

# Eric Texier

## Eric Texier in the Rhône Valley.



Eric Texier photo by Jarred Gild

## Profile

Eric Texier became a winemaker after a first career and without any family background in vines or wines. As such, his goals and methods developed not so much from his years of schooling, but from his readings, his visiting winemakers around the world, and working in Burgundy with Jean-Marie Guffens at Verget.

After giving up the idea of buying vineyards, which was too costly a proposition for a beginner with his ambitions, he started a small négoce where he selected particularly interesting vineyard plots

and the sincere, hard-working farmers who grew the healthy grapes he wanted to buy and vinify. He rediscovered nearly forgotten areas of ancient fame, like Brézème in the northern Côtes-du-Rhône, and nurtured relationships with people who tend their vines with passion and care. He has since acquired plots in Côte Rôtie and Condrieu in the northern Rhône, and replanted several hectares in Brézème, with Syrah and Roussanne.

That's how he came to produce about 30 different wines, from 10 different origins, from Bussièeres in the Mâconnais to the northern Rhône and the southern Côtes-du-Rhône. The wines are vinified in their areas of production, which means a lot of juggling tasks and traveling at the time of harvest. When they have obtained their AOC, the young wines are transported to Charnay-en-Beaujolais, just north of Lyon, where Eric lives and has recently acquired a wonderful élevage cellar. This beautiful underground vaulted cellar was built in the 16th century, and temperatures stay cool and stable through the year.

Like all good winemakers, Eric strongly believes that wines are made in the vineyard, and that his work, after the harvest, consists in following the lead of the vintage, and accompanying the wines so they fulfill their potential. Exact steps in vinification vary according to the varieties, terroirs and vintages, but the goal is always to provide the grapes, musts and wines with the best environment and intervene as little as possible.

His techniques for white wines include sorting in the vines and at the winery, whole clusters pressed in a vertical press (that's the old fashioned wood kind), no added yeasts, barrel fermentation (less than 10% new wood), aging on fine lees, malolactic fermentation for all dry wines, minimal use of SO<sub>2</sub>, no pumping, fining and filtration only when absolutely necessary.

For his red wines, he does the same sorting at harvest, 100% destemming most of the time, bringing the grapes to the press by conveyer belts, cold maceration under a CO<sub>2</sub> blanket for aromatic extraction, natural yeasts, pigeage and remontage twice a day, during maceration and fermentation. The temperatures are controlled not to exceed 34 degrees C (93F), aging is done in 2 to 5 year old barrels of 228L and demi-muids of 450L, with only limited use of new oak, no filtration and egg white fining only when necessary.

A Bordeaux native who has lived in or around Lyon since 1979, Eric is a jovial, energetic and fun-loving person who wants his wines to make their drinkers happy. He's always looking to innovate, and, since he loves German wines, he started emulating them in 2005 by vinifying Viognier grapes from Condrieu as if they were Riesling. Ô Pâle is 8 degrees of alcohol, sweet and light, with fresh acidity and delicate aromas. Unfortunately, in 2006 his Viognier grapes ripened so quickly that most were already too high in sugar when he started the harvest, and this delicious and whimsical wine is going to be even harder to acquire.

## Interview

**This interview with Eric Texier stems from a series of emails from October 2010.**

### **The facts:**

3.3 ha in Brézème:

2.2 ha de 15 à 25 year old syrah

0.5 ha of petites serines Syrah Brézème Pergaud (60-70 years)

0.45 ha of roussane planted in 2001

0.15 ha of roussanne Brézème Pergaud

With an additional hectare of roussane as of next year.

In the next five years, I plan to take over an additional 11.5 ha in Saint Julien en Saint Alban which will be 55% syrah, 35% grenache and Cinsault and 10% whites.

I also rent around 4 ha in Vaison: 3.5 ha of grenache aged between 30 and 55 years and 0.5 ha of whites.

