

# Domaine de Souch

## Jurançon from Domaine de Souch, Yvonne Hegoburu.



Yvonne Hegoburu in her vines.

## Profile

In the early 70's, Yvonne Hegoburu and her husband René found a pile of rocks, the ruins of an old house, at the top of the hill in the village of Laroin, about 6 km towards the Pyrénées from their home in Pau, southwest France. They both fell in love with the spot. He was a former, dashing Jai Alai champion, currently editor of the local sports newspaper, *L'Equipe*. After years of rebuilding this manse and enjoying life in this beautiful hillside retreat with his wife and child, he died. They had always both dreamed of planting a vineyard on their 40 acres inside the demarcated zone for the unique Jurançon wines, but they never got around to it.

By this time in 1987, Yvonne was 60 years old. Determined to complete their dream and to honor her husband, she went ahead and planted those vines - eventually, 6.5 hectares of them. Her first wine in 1990 won a gold medal in Paris which only encouraged her "folly" more. Through her friendship with Pascal Delbeck, then vineyard manager of Château Belair in St. Emilion, she came to an understanding of *biodynamie*. She saw that fruits and vegetables farmed using these methods and

the vineyards tended with biodynamic practices produced fruit that was healthy and even more delicious than those grown conventionally. In 1994, she embraced the philosophy for her own estate and has continued it to this day.

The estate really resembles a large garden of vines that cascade or are trellised down a hillside at 300 meters, the Pyrénées Mountains in the near distance. The vines are carefully tended without the use of pesticides or herbicides and traditional plowing. The trellising system is unusual for the region - double guyot - instead of the usual stake training and the pruning is very short aiming for 25-30hl/ha yields. The soil is what is called "*poudingues*" de Jurançon, a heavy, gravelly clay that has calcareous components. Her vineyard is separated by woods and large expanses from any other vineyards so there is little risk of contamination from other grower's treatments. She planted in 70% Petit Manseng, 20% Gros Manseng and 10% Courbu -- grapes famous for their acidity and ability to produce sweet wines that age.

Jurançon is an old appellation and one of the first to be classified. It has an important, legendary place in the history of France, since, as it is generally related, the lips of Henry IV of Navarre, one of the boldest Kings of France, were rubbed with Jurançon wine at his baptism, the result of which was, of course, his courage and charisma. The 20th century writer Colette added to the wine's cachet by touting its excellence.

But Yvonne, while appreciating the history, is very much a person of the here and now. She has completely charmed the rest of the French wine world, and can consider among her many friends, some of the finest winemakers and personalities in wine. Didier Dagueneau was especially fond of her and assisted her with some of her work. His sudden death in 2008 is still a grave loss of a good friend. Not so long ago, she also had a moment of celebrity as one of the sage and more memorable winemakers in Jonathan Nossiter's film, *Mondovino*. She even attended the premiere at the Cannes Film Festival on the director's arm where she walked the red carpet. "I planted vines when my husband died," she said in the film, "Ever since then, all this love inside me, I give to the vines. I talk to them. I have an exchange with them. I ask them to drive their roots deep down into the soil to get the best from the land."

All the harvesting is done by hand in successive passes through the vineyards. The pressing is done in a pneumatic press.

Yvonne is now in her 80's and in terrific form. We look forward to a lot more great vintages from her. She just got a beautiful new 3 month old Great Pyrenees puppy. She also has a cat that's 22 years old! Perhaps there is something in these Jurançon wines.

## Interview

**This interview with Yvonne Hegoburu took place in her front yard in July, 2012.**

**Tell us about *Domaine de Souch*.**

My husband and I purchased this house and the land surrounding it about 50 years ago. When we bought it, it was in shambles: there was no roof and the courtyard was overrun with wild thorns. We also had to do a lot of work to assure that water wouldn't damage the house by building underground drains.

The property is 20 hectares, 10 of which are woods. The other 10 are exposed full South and

Southwest, and here we've planted 6,5 hectares of vines. In 2 or 3 years, I want to plant another .25 hectares, but I don't plan on expanding past that.

