

Laurent Barth

Interview

This interview with Laurent Barth took place at L'Herbe Rouge in February, 2012.

Tell us about the estate.

I started in 2004, with vines recuperated from my father. I took over in 1999; my father had only sold to the cave cooperative, so I took an obligatory five year contract with them before becoming independent. I'm now working with 4 hectares of vines, which have been worked organically since 2004.

We're located in the village of Bennwihr, 10 km north of Colmar. The vines are spread through 28 parcels. The oldest are 65, the youngest are only 2. On average they're 30 years old. I have a lot of different soils: the lightest are alluvial sands, then we have silt with granite sub-soils, some are clay and limestone and finally one parcel is pure granite.

You bounced around all over the world for a while. Can you tell us about that?

After studying oenology and viticulture for 4 years in Burgundy, I wanted to see what was going on in the rest of the world. I started my journey in Libya. Then I worked in South Africa, where I met a Californian winemaker from Russian River (Porter Creek) who invited me to come help him out for a few months. My last stop was in India.

In India?

Yes! It was an estate that was just starting (one of the first actually), something that has really been developing rapidly over there. After India, I worked in Australia. That was over a period of two years. I settled back in France, because my goal was always to express my own terroir. It's always interesting working for someone else, but

With all that travel, were you ever interested in starting up in another region or country?

It's always tempting, especially when it meets your specifications. And the advantage of working for someone else is you don't have to deal with all the administrative and commercial stuff! It's not always the funnest thing in the world you know. But I have a link to my family's land, and I'm proud it finally has the Barth name on it. The idea was always to make wine from my village.

How did you come to discover organic agriculture and natives yeast/minimal intervention winemaking?

A work philosophy always grows in time. It was my goal to work the vines organically, but over the last few vintages I've decided to incorporate biodynamics. This element of evolution and adaptation is the key to being a vigneron, and it's also what makes it such a charming career.

As far as indigenous yeasts, it was obvious. I'd seen it function all over the world and knew it wasn't a risk as long as the juice was pure. If the grapes are clean, if they are well selected at harvest, you

get much more substance. Fermentations are longer and harder to execute, but that's the price to pay for complexity.

What do you think about "natural wine"?

My approach to vinification is as natural and as humanely as possible. But I do use sulfur because I feel that when you work with reasonable doses, you don't harm or alter the product. I feel that working without any sulfur creates a lack of control I can't permit myself.

But I understand this recent rejection of sulfur. Just like everywhere else, Alsace definitely went through a phase of excess, where we wanted to overprotect our wine at all costs. People became obsessed with making "clean" wines, "flawless" wines: they were never oxidized and always the right color, but yes there tons of sulfur in them. To me, this sulfur free, "natural" style is an ideal you fully grasp when you work organically and biodynamically in the cellar: to make a wine as naturally as possible. I respect the final product, and don't believe there is just one way to achieve serious results.

What do you like to drink?

My tastes are always evolving, but right now I am taking great pleasure in wines made with Pinot Noir, most notably from Burgundy. The other thing I'm really into these days are wines from Northern Italy.