### **How did you end up making wine?[]**

Passion. My grandmother had given me some money when for my marriage in 1985, and I decided to invest in wine. I began asking around on how to invest this money wisely and began realizing that the wines I enjoyed (Gourgonnier, Chamonard, Trollat, Gentaz, Goyard, Guffens) were a million times more interesting to me than what the specialized press was praising: Bordeaux, Languedoc, nouveau riche... I got in touch with these vigneronns and began discovering the concepts and traditions behind their wines.

I was bored to death at my old job as an engineer in the nuclear industry and quickly opted to learn viticulture and winemaking in 1993 by interning at Guffens. I vinified my first wines in 1995 when we moved to Charnay in a house with a wine press and a cellar.

### **Why do you choose to live in the Beaujolais but work in the Rhône?**

I'd been living in the Beaujolais with my family well before I started making wine. My wife and I moved here when our children were still infants. Alice was born here. The kids call it home here, and I felt that I had no right to force my family to move to the south when this whole wine thing was my idea.

At first I wanted to settle in Burgundy, find land in Côte de Nuits or something comparable. Unfortunately I never found anything because of my double handicap of not being a Burgundian or a millionaire!

I ended up working with vines in the northern Rhône thanks to some friendly advice from guys like Raymond Trollat and Marcel Juge who put me in touch with François Pouchoulin in Brézème. I instantly fell in love with this unknown appellation and the people that had kept it alive; its' parallels to Burgundy, namely single varietal and parcel specific bottlings, sealed the deal for me. But to me, Charnay is the most beautiful place in the world and that's where I feel most comfortable living. I should also point out that I would never be able to afford a house like mine in the Val de Drôme, an area that is extremely touristic and expensive!

Finally, I would never find a cellar as beautiful, as calm and as perfect as my own in Charnay.

### **What's the work like with the vines? What do you think of your terroirs and your vines?[]**

Certified organic "Ecocert" in Brézème and Vaison. We began converting Saint Julien in 2011. We use the 500 and 501 everywhere and follow the lunar calendar but I am highly opposed to the necessity of animal compost imposed by biodynamic agriculture; I guess it's my own interpretation of it. We do a lot of experiments involving other types of plants in between rows and vines, as well as "natural" viticulture with zero intervention to the soil or the vines (by applying the principles of

Fukuoka, Mollison or Altieri). I do my best to never have to use the three things that I find the most intrusive in organic and biodynamic agriculture:

- Plowing (in between rows or at the root)
- Copper (Mildew, Black Rot)
- Sulfur (oidium)

To avoid these three pitfalls, I work on cultures that complement each other, selecting plants that provide permanent vegetal cover of the soil that can "shut down" when resources become scarce, by using one microbiological elements to fight illness (Ampelomyces Quiscalis against odium...).

The terroirs of Brézème and Saint Julien are particularly unique because wine from either appellation is very rare: 5 producers in Brézème and 2 in Saint Julien. They are the terroirs of farmers, proud of their rusticity and history.

### **Your situation is fairly unique. What is your criteria for selecting the vineyards and the grapes you work with?**

I work exclusively with 3 vigneron: Jean Riché in Chateauneuf, René Dondin in Bussières and Bernard Garrayt in Condrieu/Côte Rotie. I've known all these guys for a very long time; Bernard and I even make wine together!

All three of these guys have something in common: they are all better vigneron than I am and know their land way better than I do. In fact I'd go as far as to say that these guys taught me everything I know as a vigneron.

Should I plow along the side of the hill in Condrieu in August when storms are announced in early September? I don't know since I don't have to worry about stuff like this in Brézème, where my soils there "behave" better.

Or do I take a big risk in Chateauneuf and letting grass grow under the rows in a rainy vintage? Again, I have Jean who always does the right thing because of his experience with his terroirs and vines.

What I've learned in Brézème only applies to Brézème; I can't transpose my work there to Saint Julien because the terroirs and the climate are very different. In such, I learn from the proprietors that worked this land before I did.

I work with these three guys because they are great vigneron. They are autonomous and traditionalists (no insecticides, plowing soils or leaving grass) and I have nothing to explain to them.

