

Louis-Antoine Luyt

Interview

This interview with Louis-Antoine Luyt took place at *L'Herbe Rouge* in Valaire, France in January, 2012.

How did you end up in Chile?

I came to Chile in 1998 for three months. I was 22 at the time, and sick of living in France. I wanted to sharpen my Spanish, so I decided to visit. I've been here for 14 years.

Did you discover wine there?

No. My family is from Burgundy and Toulouse, and has always had an affinity for food and wine. Anyway, my first gig in Chile was as a dish washer at a restaurant, and from there I eventually managed to run the wine program. That's where I started to get professionally interested in wine. This was in 1999, and through work I met Hector Vergara, the only Master of Wine in South America at the time. He was opening a sommelier school in Santiago, which was to be the first in South America. I was one of his first students, and we got to taste a lot of local wines.

At first, I was surprised how homogenous Chilean wine tasted to me; this sparked an interest in local wine and the people who made it. What I came to realize is that there are incredible vineyard sites here, and even though a large part of it is completely industrialized, there were still some independently run parcels. Everyone told me they were worthless, but I didn't believe it.

In 2001, I came back to France to work a harvest. I ended up working for Phillipe Pacalet, and discovered there was a viticulture/oenology school in Beaune. I begrudgingly went back to Chile after that harvest but came back to France in 2002, determined to go to school. The idea was to apply what I would learn back in Chile. But before that, I wanted some work experience to see if this was really what I wanted to do. I eventually got hired by Louis Jadot in Morgon; I learned a lot there, and had a great experience. I then worked the 2002 harvest in Burgundy, followed by my schooling in Beaune. I met Matthieu Lapierre there, and this was my introduction to natural wine. I got to visit the estate many times, and to spend some special moments with Marcel.

After your schooling in France, was there ever a moment of hesitation about going back to South America?

Not really. The plan was always to learn in France, then go back to Chile. At the same time, it would still be fun to have a little estate in France somewhere down the road. Chile is a marvelous country where there is zero pressure from illness: there is no esca, no mildew, next to no odium and it's really easy to practice organic agriculture here. Basically, it's beautiful!

But I see the difficulty of working this way in France, and really feel that these vigneronns are courageous for doing what they do. Not only are the climates extremely challenging, but costs are high and competition is huge. These are things I never have to worry about, because growing quality grapes is a lot easier here. Making good wine is another story though...

Did you feel confident you could reproduce efforts like Marcel Lapierre's in Chile?

Yes. Marcel told me I was crazy for going back, that France needed more young guys like myself starting up. I told him that in Chile, there were vines that predated phylloxera, some of them over three hundred years old! After I said that, he replied: "*Well, that worth checking out.*" Marcel actually came to visit, and after seeing the vines, he confirmed I'd made the right choice.

The vines I work with were all planted well before I moved here and will be here well after I'm gone. I knew good grapes could be grown here. I had no idea if they could make good wine, but I refused to believe that all South American wine was shit.

Let's talk about the *Clos Ouvert* project: what was it prior to the 2010 earthquakes, and what is it now?

Before the earthquake of February 27th, 2010, I had two business partners in the *Clos Ouvert* project, which was based on a négociant model. The goal was to promote fair trade by buying grapes from local peasants who worked naturally. We would go get lost in the countryside, and whatever we found eventually led to the development of our first cuvées. The business was organized so that I was the person in Chile organizing everything year-round, with the two other guys coming to help out with harvest, blending choices, vinification and then handling the commercial side of things in France.

With the earthquake, we lost 500hl of our 700hl production. Right before, I had decided I wanted to make some wine on the side, since my partners did not want to increase the quantities of *Clos Ouvert*. My whole angle was to make single parcel Païs, where I would name the wine by the parcel/village rather than the varietal. 500hl were *Clos Ouvert* and 200 were Louis-Antoine Luyt wines, and we lost the equivalent of *Clos Ouvert*'s total production. For commercial reasons, my partners chose to back out, but I continue to make blends and a Carmenere under the *Clos Ouvert* name. I've also continued to make my zone-specific Païs, as well as some other fun wines under my name.

What's the work in the vines like?

My first big decision after the earthquake, strangely enough, was to start renting vines. I rent 8 hectares and purchase fruit from the equivalent of 12 hectares. Of the vines I rent, there were 2 hectares of Païs that were completely abandoned, and hadn't been touched in a decade. The owner was about to tear them out to replant Merlot, but told me that if I was interested, I could rent them. So I ended up with the rest of his vines, 4 hectares of Carmenere, and 2 hectares of Cabernet Sauvignon.

We work organically, and adhere to some biodynamic principles, most notably working in accordance to lunar cycles. For the négociant stuff, I am extremely present throughout the year. I really emphasize purity, and nothing is irrigated; all the vines I rent have irrigation systems installed, but we do not touch them, because it just isn't necessary. We use horses to work the soil for the majority of our vines, both for the rented vines and the purchased fruit.

Fortunately, we are blessed with a lot of sun, so for some vines we only do one sulfur treatment a year. I don't mind if odium rots 2% of our grapes, since it won't end up in the tanks. Everything is hand harvested.

And in the cellar?

I worked five harvests with Marcel Lapierre, where I learned the motto: "*We make a lazy man's wine, since we do nothing.*" The grapes are either whole cluster or destemmed. We do pigeage or don't. It's really an instinctual thing, and we just feel out what each vintage needs. The pigeage, for example, depends on the thickness of the skins and the maturity of the grapes. I tend to do carbonic macerations for the País wines, but I've also vinified them in a more Burgundian style.

As a Lapierre disciple of sorts, how do you feel about "*natural wine*"?

It's a little odd talking about all this stuff from a Chilean point of view, since every single peasant here makes natural wine. But then again, these peasants don't sell their wines much further than a few doors down the road from their farms. I'm the only guy doing this to export it, and I'm the first to claim the wines to be made "this way." All my oenologist friends out here think I'm absolutely crazy, and I think this is why I have less and less oenologist friends!

Being in Chile protects me from all the pissing contests and mini-chapels of natural wine. I'm not part of the A.V.N, but I know that everyone in France respects what I do. I'm expressing unique terroirs, and that's what's important.