

# Jean Thévenet/Domaine de Bongran

## Interview

*This interview with Jean Thévenet took place in his cellar in August, 2012.*

**Tell us about your family history.**

The original name of my family is Gillet, and we have been living in this region since the 15th century. Historically, we have always been vigneron and stonemasons, but I only continued one of those traditions! In fact, our family's history as stonemasons ends in the 19th century.

My father started working in the vines very young, right after the World War 1. Very quickly, he realized that certain terroirs produced better wines than others, and he dedicated his life to finding the best our area had to offer. Luckily, they were easy to acquire since the majority of them had been abandoned.

**Why were they abandoned?**

There are a few key reasons for this: firstly, the land was very hard to cultivate and the vines were low yielding. But it was also a time where wine wasn't selling, as well as the beginning of the cave cooperative model. This marked a shift in viticultural priorities: people stopped producing grapes of quality to favor higher volumes for négociants and caves coops. Good or bad, you were paid by the hectoliter, so who could blame them? The same thing is still happening today in many regions of France.

**You and your son Gauthier produce wine under three different estate names: *Bongran*, *Domaine de Roally* and *Emilian Gillet*. Could you explain each one's origins and differences?**

Everything started with *Bongran*. These vines have been in the family for a very long time, and there are two possible explanations for the name. My father always believed it to be an abbreviation of 'bon grain' (*good grain*), a local expression for when a wine is good. But I recently did some genealogical studies, and discovered that a long time ago, a member of my family had sold his vines to a priest called... Bongran! When he died, the vines came back to the family.

*Emilian Gillet* is an estate I founded in 1988 with vines that have always been rented. Legislation is extremely complicated in France, and it was actually easier to create an entirely new, separate estate than to expand *Bongran*. And because I didn't want blend *Gillet's* terroirs with *Bongran's*, I decided this was the best solution. The name Gillet is that of my ancestors.

**And *Roally*?**

*Domaine de Roally* came later. Henri Goyard and I were school-mates. He's a few years older than me and believe it or not, Henri taught me how to tie my shoe laces! It was a good lesson! Anyhow, we were out of touch until 1975, but reconnected when we realized we were both vigneron. He'd help me bottle my wines, I'd lend him equipment, etc... It was always friendly, but we kept it professional; I wouldn't go on vacation with him or anything! Not that we ever go on vacation anyway! But there was a lot of communication, and it was rare if a week went by without us seeing

each other. When he decided to retire, my son Gauthier purchased the vineyards and continued producing under the name *Domaine de Roally* from Henri's vines.

**Gauthier was mentioning in an earlier conversation that Gillet's terroirs are quite similar to Roally's. Why not combine the two into one estate?**

In large part because of you guys! *Roally* already had a great reputation and identity, so we decided to keep the name. However, we sell none of it domestically: everything is shipped to the US and Japan.

**When and how did you get involved with the family estate?**

When I was 14, I had to make a choice. I didn't feel like pursuing academics, though in retrospect this can largely be attributed to my dyslexia, a discovery I made much later in life. It makes it near impossible for me to learn a language, and it also means I'm a terrible singer. When I sing to my grandchildren, they are quick to tell me I'm doing it all wrong!

But I knew I had a job I liked waiting for me at home. At first, this horrified my father, who tried to discourage me! It was a hard way to make a living back then, and we all know how labor and time intensive this line of work is.

**So you never studied viticulture or oenology in school?**

My father taught me everything I know. He showed me how to spot and appreciate good terroir, and also taught me his vinification techniques. Nowadays, you can find these in any oenology book, but back then there weren't any! The methods are the same to this day: we harvest ripe grapes, do a slow press, perform a *débourbage* and let the wine ferment on its own with indigenous yeasts.

I learned everything about being a vigneron in the vines and in the cellar. Granted, I spent time doing internships, for example one in Beaune where I learned how to analyze a wine and actually understand the results. But you have to remember that this was a time when most vignerons had no idea what a malolactic fermentation was!

**Were you using chemicals in the vineyard when you first started?**

Yes. But I quickly realized that they were undesirable. The problem with chemicals is that they destabilize a natural environment, which leads to unpredictable outcomes. I was always skeptical of herbicides, but tried them on a small surface once or twice and confirmed my doubts.

I persist in my beliefs that one must lean towards the most natural agricultural work possible. But I am not naive, and this year is a good example: a person who used no treatments whatsoever in 2012 would not have a single grape to harvest. However, one can and must treat intelligently, conservatively, use plant treatments... It can be done, but requires a lot of work.

**You speak of this casually, but it's important to point out that 30 years ago, you and Henri Goyard were the only ones in your region working this way. What was it like back then?**

Here's the thing. If you're doing something one way, you can't get caught up in what others are doing or saying. You have to know what you want, and you have to stay focused. I believe I get better wine by working this way, so I persevere.

