

Valérie Forgues

Interview

This interview with Valérie Forgues was done over a Skype conversation in April, 2017.

How did you end up heading Domaine de la Méchinière?

I'm not from the area and have absolutely no agricultural or viticultural background. I do have some family ties to the Cher, but it's a total coincidence I found myself living here. Like a good little Frenchie, I went to school to follow a career path.

To answer your question about the estate, love is what brought me here. It was a decision I made with my ex-husband about 20 years ago. I knew nothing about wine.

So you founded it 20 years ago?

It existed already. We took it over and learned everything from the ground up. From the get-go we were interested in taking an ecological approach to the vines, which for us at the time meant working sustainably under the Terravitis label.

Fast forward to 2008, and I find myself alone at the estate with my two kids. It was a very dark time for me, but I had the good fortune of having an incredible neighbor: Didier Barrouillet! He would swing by every so often and offer to help me out. By 2009, he offered to guide me in restructuring the estate from the ground up.

I found comfort in this new path of organic viticulture, and it was the beginning of me finding real, genuine pleasure and satisfaction in being a vigneronne.

You never thought about being a vigneronne before this?

I honestly didn't even think about it. I was focused on raising my sons. At the time, family was my top priority. As you may know, kids take up a lot of time!

Being a vigneronne never occurred to me. I never in a million years would have imagined getting inside a vat to scrub it clean! This morning I racked my Côt; another thing I never thought I'd ever do! It's not always easy, but it's gratifying. My back may hurt at night, but the satisfaction I get from making MY wine is incredible.

So, to backtrack a bit, what inspired you and your ex-husband to start the estate?

My studies at university had focused on agriculture. I'd always been attracted to nature. When I returned to France to live with the man I loved, he'd proposed a winery. We picked Touraine for simple economic reasons: it's relatively close to Paris and relatively cheap to start an estate here.

And because of my engineering degree in agriculture, we decided that the entire estate, from the ownership, financial and administrative side was to be under my name. Looking back on this now and where I find myself, this ended up being a good thing.

Why then did you decide to continue the estate all by yourself in 2008? It must have felt like an enormous undertaking, especially considering how hands-off you had been prior to the separation.

It's very simple: my children. As a mother, I could not let them lose the house they had grown up in. It was the aura of their entire childhood. Even though it seemed impossible economically, physically and mentally, I nonetheless persevered and stuck my neck out to keep things afloat.

That's how I felt at the time. I think it was also subconsciously a way to rediscover myself, to find a new strength in myself when I thought there was none left.

So how did you go about taking the estate over?

My brother-in-law was a retired vigneron, and he was instrumental in keeping things together in the very beginning. He quite frankly ran the entire estate the first few months, and for that I will always be thankful to him.

He was also very helpful in actively engaging me, in encouraging me to come see the work in the vines, what different choices meant, etc... He also made me understand that if I really wanted to do this, just how much responsibility it really meant. From managing employees to working the tractor, he showed me the way.

It was hard though, because of course having him around meant a constant reminder of my ex-husband. It also bothered me because at that point Didier would swing by occasionally and point out that his work was extremely conventional. Didier's philosophy and vision of agriculture resonated with me in a way my brother-in-law's did not.

One day I pulled him aside and told him that his chemical approach to the vineyards was something I wanted to move away from. He didn't disagree, but simply retorted that he did not want to jeopardize an already fragile estate. To him, this justified using selected yeasts for the wines, that we NEEDED all the technology and science available to help us through hard times.

But then I'd speak to Didier about the same subject, and you can imagine that it was a completely different story! I knew it was a riskier approach, but I became increasingly drawn to it. Conversation by conversation, it got to the point where he told me he would help me through the entire process of transforming the estate.

How did you meet Didier?

It's the country and I live five minutes away from Clos Roche Blanche!

Around 2008, that very difficult period of my life, I also spent a lot of time with Catherine (Roussel). She was incredibly welcoming and a true friend in my time of need. I will never forget her help! I wasn't socializing much, and I think he saw that I needed help. He's the one that proposed being more active in reshaping the estate.

What do you think Didier saw in you?

What he saw in me I have no idea. I often ask myself the same question! He probably saw an interesting terroir, that I had an interesting cellar, interesting vines... He's very aware of his surroundings, and maybe he just wanted his neighbor to work the same way that he did.

But I think what really drew him in was that I kept asking questions. Every answer led to more questions, to new discoveries. The more I discovered from him, the more I wanted to learn! He's always had the reputation of being extremely knowledgeable, and even back when I was with my ex-husband, we would occasionally solicit him for advice. So there was already an exchange between us and a respect for Didier.

So how did the two of you go about creating the new direction for the estate?

I can't even remember how the process started. But I know that we constantly talked about what was possible in the vines and the cellar, and that his responses resonated with me. I'd ask him what he would have done in my place. This led to him visiting the vines and cellar with me and getting increasingly specific with his advice. Some of it I follow, some I don't; but if I'm asking someone for advice it's either to follow it or have a conversation about it!

I think that it was around 2011 that the collaboration was fully under way. He was helping me in the vines, constantly tasting from vat, giving his advice... It all happened very naturally.

As far as converting to organic viticulture, which I began in 2013, these are the moments of our collaboration that I remember most vividly. It started with an argument: he told me that at the point I'd progressed, that I should take the next step and convert the vineyards. I told him to hold his horses: this meant making an already demanding job even harder! I had to ensure I was bringing fruit to the cellar!

