

Dard & Ribo

Interview

This interview with René-Jean Dard took place in his cellar in August, 2015.

Tell us about your estate.

Dard & Ribo is starting to get old! We officially started the estate together in 1983, but François (Ribo) and I have been working together since 1980. I started making wine in 1975, after inheriting my father's vines following his death.

We started out with very little land. My father's vines represented about an hectare of Saint-Joseph. But we got lucky and almost immediately found 3000 meters of Hermitage and 5000 meters of Crozes-Hermitage, so that was the beginning.

□Your father was a vigneron?

□He was not. He had vines, but it was essentially for personal consumption. Though he sold a bit to his friends.

So how did you get interested in viticulture?

My dad did this as a side project. He died when I was 15, and I just decided to keep doing it. I was still going to school, playing sports and doing things a normal 15 year old does, but I always took care of that bit of land and made wine from it. It was about an hectare.

Did you know François back then?

□No, we met later in life. At the time I never thought this would become my job. It was after finishing my baccalaureate that a professor I'd become friends proposed I become a vigneron. So I left to Dijon to study oenology, but I found it quite boring.

So I went to Beaune instead to study a more practical program, and that's where I met François. We instantly hit it off and became friends. He also started helping me in my vines, and from there we decided to partner up.

Is he a local?

Yes.

You were saying you got lucky finding the land you started with. Could this be possible today?

It's difficult now, mostly because the prices for land have really risen. I can't imagine a young vigneron starting from scratch like we did in today's climate.

So how big is the estate now?

We're at about 8.5 hectares of vines. About 4 hectares of Crozes-Hermitage, 2 or 3 hectares of Saint-Joseph and some Hermitage. I'm not really sure of the exact amount of land, that's more François's thing. Oh, and each AOC produces reds and whites.

You mentioned earlier that you grow a lot of white grapes for the region. Is this a coincidence?

No. We planted a lot of whites because we like white wine. But it really helped that from a very early point, our whites were very popular and well received. It's what our clients were looking for, and since the region is only about 10% white, we decided to create a niche for ourselves with white wine. Our estate is about 35% white wines, which is a lot for the region.

How did your work philosophy over the years develop in the vines and the cellar?

When we started, we weren't working organically in the vines. But I've been making sulfur-free wines since I was 15. I didn't even know you could add sulfur to wine until going to oenology school! "You have to", they said! My dad never sulfured the wines and I basically just followed in his footsteps.

My first year with François, we made wine the way we were taught to in school and knew that this was not our style. It did not interest us. So the reflection in our work actually began through vinification: what we had been taught in school vs. what my father always did. From there, we started working in what we considered to be the old-school, local way of making wine, and this eventually led us to reconsider our vineyard practices. But it wasn't a complete 180, and took some time.

Can you elaborate?

We liked the idea of working naturally in the vines, but the reality of converting everything was extremely daunting at first. We have a lot of very steep coteaux, and the learning curve is much higher than working organically on flatland.

We are obviously of the philosophy that the less you pollute, the better the situation. But our goal has always been to make the best wine possible. And the only way to do that is to be clean in the vineyards. It's as simple as that.

So who were your first clients?

We always made wine that we liked to drink. It might sound selfish, but we never thought about what our customers would think about the wines. It was about what we liked, and we were lucky in finding great clients that shared our taste.

Again, this was luck and good timing. We happened to start our estate right when the first natural wine bars were popping up in Paris. In fact, the term natural wine didn't exist back then, and our style of wine was simply called "*sans soufre*" (sulfur free).

We were on the scene in Paris as early as 1985, but back then there were only a handful of places. We were a tiny estate, so even 4 good customers was enough. But then we were fortunate enough to grow side by side with Paris' natural wine scene; once there were 10 places we happened to get an extra hectare, and when there were 20 we grew some more...

For a very long time, we sold 70 to 90% of our production to Paris in these types of establishments. This very small hub eventually began to expand, and with that business we were able to up our production. It was completely natural in its progression. So now we import wine to 17 countries. Even though the natural wine movement has spread worldwide, it's still a niche and we still remain a small estate.

You talk about the global popularity of these types wines today, but you must have been rather isolated in your early years.

Completely isolated. In fact we're still kind of isolated in the region! François and I have faced countless instances of backlash from neighboring vigneronns, from customs, the repressions des fraudes (**ed note:** an office in France that focuses on fraud) and by syndicates like InterRhône. Honestly, this still continues to this day.

Yet you still stick to the appellation system?

I'll admit that we are still attached to our appellations. It's a unique place we work in and it would be sad to not let people know where the wine is from. Our job is to bring the terroir into the bottle, and that terroir has a name. So I want it on the bottle.

I'm not critiquing producers that intentionally declassify their wines. In fact there are moments where we should have done the same. But it can get complicated: if everyone is making Vin de France, how do you know where anything is from?

I guess that's partly the responsibility of importers, restaurants and retailers now. It's a different context.