I laugh when I hear people sourcing fruit tell me they control everything the vigneron does in the vinyard:

- 1) You're clearly full of it unless you live and sleep in the vines every night.
- 2) If you're telling someone how to do his job and he offers zero input and does exactly what you say, I don't see how this can be beneficial to the work being done in the vineyard.

So my basic principle remains the same: I don't give any orders to my vigneron and I control absolutely nothing! They are my friends and I have total confidence in them. Not to mention they all have superb terroirs with the least amount of clones possible (I'm at about 95% old vines or massale) and as many old vines as possible.

## **What's the wine making process like?□**

For red:

- no intervention during vinification: no yeasting, no SO<sub>2</sub>, no bacteria, no tannins, no enzymes.
- no pigeages: the hat stays forcefully immersed thanks to a wood clamp.
- Short cuvaisons 5 to 15 days mostly.
- Aged on the lees, no SO<sub>2</sub> unless necessary, no new oak, 20% small barrels, 30% wood tanks and 50% cement tanks.
- very little filtration(less than 10% on normal years,bottled when it's clear.
- 10 to 30 mg of SO<sub>2</sub> at bottling. I do a few cuvees with no SO<sub>2</sub>: an improbable Chateauneuf du Pape, 1 bottling of Pergault Saint Julien and Brézème.

For white:

- Pneumatic press or vertical press without maceration except for certain cuvées bottled without SO<sub>2</sub>.
- no intervention during vinification: no yeasting, no SO<sub>2</sub>, no bacteria, no tannins, no enzymes.
- Aged on the lees, no SO<sub>2</sub> unless necessary, no new oak, 50% wood barrels 50% cement tanks.
- Filtered "sur terre" except for the Pergaud and Chateauneuf blanc.
- 20 to 40 mg of SO<sub>2</sub> at bottling.

My wines are not "nice" or "fun". I believe they expresse where they come from and truly show a sense of regional identity. They are clear and precise. I don't give a shit what people are drinking at hipster wine bars in Paris or what a 1000 euro bottle of Bordeaux tastes like. I'm very happy people like my grandma and François Pouchoulin, the father of Brézème, like them.

## **What do you think of the wines of your AOC and how they compare to something "typical" of the region?**

I'm in the "Terroiriste" camp, Jules Chauvet style. I don't like modern wines or super natural wines that scream "fuck tradition".

I'll let Jules do the talking: "Every vigneron should accept his wines as they are in reality, and not how he wants them to be."

## **What kind of wines are you aiming to make?**

Wines of terroir.

## **Have you always worked organically?**

Yes.

## **Why?**

For me it comes right back to Chauvet.

The less you interfere with the vines and during the winemaking process the more your wine stays true to its origin, whether it be terroir, varietal or vintage. In such you can be proud of it's unique individuality.

## **Where do you stand on the "natural" wine debate?**

If "natural" essentially means a product of nature then long live natural wine! On the other hand, if

"natural" means disjointed, revolutionary and trying to justify all possible deviation for the sake of originality, then I'd rather make wines like that then actually drink them...

Modern wines and super natural wines share a common trait: the will of the vigneron/winemaker to make a wine knowing precisely what he wants from it. This idea frustrates me because I feel it leads to a standardization of taste. An overripe Cabernet with a ton of new wood doesn't strike me as better or worse than a carbonic Syrah that tastes like every other carbonic wine ever made. If I had to pick one of the two though, needless to say I'd drink the latter!!!

### **What wines do you like to drink besides your own?**

- Chamonard's Morgon
- Mas du Gourgonier
- Frank Peillot's Altesses.
- Marc Olliver's Muscadets
- Some classic Burgundy: Rousseau, Roumier, Mugneret Gibourg and DRC

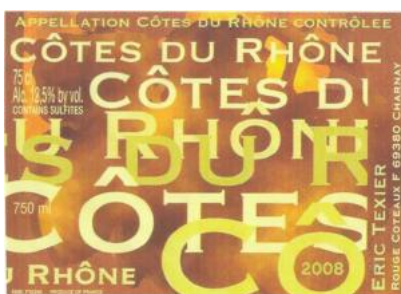
The old syrups of Trollat, Gentaz Dervieux, Juge or Verset.  
Les Ponchonières d'Helen Durant in Rasteau.