I could never have taken such a big risk without his help, so he agreed he'd be there every step of the way to help me convert. And you know how it is: for someone to commit voluntarily (and benevolently!) to such a huge undertaking, he's got to believe in the final result!

What were the biggest challenges in the conversion?

I think the biggest challenge when working organically, for me at least, is mastering how to properly work the soils. This was something we never worried about with my ex-husband. Didier taught me that if you aren't properly managing your soils, you are going to have a much harder time managing your vines and your yields.

What about in the cellar?

This whole experience has taught me that taking the safe approach is bullshit. Using selected yeasts, particularly for the "aromatic profile" of Sauvignon, started to feel absurd in the early stages of the organic conversion. It was immediate.

This conversion taught me two crucial facts for making wines without entrants: hygiene and temperature control. That's why today I clean all the vats myself and am checking on temperature multiple times a day during fermentation.

☐ That sounds like something Didier would say.

You know, the first harvest I did with him, he was there every night tasting and watching over the juices. Every night! And he was still running Clos Roche Blanche at the time! The following year, he came two or three times a week. And the vintage after that, he'd come only if I'd call him.

2016 was marked by the final step in this whole conversion: your first vintage

hand-harvesting. How did it go?

It went great! It had been at least two years that Didier had kept telling me I needed to stop machine harvesting if I wanted to reach the best quality possible for the wine. Much like the original argument about working organically, I pushed back: I told him I had to be realistic, that it was too much work, too much risk.

And when we met about a year and half ago to discuss potentially working together, you told me that you would consider bringing the wines in, but the grapes had to be hand harvested if we were to continue the conversation. It was actually then and there that I realized how important this was to people. I'd also heard this argument from Thierry Puzelat. And when people you want to surround yourself with are trying to push you in the right direction, after a while you come to accept that there must be a reason for it!

It's hilarious because the second Didier and I got back into the car after our meeting, I burst out in laughter and told him: "You're going to be happy! You've been on my case about hand-harvesting for two years; we have a 20 minute conversation with Jules, and I'm convinced!" I had no idea how I was going to do it, but I knew then it was going to happen. The mental block was gone.

In a way, I guess it helped that we had very little to harvest in 2016! It was a piece of cake! The weather was gorgeous, the pickers were happy and we were done by 2pm everyday! I didn't even have to worry about cooling down grapes! I'm usually up till 2am with that. In 2016, we were done and ready to go at 8pm! The cellar was cleaned, the grapes were in the tanks and we were ready for apero.

So yes, it went well.

We've talked so much about the metamorphosis of the estate that we haven't touched on the amount of hectares, grapes grown, etc...

I cultivate 16 hectares on clay and limestone soils, and grow seven different grapes. All the grapes are traditional to the region, and many are almost extinct. I have some very, very old vines over 100 years old: in white I grow the original grape of the Touraine, Arbois, co-planted with Chenin Blanc, also fairly rare in our area. With this I make my Pineaux Melées cuvée. I also have an hectare of the rare and indigenous Pineau D'Aunis, also very old vines. I of course grow Sauvignon, along with Gamay, Côt and Cabernet Franc.

I must point out that I do sell a sizable portion of my grapes, about four hectares worth, to Thierry Puzelat and Pascal Potaire. This is very helpful for me, because not only is it a source of income but it also takes a huge load off my shoulders!

How did you meet Puzelat?

□I had been invited to a tasting three years ago, and he came to taste at my stand. I did not know who he was, but immediately knew he was a vigneron. We had a friendly conversation, exchanged contacts and two months later, he reached out to me. At the time, he was drawn to the fact that I had some Pineau d'Aunis. We got to talking and he then asked about Sauvignon and Gamay, and he came to pick which parcels he'd like to work with.

Meeting Thierry was a godsend. He was the first person to reach out to me about potentially buying grapes. Not only does it save me a lot of work, but that someone was actually interested in my

terroirs meant a lot! And they are established, respected producers, so that was inspiring.

Do you think you'll continue working with Thierry?

I'm a very loyal person. When Thierry and I originally discussed selling him grapes, he asked me if I'd consider being a stable source for him in the future. I of course had no problem with that since he was relieving me of such a heavy burden!

Thierry and Jean-Marie have been very good to me, so yes I will continue working with them. It's a moral and commercial engagement.

What's the work like in the cellar?

For the whites, the major shift this year came along with our first manual harvest. Before we had a pump that would suck out the grapes from the machine's bin into the press. Didier aptly pointed out that we could not do this with hand harvested grapes. So we moved the press and created a receptor for the grapes so they don't get damaged before press. Then we direct-press and instantly cool down the juice for racking. The juice then heats back up naturally and a spontaneous fermentation occurs. Malo usually occurs.

For the reds, we de-stem and throw the grapes directly into vat, either fiberglass or stainless.

We've talked in person about how your labels are quite symbolic to you. Can you elaborate?

The label is a painting that my mother made when she was a young woman. She was very artistic in her youth, and quite prolific! She grew up in this region, so the painting represents coming back to my roots. And the woman she drew is clearly a Tourangelle (a woman from Touraine); you can tell by her typical garb.

One day she was cleaning up her house, and told me she needed to get rid of a bunch of paintings. So she brought a bunch over to my place, because she knew I had room for them. I saw the Tourangelle and something just resonated with me. My family, my region, the depiction of a woman: these are what I want to bring to the estate with my taking it over on my own.

Before the woman we had a very traditional label with a drawing of my house. My house is nice and all, but I could do without it on the labels! And I can't fail to mention that having a woman on the label, a woman that lets me trace back my roots here, a woman painted by my mother, all this matters to me.