### **When were the vines planted?**

When my husband René left us 27 years ago, everything changed drastically. His salary was gone, and I needed to do something to earn my keep. Back then, we let our neighbors' cows graze the land. But I took them back, and decided to plant vines. So the vines are 27.

### **You were 60 when you planted your vines. Can you tell us about your life before becoming a vigneronne?**

My husband's first career was as a wood merchant for a big enterprise. We met at a wood factory where I worked as a secretary. He travelled a lot since he sold most of his merchandise to England. During that time, he developed a taste for living lavishly and his employer eventually decided he was costing them too much.

After getting fired, he proposed we start a business partnership together, since his loyal customers still wanted to buy from him instead the enterprise. So we did it, and it was a prosperous time for us: the Brits needed a lot of wood to rebuild from the war, (particularly London) and we made a lot of money. We were very young at the time we started; I was 20 and he was 25.

Profits eventually slowed down from the wood business, but it gave us the opportunity to partake in many different investments. One of those was the purchase of 9 buildings in Bordeaux. We had 49 tenants, but a friend of mine who lived in the area advised me that we weren't going to see proper long term benefits from this deal, and were better off selling the units in order to purchase a viticultural estate. I searched for a month and eventually purchased Chateau de Viaud. That's how we started with wine.

### **So at the time, this was more of an investment than a passion?**

I planted my vineyard as a result of my time in Pomerol. I instantly fell in love with the work in the vines there, and wanted to plant my own. I took a 300 000 franc loan out, and went all-in on Souch. If it hadn't worked, I would have had to to sell the house!

### **Domaine de Souch is one of the most high profile biodynamic estates in France. How did you discover this type of agriculture?**

Since I had no background in viticulture, the first thing I did was go to the Chamber of Agriculture and ask for a protocol. They immediately gave me round-up and all that other junk. So for 8, 9 years, I used round-up.

At the time, I was living between *Souch* and *Chateau de Viaud*. One day I was taking the train and had nothing to read. So I went to the newsstand and the first thing I grabbed was a publication on wine. Inside, there was an article on the Barre family, which focused on their use of biodynamic practices. It instantly made me realize that working chemically was killing my soils, that I was doing something terrible to them!

So I rushed to the nearest phone both and immediately called Ms. Barre, who is about my age. I told her how wonderful their work was, etc... Since I lived quite close to their village, she invited me to their weekly meeting for biodynamic vignerons. It was very friendly and convivial: everyone would

meet, read a little bit of Rudolph Steiner out loud, eat, drink each other's wines and support each other. From there on out, I started converting *Souch* to biodynamics.

### **How long did it take you to see a difference in the vineyards?**

It takes 10 years.

### **What about the winemaking?**

That took longer. Even though the vineyards were converted to biodynamics, we were using commercial yeasts for many years. But we've been certified biodynamic since 1994, and the grapes' yeasts have been able to find themselves into our cellar. It's in the walls, in the air... It's everywhere! The fermentation starts on its own now, and we've been using native yeasts for about 10 years.

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

I like drinking my friend's wines! I don't have the talent to dissect a wine, and I prefer loving wines from people who love me!

## **Wines**



### **Jurançon Sec:**

70% Gros Manseng, 20% Petit Manseng and 10% Corbu. Vinified in stainless steel vats, with daily lees stirring and usually 3 rackings.



### **Jurançon Moëlleux:**

50% Petit Manseng and 50% Gros Manseng. Vinified in stainless steel vats, with daily lees stirring.



**Jurançon Cuvée Marie Kattelin:**

100% Petit Manseng. Only partially de-stemmed fruit, direct press than vinified in barrels. 3 rackings. No fining, light filtration. This cuvée is named after Yvonne's granddaughter.



**Jurançon Cuvée Joe Dressner:**

A one time cuvée named in honor of the late Joe Dressner. Made from the two best barrels of the exceptional 2010 vintage of Marie Kattelin. Yvonne felt they were so good they needed to be bottled one their own, a choice she has made only a handful of times in the estate's history.