## **Wines**

Whites from both the Northern and Southern Rhône are made in a similar fashion with barrel fermentation, the use of indigenous yeast and gentling aging without unnecessary racking, fining or filtering.

The red wines are made in a similar gentle fashion. Once the grapes have been sorted, they are normally de-stemmed, lightly crushed and placed into traditional open top fermentation tanks. A combination of wood, concrete and stainless steel tanks are used depending on the vintage and the varietal. Once the grapes are placed into the tank, CO<sub>2</sub> is used to create a blanket to protect the wine from oxidation.

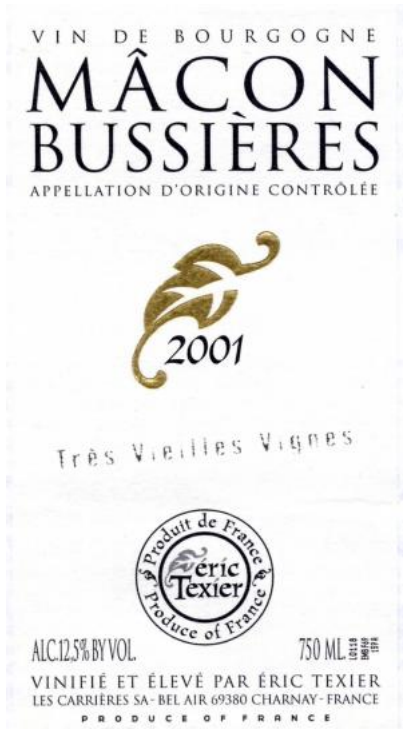
Once fermentation has begun using indigenous yeast, the temperature are controlled and never allowed to exceed 30° C. Pigeage, the pushing down of the cap of grape skins that naturally float to the top of the fermentation tank, and remontage, the gentle pumping over the grape juice over the broken cap, is done usually on a daily basis. Once fermentation is complete, the wines are gently pressed using a bladder press.



