining the vines easier, because you actually understand what's going on with nature.

And it's tremendously beneficial to the wine, because wine is nothing more than chemistry. Wine is full of molecules: microorganisms, bacteria and fungus. Wine is a transposition of composites in the soil through chemistry. Science made me realize this, and that made me realize that we had to stop using chemicals in the vineyard.

### **Can you elaborate?**

Using herbicide forces the vines' roots to the surface, in which they can effectively grow in the 8 to 10 centimeters of fertile soil that you find anywhere in the world. This isn't terroir. To get to the terroir you need to go deeper. It's what under those 8 to 10 centimeters that differentiates one soil type from another.

My scientific definition of terroir (in fact it isn't just mine), is *the degradation of earth's mother rock from bacteria, which is transmitted to the vine through its roots.*

When you realize this, you can't go back to chemicals because there is always the possibility of pushing things forward without them. At first I was only interested in wine-making, but today I consider it the least interesting part of my work. The wine I make is the consequence of my work in the vines. I almost never taste in the cellar, because I know what the end result will be. When I first started, I took no interest in the vineyard. But my natural evolution has led me to spend less and less time in the cellar.

And this evolution continues in that today, I almost don't pay any attention to the vines and focus principally on what's happening in the soil. The vines are a direct consequence of what is happening in the soil.

None of this came as an overnight epiphany. It's been a slow and steady 30 years of evolution.

### **Can you tell me about the progression of your work with the soil?**

Again, there has been a serious evolution in my work. When we started converting everything away from chemical viticulture, we did things the traditional way, by working the soils through various methods of plowing. From the beginning I didn't like it: it's a pain in the ass and it takes too long.

I was trying to find an alternative, and fortunately I learned a very important lesson from an agronomist named Claude Bourguignon (who has come here many times), and that was the working the soil is not a good thing.

As I've mentioned before, viticultural land is very poor in microorganisms because of the 50 years of constant exposure to copper and other harmful products. So what's left in the soil? Bacteria and fungus. Some of these are aerobic organisms, which mean they like oxygen, and others are anaerobic, which means the opposite. When you start plowing and shifting these organisms around, the aerobic ones (which are logically on the top), die because they now lack oxygen and the anaerobic ones aren't too happy being exposed to air.

So to let these organisms thrive, you need to only work the soil superficially, with blades to cut down unwanted grass, or to plow very lightly, and only to oxygenate the soil for the organisms that need them. I haven't plowed the vineyard in 15 years, and this has enormously benefited the soil's structure. Even at its driest, the soil has enough humic structure for me to cultivate it. This was initially a tremendous challenge because, on the surface, we have a lot of (not necessarily great) clay which is very compact.

This was the first big breakthrough, and the second involved a shift away from intensive monoculture. If you had told me this 20 years ago that I was practicing "*intensive monoculture*", I would have no idea what you were talking about. What do you mean intensive monoculture? I've got Sauvignon, Côt, Pineau D'Aunis...

The guy who's been making corn on the same parcel for 25 years in the South-West knows that he's working in intensive monoculture. He knows the corn is eventually going to stop growing the way it used to, and will be tempted to use GMO's.

For some reason this evades most vignerons. Time and time again, it's been proven that when one works in intensive monoculture, you begin to have problems with insects and fungal illness because nature's ecosystem is unbalanced and prone to vulnerability.

I haven't used insecticides for 15 years. All you have to do is plant something other than vines and

let grass grow to create a more balanced ecosystem. I have a reservoir full of insects, and I've created corridors so that they can move freely throughout the vineyard and feed off the flowers that grow there. They grab some pollen and then they get to work. They also leave the vines alone.

### **So why do we hear time and time again that working the soil is of utmost importance?**

Because it is! You need to work the soil without plowing, first to get rid of the superficial roots of the vines. This way you don't fall into the same trap as using herbicides.

You also need to work the soil to aerate it. If you're using organic fertilizers, these cannot be directly assimilated by the vines. They need to be transformed into mineral elements that can be assimilated by the plant, by the soil's microorganisms. This process occurs because of oxygen.

### **You've expressed that the work in the cellar is minimal compared to that in the vines, but can you give us some insight on what goes on in there?**

In the cellar I work as naturally as possible. I almost always vinify without sulfur. If the PH levels were too high and acidity levels were too low, I wouldn't take the risk of vinifying without sulfur. This isn't really something I have to worry about in our region though, and if you're well equipped I don't see why you'd need to use any.

Evidently I don't use any commercial yeasts or enzymes. I'm very conscious of temperature control, which are very important to control fermentation.

I'm a lot less stressed than I used to be in the cellar. I analyze the wines myself because I can, and because I have a little laboratory set up. This saves me a lot of time.

### **You analyze your wines a lot right?**

Much more than most.

When you don't use sulfur, there is always a possibility for all types of deviations. Like I said earlier, wine is like the earth. At its core you're working with microbiology, where microorganisms, yeasts and bacteria are always interacting with each other. Yeasts are the catalyst for alcoholic fermentation; they transform sugar into alcohol. The bacteria is there to turn malic acid into lactic acid.

The secret is to not let the bacteria take over when you need the yeasts to work, and vice-versa. This balance can be attained with temperature control. Yeasts, for example, work very well at 25°, and while bacteria can work at that temperature, they won't be able to maximize their effort, because they have to compete with the optimally performing yeasts.

