

Hervé Villemade

Interview

This interview with Hervé Villemade took place in Bordeaux in June 2011.

Tell us about your estate.

Domaine du Moulin (**now called Domaine Hervé Villemade**) is a family estate. My grandparents founded it, and I took over in 1995. At the time there were 8.5 hectares of rather young vines (15-20 years) that my grandparents had planted. The farm used to be in polyculture, and the old vines from the 60's had been removed to plant new ones in the 70's.

When I took over, I replanted 5 hectares and started renting some vines as well. I've also bought land over the years and today we find ourselves working 25 hectares (8 are mine, 8.5 are my parents' and the rest is rented).

A lot has changed in your work ethic since you've taken over in 1995. Can you outline what and how that happened?

When I first took over the estate, everything was farmed conventionally with chemicals in the vineyards. Unaware of the alternatives, I followed in my parents' footsteps and continued working this way. I quickly became very bored with the work and the wines. They were uninspired and bland.

Around this time I was introduced to wines that were different, that spoke to me, that struck a chord emotionally: natural wines. Coincidentally, at the exact same time that I was discovering these wines I started developing a very serious allergy to sulfur.

This was around 1997. My first attempt at sulfur free winemaking was in 1999. What I hadn't realized, and what I quickly found out (through Marcel Lapierre in particular), was that to make sulfur free wine, you needed clean grapes. From that point I immediately started converting the entire estate to organic agriculture. This was in 2000.

Are you certified organic?

Yes.

Do you think certification is important?

It certainly isn't a prerequisite. Personally I think it helps communicate to the public what we're doing. We've always followed a very simple logic: we do what we say and we say what we do.

You mentioned earlier that you were introduced to certain wines that inspired you. Can you remember any of these?

Of course. The first were Marcel Lapierre's wines. But the wines that really made me start to believe I could make wines in this style were Thierry Puzelat's. Marcel's wines were the spark, but he lived 450 kilometers away from me and was working with very different terroirs; having a neighbor pull it

off right next door was the inspiration and motivation to follow in his footsteps.

Jean Foillard and Gramenon were also two early inspirations that truly marked me.

Whats the work in the vines like?

It's very simple and essentially the way everyone was working 50 years ago. We make a conscious effort to upkeep grass, since you need grass but you don't want too much of it competing with the vines either. In doing so we adapt to each vintage: if it's very dry we'll get rid of all the grass in early spring but if it's humid we'll keep as much of it as possible.

As far as the vines getting sick, again we adapt to each situation as it comes along. So for example if there's a potential problem with mildew, we'll treat it accordingly (strictly with copper), but not if the vines don't need it.

In a way, adapting to each vintage is at the heart of organic agriculture: there is no secret recipe or miracle product to make everything work out perfectly every year. You just need to always be there, to act accordingly and at the right time.

What about in the cellar?

I have two different terroirs: sandy flint and clay/flint. For the sandy flint soils, we vinify in tanks, concrete for the whites and wood for the reds. We then bottle the wine the following spring, which is typical of the Loire.

For the clay/flint soils, we vinify in 500 or 220 liter barrels. The wines then age in barrel for 12, 15 or 18 months depending on the vintage. I do this because this terroir lends itself to higher concentrations of minerality, and the wines need the time to balance themselves out before bottling.

How do you feel about the AOC system, and more specifically your appellations of Cheverny and Cour-Cheverny?

Both appellations are relatively recent, dating back to 1992. I come from a family of vigneronns that is firmly rooted in the area, and when I was a child I remember my father going to meetings every week, building the foundation that led to the creation of both appellations. As with any AOC, it's a lot of work; you really have to demonstrate and validate the regional history of your terroirs and varieties in order to be approved.

In such I am very attached to both the Cheverny and Cour-Cheverny appellations, and to the AOC system as a whole. An appellation really means something as long as you make it mean something.

For example, a 60 hl by hectare maximum is wishful thinking: it's to say that if a particularly productive vintage were to occur, this would be an estimate of what the vines could maximally produce. Of course with chemical agriculture, vigneronns are going to do their best to make sure they have 60 hl every year. The point I'm trying to make is that this wasn't applied to set a standard of productivity, but rather to gauge the realistic maximal possibilities of the region.

I've never reached 60 hl. On average we do between 30 and 35. And on years where we get to 45hl, we don't feel bad about it because it's a direct result of the vintage, and in such respects and represents the vintage accurately.

You've mentioned natural wines earlier and you are a prominent member of the AVN (association des vins naturels). Where do you stand on the natural wine debate?

I am not a fan of categorizations: I make wine that I want to make, and that's that. As far as I'm concerned, that means making wine from clean grapes and nothing else. Once that's done, I filter because the wines need it. I add a little sulfur at bottling (and let's not forget that I'm highly allergic!) because the wines need it. If they don't need it, which does occasionally happen, then I don't add any sulfur. It's as simple as that. I drink wine everyday, and a lot of it is my own, so it's in my best interest that they suit my tastes!

In the end, the wine speaks for itself. But if you're going to ask me what kind of wine I make, it goes back to what I said earlier about working organically: we do what we say and say what we do. I think that the vigneron's personality and work will reflect immensely in his wines, and you can't hide this from an experienced taster. There is no way to cheat: if you say you did something but it's not true, someone is going to know you're lying and call you out on it.

I want people to drink the wines and appreciate them based on their personal preferences. Getting caught up in semantics like "I'm natural" or "he's not natural enough" or "he's too extreme" is a waste of everyone's time.

On a lighter note, do you have any favorite wines to drink?

I love Pinot Noir and Grenache for red.

For white, my favorite varietals are Romorantin and Savagnin. They are almost polar opposites in style, but they share the quality of unmistakable aromatics you won't taste anywhere else. No one is ever going to confuse Romorantin with Sauvignon Blanc!

All over the world there are ten varietals that everyone always talk about, but there used to be thousands in France. Unfortunately there are only a few hundred at this point, and varietals like Romorantin and Savagnin do an incredible job of linking you to a specific place, something that isn't always the case with the "big ten".