### **A.O.C Côtes du Rhône White**



**A.O.C Côtes du Rhône Red**

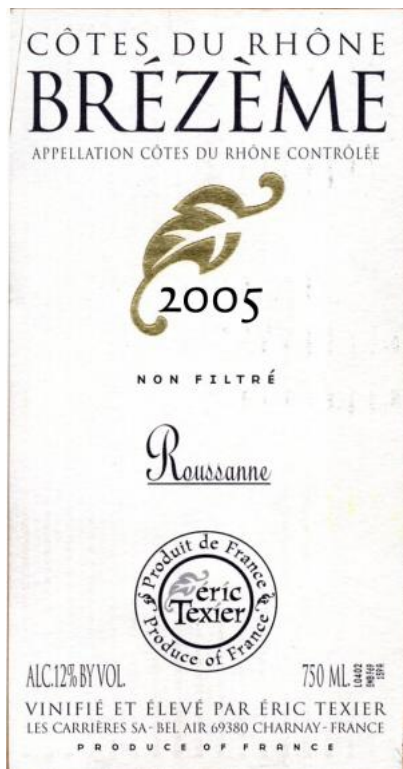


**A.O.C Mâcon-Bussières "Très Très Vieilles Vignes":**

**Soil:** Limestone and Clay

**Grape:** Chardonnay

**Vines:** Between 80-100 years old on a southern facing slope.

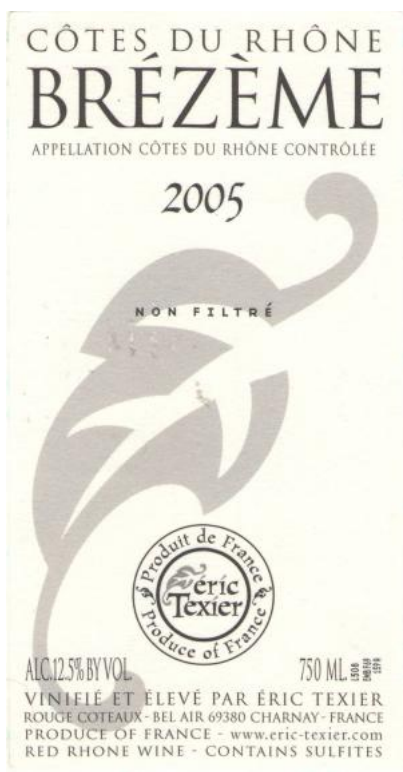


**A.O.C Côtes du Rhône "Brézème" Roussane:**

**Soil:** Rocky soil with galets roulés.

**Grape:** Roussane

**Vines:** Clos vineyard, enclosed by an ancient stone wall. Gentle south west facing slope. Vines are 25 to 30 years old.



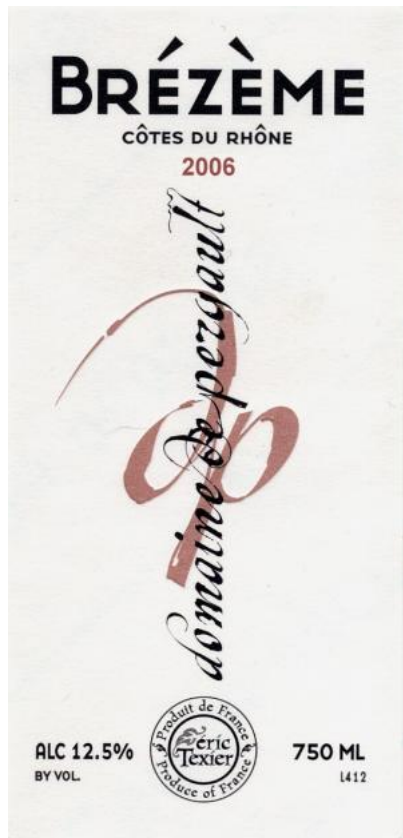
**A.O.C Côtes du Rhône "Brézème" Red:**

**Soil:** Rocky, talus soil of clay and limestone.

**Grape:** Syrah



**Vines:** Vines are between 10 to 15 years old and mainly located on the Côteau on a Southwest facing slope.



**A.O.C Côtes du Rhône "Brézème Vieilles Vignes Domaine de Pergault":**

**Soil:** Clay and limestone on top of hill and decomposed limestone on bottom.

**Grape:** Syrah

**Vines:** The slope increases as one climbs the hill, becoming terraced nearer the top. Full south exposure. Vines are over 60 years old.



**A.O.C Châteauneuf-du-Pape**

**Soil:** Galets roulés

**Grapes:** Grenache and Mourvèdre

**Vines:** The Grenache comes from La Crau, a north facing vineyard in the northeastern part of the appellation, towards Courthézon. Many of the Grenache vines are over 70 years old and because of the northern exposure the tannins reach phenol ripeness without an overwhelmingly high alcohol level. The Mourvèdre comes from a vineyard on the southern edge of the appellation and provides

crisp acidity to the blend. All of the vines are gobelet trained (head pruned) which keeps the fruit low and protected from the gusts of le mistral.

**Vinification:** Both the old Grenache vines and the Mourvèdre go through malolactic fermentation in 1 year old barrels.



**A.O.C Côte Rôtie Vieilles Vignes:**

Soil: gneiss and shist

Grape: Syrah

Vines: Extremely steep terrain with numerous terraces. Vines are 40 to 70 years old.



**A.O.C St-Julien en St-Alban "Domaine de Pergault"**



**VdF "Opâle" dessert wine:**

Opâle is a unique wine created in order to offer a completely new approach to Viognier from Condrieu. Low in alcohol (7%), with aromas of fruit and flowers revealed by delicate bubbles, the wine is altogether soft, crisp and aromatic (apricot, peach). It needs to be chilled before serving as an aperitif or with fruit deserts, and can also be very surprising with spicy Indian and Asian foods.