Our goal is to provoke an alcoholic fermentation that isn't affected by lactic bacteria, because bacteria hates being bored: their "job" is to turn malic acid into lactic acid, but once they're done, if there's still some sugar left in the wine, they will start working on the sugar and transform the wine into vinegar.

And that's not all. They're also often responsible for sourness in wine. Greece has had a lot of problems with this. Lactic bacteria always has to stay busy, and they love to fuck things up! So we make sure the alcoholic fermentation is completely finished and there isn't a trace of sugar, then we let them get to work. For lactic bacteria, the optimal temperature for them is between 18 and 20°.

**As someone who uses science to work with nature, how do you feel about modern oenology's approach of using science to correct nature?**

Modern oenology is a science. We know how a fermentation works, and there are rules to follow in order to have one occur. When you work with spontaneous, natural fermentation, you are taking a huge risk. Not everyone can do it and you'd go out of business if you made vinegar every year.

I don't use science to make wine, I use science to shape it. I'm very serious about temperature control, and you can read about temperature control in oenological books that date back to the early 1900's! This is an oenological practice!

After the war, we discovered how malolactic fermentation occurs. Of course it was also the beginning of manufactured products entering the vineyard. And everyone turned a blind eye to it. Everything is allowed in the vineyard: ascorbic acid, citric acid, every conservative in the book, you name it!

And what's more, which I find scandalous, none of this is listed on a wine's back label. The obligation to mark "*Contains Sulfites*" on back labels is a recent thing, because some people are allergic to it. But if all it did was give you a headache, you bet it wouldn't be written back there!

Wine is the only product in the entire world where you don't have to list the conservatives you use on the back label. This is not normal.

**Let's talk about your favorite subject, "*natural wine*". I know you have strong opinions about this. What were your intentions when you started working this way in 92, and how have things evolved for you and for all wine made this way in 2011?**

The current notion and pseudo-definition of "*natural wine*" is bullshit. All wine is natural: when you add commercial yeasts, they are natural yeasts. They're preselected, but they're natural!

Sulfur is also natural. If you don't add any, you can still find tremendous quantities from the indigenous yeasts alone, up to 150 mg! So sometimes you analyze your wine and it turns out you have as much SO<sub>2</sub> as your neighbor who added it in!

I'm not talking about all the chemical products in the vineyard here, because yes, some of them are 100% artificial. But they affect viticulture and not wine-making. Anyone who can grasp this concept should understand why we shouldn't use the term *natural wine*. *Wines of nature* fine, but *natural wine* no.

Because what does *natural wine* imply? It implies that all other wines are artificial. And in doing so you're insulting your neighbor's work, as well as the general public who drink it. These guys don't make artificial wine, they make wine that was produced with grapes that were grown with chemicals that are, most of the time natural.

You can't reason in this dogmatic way. And if you do, you're forgetting your past. Was I an idiot when I worked conventionally in the 80's? I don't think so. I evolved into the man I am today, who works the way I do now. I can't insult guys who work conventionally, because I also worked that way. For many years! Everyone's allowed to do as they please.

You can't be dogmatic about things like this, and this is what I don't like of all these little "chapels" and associations that sprout out everywhere in regards to natural wine. A lot of my buddies are in

these associations, but frankly I find them ridiculous. We weren't put on this earth to fragment and isolate ourselves into mini-cults.

**So as someone who does follow, more or less, the principles of "natural" winemaking, how would you ideally present it to someone who knew nothing about it?**

When you don't come from an agricultural background like myself, you are free. You're free to experiment, and there is no pressure to perform in any one way. You can be auto-didactic, and personally I'm an iconoclast, so I don't like the concept that there is only one way to do something.

Everyone works the way they see fit. Along the way, people will influence and shape your work. This is normal, this is life. You find something you deem interesting in somebody, you reject what you don't. You shape yourself from your personal experience, which is inevitably affected by those around you. You live, you learn, you work. You get praised, you get criticized. And with this you progress.

You can't be pretentious. You should be humble.

You should also be observant: every day something new is going on. Plenty of vigneron work organically, but for me the ones doing real work are the ones in the vineyard every day, observing their surroundings. Even in May, June and July. They aren't walking through their vineyards to work, but to observe. To see eye to eye with the plant.

You can talk to a human and never really know what's going on, but plants are transparent: you know when they're doing well or if they're not feeling good. You sense joy and pain without words. Ok, I'm getting a little poetic here, I'll stop!

**Can you tell us about your attempt to convert the estate to biodynamics?**

I learned a lot from biodynamics. I worked *Clos Roche* this way for three years, and the biggest lesson I learned was humility. I learned that we're not alone on this world, that innumerable forces constantly interact with everything we do.

After that it's up to you if you believe in magical preparations. I don't, which is why I stopped. And if you ask the most serious biodynamic farmers, they'll tell you: "*The preparations don't work. But at my estate they do!*"

If I hadn't done three years of biodynamic work, I don't think I would be where I am today.

**Is that because you thought you could control everything just with science?**

Exactly. But I was wrong. Now that I know what is going on in the soil, little things that don't mean anything on their own -the 1 in 0.0000001- every day for 400 million years these little nothings have been creating the world's antibiotics. Man has only been doing this for a century. I thank Pasteur and penicillin, but this has been going on every single day in the soil. It's incredible. The Ice Age, insane heat, they've survived it all. The oldest insects we know of (350 million years) are insects that live in the ground.

They've survived it all. With courage and humility! And humans don't see a problem with fucking around with this.

Destroying nature is easy. Reconstructing it will take a very long time.