

Emmanuel Houillon/Maison Pierre Overnoy

Interview

This interview with Emmanuel Houillon took place in Pierre Overnoy's house in August, 2012.

Tell us about the estate.

Today, we work 6 hectares of vines. We grow three different grapes: about 2 h of Ploussard, 2h of Chardonnay and 2h of Savagnin. We're also planting 30 ares of Trousseau next year, which will be a new experience for us.

As far as our history, the estate was founded by Pierre, and today I have taken over all major responsibilities. The vines have always been worked organically, and our goal is simply to make a pure, authentic wine. We want you to taste fermented grape juice and that's it. Sometimes this is problematic, because people don't understand the wines or what we are trying to make. But overall, people are very open to the idea.

Can you tell us about Pierre's beginnings?

Pierre took over his family's estate. His father and brother were both vignerons, and he expanded the viticultural size of the estate by shifting from polyculture to monoculture. At some point early in his career, Pierre decided to study how to make wine in Beaune, where he was taught modern oenology. After applying these techniques to make wine, Pierre found it odd that his wines were so dull compared to his father or brother's; after all these were the same grapes! He had gone to oenology school to make better wines than his family's, but it ended up being the opposite!

Around this same period -mid-to-late 70's-, he met Jacques Neauport for the first time. Jacques told him that it was entirely possible to make wine without modern techniques and even without sulfur. In 1984, Pierre started vinifying without sulfur, only adding a touch at bottling. Starting in 1986, not one of Pierre's wines have seen any added sulfur.

What is Pierre's current involvement?

Pierre is still completely integral in my family's day to day life. He's still here, he's still a vigneron, but now his new passion is baking bread! He's always there to taste the wines with me, to give advice or lend a helping hand.

What about your involvement?

The first time I came to Pupillin was with my uncle, who had been buying wine from Pierre for a very long time. He knew the Overnoy family very well; over our many visits, my parents eventually befriended Pierre. I was in high school at the time, and by 1989 I would spend all my off time helping out in the vines. I was 14 at the time.

In September 1990, I went to Beaune to study viticulture, and that was really the beginning of my career.

Did you hope to start your own estate or to work elsewhere after your studies?

When you're 15, you don't really think about stuff like that! All I knew was that it was something I truly enjoyed -that I still enjoy- and that the vines felt like a wake up call. I was a bit of a lost soul in school, but learning to make wines with Pierre -especially with how different it was than what they were teaching me in Beaune- made me realize that even if you think you've found everything, there's still so much more to unearth.

So seeing how Pierre worked, and how completely different it was from what you were being taught in school, that really affected you?

We are always told that the teacher knows everything. But if he teaches you the wrong thing, you might spend your entire life doing something wrong and thinking it's right. We were told that wines without added sulfur were impossible to make, that it would invariably turn to vinegar. So to make people accept that it IS possible to do -and even today some people still don't believe it- that was something that marked me. This was 1990: people treated Pierre like an extraterrestrial!

After your studies, did you come right back to Pupillin?

The program I took had me splitting my time between Pierre's vines and school: each month I would spend two weeks in Pupillin, then two weeks in class. In July and August, I was in the vines the whole time. So I've always been working the same land. It's where I learned everything. I studied for 7 years, and in 1997 I came back to Pupillin to work full time with Pierre. I was salaried until 2001, which is when I took over the estate.

What's the work in the vines like?

Everything is important, everything counts. I think the most important thing everyone needs to start focusing on is taking your selections *massales* very seriously. Go find the old vines wherever they may be, because otherwise you're going to lose them forever.

This is really important for the future generation of vignerons. Back in Pierre's day, people controlled the entire process of how their vines were planted. If they felt like they needed something that could withstand a colder climate, they would make selections from vines that were a little more precocious. Today, our climate is getting increasingly hotter, so it makes sense to find the vines that produce lesser maturities, that you can harvest later. The *pépiniériste* cannot do this job for you: he can only do the same, uniform plantings for everybody. People need to make personal judgement calls.

Has anything evolved in the cellar over the years?

We have a saying here: "*You can always do better for tomorrow.*" I don't believe you can ever reach a point where you can say: "*Everything is perfect, we'll keep it exactly like this.*" Everything is always changing: the climate, the yeasts that will ferment the wine each year... These are things that we know aren't static. So you have to follow the movement of where things are headed.

Obviously, we are trying to make wines that we like to drink. Wine from 200 years ago might not be what we'd want to drink today. So yes, there are always little changes happening here and there, but never any drastic overhauls.

What is your take on sulfur?

In my opinion, sulfur can in some instances be beneficial to viticulture and winemaking. Pierre always said it helps stabilize wines, and can carry them through time. The problem is that sulfur use has become standardized, and in many cases takes the life out of the wine.

The big argument is that it keeps the wine stable.

But this is a fool's tale! I would argue that alive wines often age better, because when a wine is unfiltered and unfinned, you've got all the elements you need for it to age. If you want to make a wine that will age for a long time, there are many ways to do it: you can leave it on its lees for a long time, bottle them years before release...

Sulfur free wine often gets a bad rap because many of them have very obvious flaws, specifically brett, oxidation and volatile acidity. Yet this never occurs with your wines. Why?

There are important guidelines to follow if you don't want your wine to suffer from these flaws. You can't just do whatever you want, however you want to do it. You can make sulfur free wine every year, but that means that some vintages you'll need to be patient. Being meticulous with the grapes you are harvesting is THE most important thing you can do. Especially with the reds, if you're not sorting through what you're picking, it's not even worth attempting.

Another important detail: not letting the grapes reach over-maturity. The best fruit is the one picked and eaten exactly at the right time. If it's under-ripe, over-ripe or you let it sit for a few days, it's going to lose some of its purity.

How do you feel about the term "*natural wine*"?

Our wines are what they are. As far as classifying them, I'd rather someone else do that: it's much more interesting for us, and gives us the opportunity to always put what we're doing into question.

Here's the thing: for a long time, these wines were misunderstood. There were so many "*connoisseurs*" that believed our wines weren't good because they were unfiltered, un-fined, un-everything... Today, people are more sincere when they drink. They taste a wine, and if they like it, they're happy. They are much more confident in their own palates. Better that than being told what you should and shouldn't like! So I think there is a future for these wines. I think that one day we won't talk about organic agriculture anymore, because everyone will be doing it.

You're convinced of this?

I'd like to see it happen! It's how we used to do things, right? Why couldn't it come back? In any case, I'm convinced that the next generation of great wines will come from this type of work.

Do you think this shift will result from new laws being passed, or simply a more conscious generation of farmers?

There is already an ever increasing amount of consciousness. We needed it. And now I'm meeting more and more people who are proud of what they do. They have a healthy outlook on life, and even if they're not working organically yet, tomorrow they will be. And the consumer is requesting it too: they are sick of always drinking the exact same wine every time, they want to taste the pleasure of something real.

What do like to drink?

Plenty of stuff! We have so many vigneron friends... I don't set any rules for myself, but I love wines from my friends. I won't name names, but from North to the South, I like it all!