## ***Bongran* is a very unique style of wine, something people might not expect from Southern Burgundy, or anywhere for that matter. Thoughts?**

I wish I could say I invented a new style of wine, but I believe that *Bongran*'s characteristics come solely from its terroir. Man and climate can intervene, but geology is king! Generation after generation of winemakers come and go, but no one forgets the terroir. My father was wise enough to find this particular terroir, but also to adapt the cellar for the grapes it produced.

When he first started, the norm was to wash your press just before harvest and right after harvest. That meant that most wood presses smelled like vinegar. One day, my dad said to himself: "*Why don't I clean this thing after every single press?*". This was back in 1915: cleaning your press meant getting water from the well with a bucket and manually brushing it down. It was a lot of work, but he soon realized that because his press was so clean, there were less contamination problems, meaning he could do a much gentler, delayed *débourbage*.

Another important point to make is that back then, no one knew what a malolactic fermentation was. They would obviously occur, but no one took it into account when making their wine. People also made a point of harvesting ripe grapes and fermenting them in smaller vessels (which accelerated the process). Now we have the analysis to guide us in our actions, but the point I'm trying to make is that it was far more common back then for wines to become oxidized in their youth.

The only thing I improved was bottling methods. I learned when to avoid oxidation. You have to bottle wine before it gets too old. You need to get it in bottle while it's still full of life, then let it age in bottle rather than barrel. This is why *Bongran* is always released years after it was harvested.

### **What about the wine's residual sugar?**

Historically, every good vintage has RS. I remember a tasting I organized for the INAO 15 years ago (**note:** Jean is specifically referring to a tasting defending natural sugars in his wines, which you can read more about on the [Roally profile](#)). Henri Goyard and a neighbor participated, but I was the only one who had any bottles with significant age on them. We tasted younger vintages, as well as 83's, 89's... I then served a wine blind; a 1937 *Bongran*. I asked the INAO panel to guess the vintage, and they guessed it was from the late 40's/early 50's. Then I blinded them on a 1929, and one of them was convinced it was from 59, an exceptionally rich vintage. That 1929 was nearly identical to the 1989: 15% alcohol, 10 grams of RS, 3.27 PH.

The point is that wines from this terroir always have residual sugar. But if it's balanced, you don't feel it. Wines that are not chaptalised, that are naturally rich in sugar and where the fermentation was not halted by technology, these are wines that can age incredibly!

### **I want to ask you how you feel about "*natural wine*". Overnoy, Lapierre and Thévenet are the three big names I always hear come up...**

If you want to talk about the first time the term "*natural wine*" was used, you need to go back to 1910. This was a period when vigneronns were having trouble selling their wines because they had to compete with fabricated ones. One was wine made with ripe grapes from a vineyard, the other was made just like beer (and was full of undesirable chemical products). There was this one guy who had a cafe and loved good wine, and he started defending them by selling them as "*natural wines*". He got into a lot of trouble for this, and eventually went bankrupt.

Fast forward a few decades, and the world of wine had changed drastically. Jules Chauvet, whom I

had the pleasure of knowing, began leading a fight against SO<sub>2</sub>. He explained it to me as such: one day, he'd purchased a Moulin à Vent and noticed a tiny bit of hydrogen sulfide. He then realized that when you are adding SO<sub>2</sub> to a red wine, you should never do it once the alcoholic fermentation has started, because the yeasts will produce more hydrogen sulfide and it's going to smell like rotten eggs.

He held on to some of those bottles, only to notice the phenomenon amplify itself in time. This is what inspired Chauvet to make wines with little to no SO<sub>2</sub>. This is how he came up with carbonic maceration. And this was great, since Beaujolais are wines you drink young. But you need to remember that sulfur in wine sort of plays the role of a police officer in the bottle. If you get rid of an entire police force in a big city, who takes over? History has proven time and time again that chaos ensues.

It isn't always the case, but without sulfur the bad yeasts and bacteria will take over the wine. Completely eliminating it -particularly with whites- is a very delicate process. An example that comes to mind is a vigneron I know who chose eliminating sulfur from his barrels (before adding the wine to age). As a result, lees from the previous vintage got stuck in the wood. The result on the next vintage was brett and "*the mouse*".

Another analogy: if you have a small cut on your hand, putting a little disinfectant on it will help. If you dip your whole hand into it and leave it there, you won't have any skin left! SO<sub>2</sub> is the same thing: if you NEED to use as much SO<sub>2</sub> as there is wine, something is very wrong with your wine. Going back to the police metaphor, if a city needed 1 police officer per citizen, there would be a huge problem with society.

Just to be clear: I'm just as much against a police state as using too much sulfur in wine! But you need a minimum of sulfur. Jules Chauvet said it himself! I was speaking to his niece recently (she owns a restaurant in Paris), and she is furious that people tag her uncle's name on beverages that shouldn't even be called wine! Chauvet said you had to limit doses as much as possible, not eliminate it completely.

### **What do you like to drink?**

I like wine that does not taste like mine! I love Alsatian Pinot Gris. And the Loire, particularly Sancerre. I love good Muscadet. I like young Condrieu.