Today, natural wine is recognized in the entire world. You can sell just by the fact that you make natural wine and that your name is so and so. But 20, 30 years ago, if you brought in a Vin de Table to a restaurant at the price of a Saint-Joseph, the owner still had to sell a Vin de Table at the price of a Saint-Joseph. Customers back then could not accept paying so much for table wine.

Did any wines along the way shape your feelings about how it should be made?

When François and I were young, we were obsessed with tasting wine. We would get bottles from the four corners of France, do blind tastings and just discuss our impressions. As far as wines without sulfur, there weren't many people making them.

What about meeting like-minded vigneronns?

We'd basically only see them in Paris. Even in the early days, there were small groups who promoted sulfur-free winemaking but we never participated in any. We've always kept our distance. Obviously, today we are more known so we get out a little more to shake hands.

But you guys don't do any tasting events right?

We don't. If we are known today, it's only because of our wines. Very few people actually know what René-Jean Dard and François Ribo look like. Getting to the cellar is pretty complicated, and we almost never accept appointments (**ed note:** I guess we're lucky!) We don't feel our job is to do sales.

□ We sell 3% of our wines to consumers, so there is no incentive to have them visit us. But I'm not

saying we do commerce! We just do it differently, by visiting our customers, having dinner or a glass at their places. Sometimes (very rarely!) we'll visit another country. We've never been to the US though.

Whenever you want to come to the States, we'll be happy.

One day!

I'll give you a burger tour.

I dream of eating a good, real burger. I've never truly understood them, because they are terrible in France.

Getting back on track: did meeting any of these like-minded vigneronns affirm or confirm anything? Did it influence your work?

It confirmed that this was in fact a different way of making wine that worked. None of these guys were from our region though, so it was hard to compare techniques.

There were producers from Beaujolais, Alsace, the Loire, the lower ends of the Côtes du Rhône, Bandol... But most were from the Beaujolais, and since we never used carbonic maceration, it was difficult having vinification discussions. It was more about just general ideas, and drinking good bottles together.

You've been using synthetic corks for a while. What prompted that decision?

Not to name them, we started using Nomacorcs in 2002. Without getting too much into it, traditional corks are a huge rip-off. They look like cork, they have the color of cork, they feel like cork but the truth is that the actual cork is only in the middle. The edge of the cork is painted and treated chemically.

Yes, there are real, 100% corks but they cost a fortune. We decided fuck it, let's pass to plastic. We also chose to have black ones to make a statement: we are definitely using plastic and not trying to trick you that's it's cork. We did some experiments in 2002, and in 2003 all of our wines were bottled with black, plastic corks. We find it efficient.

I drank a 2006 *Les Champs* the other day and it was delicious. People often say wines can't evolve with synthetic corks...

They are not completely wrong. But the principal passage of oxygen into a bottle, which in turn brings evolution to the wine, doesn't go through the cork: it goes through the space between the cork and the glass. The current models of plastic corks have been thoroughly designed with this in mind. The corks we use have the exact same exchange rate as a traditional one.

We taste our wines, see them evolve and still taste great. And we don't have to worry about corked wine or leaky, stained corks.

I've heard rumors that you intentionally print our importation backlabel upside down because that way the only way to read it is once you've finished the bottle. Is this true?

Actually it's because we bought the roller in the wrong side. We've have to manually roll everything

to get it the right way, so we just end up having them upside down. We're a little lazy is all!

In the interminable debate about natural wine, where do you stand? I ask because you are one of the most seminal, often cited producers from the early days of this movement.

Overall I am very happy, because it simply means there are more drinkable wines. The problem, of course, is that there is a lot of hideous stuff out there as well. A lot of people are hiding behind the word "natural" to escape criticism from their lack of serious work in the cellar. The wines are jam packed with volatility, they are muddled and murky; that's not wine. Just because you didn't do anything to the wine doesn't mean it's good.

Making "natural" wine should not be a goal unto itself. It should be a tool to make qualitatively superior wine. At Dard & Ribo, our goal is not to put a label on our wine so it sells easily. We want to make the best wine possible, and have come to the conclusion that this is the way to do it. We want to make wine that is easy to drink and doesn't give you a headache.

So when a wine is prickly and sour, don't tell me: "Oh that's because I'm natural." But at the same time, it's hard to criticize these extremists, because conventional vigneronns have been acting like such jack-asses for so long that I almost want to root for these guys.

You guys didn't have any issues in your early days?

OUU LAH LAH! We had every problem imaginable! We've made wine with bubbles. We've make wine that was so reductive it was undrinkable. The fact is that when you make wine like this, it's alive: if the sugars don't finish, or who knows what you can be in serious trouble.

But this forced us to reflect on our errors and to me much more careful in the cellar. And it's still a constant challenge for us! The truth is that sulfur is the vigneron's sleeping aid: you put that in the bottle and everything stays put! Us on the other hand, it's constant sleepless nights!

But it's the risk you take.

What do you like to drink?

I love beer and sake. I still love wine of course!