

Ulysse Collin

Interview

This interview with Olivier Collin stems from an email exchange in October 2010. Olivier chose to capitalize Terroir in his emails, so they've been left as is.

How did you get into wine?

The Collin family has been working the vineyards of Congy since 1812.

As for myself, my passion for wine began as an amateur and a drinker, a path which ultimately led me to seek out "alternative" and original wines. My lineage and passion made it a natural transition into a career.

What was happening with the estate before you took over?

My father rented his vines to a négociant until 2003. I began studying law in 1995 in hopes of legally re-obtaining the family estate when the time was right.

Between 2001 and 2003, I discreetly began an apprentissage at Selosse while also studying law in Nancy as well as viticulture in Bordeaux. At the time I wasn't sure if I'd ever be a vigneron; you don't regain a 8,7 hectare estate from a négociant that easily□

Why Selosse?

The man spoke of and intellectualized a type of viticulture which just didn't exist in Champagne: biodynamic. At my own pace, I began understanding his work methods. Over time I came to realize that working in this fashion confirmed what I already believed to be "wines of Terroir".

By November 2002 we began trying to regain our estate from the négociant which was shutting down on March 22nd, 2003. The heavy frost of April 11th made it impossible for me to keep the few grapes of this first vintage, thus 2004 was my first vintage as a vigneron.

What is your work process like in vines? What do you think of your terroirs?

When we took over from the négoce, the land wasn't in great shape; my initial impulse was to re-plow with my first major investment: a tractor. For me, plowing is an evident necessity for making wines of Terroir.

Fundamentally, I distinguish between the protection of the vegetal leaf from illness and the vitalization of the roots and the rhizosphere by working the soil. Even though this forces us to stay vigilant in regards to what products we use, for me the way a wine tastes stems from the clay and mineral composition of the soil, more precisely from the "interface" of the roots and the healthy circulation of the plant's sap. This is why I feel so strongly about keeping a steady and dynamic stimulation of microbiological activity in the soil.

For me, protection of the foliage is an afterthought; it doesn't really affect the quality of the soil's minerals [mineral salts] that the plant feeds on. To do so is a pragmatic approach in winemaking in which you place more importance in the gustative "quality" of your wine than the sanitary "quality" of your grapes.

Why don't I use copper (in its sulfite or hydroxide form) against mildew and use more conventional products? To protect from fungi with copper is aleatory and risky in our region. Copper is a sterilizer that soaks through the leaf, which eventually falls to the ground, which absorbs it: I've noticed this cycle tends to decrease microbiological activity. Therefore one would need to use very small quantities of copper to limit its effect on the soil. Because of the propensity of mildew in Champagne, this remains extremely difficult in our region and I have the utmost respect for those that succeed in doing so.

We never use the tractor after the harvest because the grass that has grown during the summer helps detoxify the soil.

After reflecting on my parcels I began shaping the 3 cuvées I make today. 3 cuvées made in the same spirit but with strong individual personalities. There is still a lot of work to do but the lasting impression I've had since 2003 seems to be pushing the Terroirs in the right direction. Everything can be perfected.

What about the vinification process?

My vinification process is an attempt to reveal the true personalities of each parcel in function of its history. I do my best to respect the identity of each parcel with a minimum of intervention. The barrels, the fermentation, the absence of filtration and a low dosage lead me to believe that we are coherent in a calculated aesthetic that corresponds to the style of the estate.

How do you feel about Champagne as a region?

It's an industrialized region which could benefit greatly from real artisanal work. There are good wines in Champagne, made with the heart and soul of those who make them. I respect these wines and consider myself in this category.

What are kind of wines are you trying to make?

I create nothing. I accompany the forces of nature.

We don't make "name" wines but rather wines of Terroir, wines where the vigneron does not impose his personal preferences; instead we try to accentuate the personality of the parcels. I truly respect the spirit of Terroir: the internal structure of these wines lies in the individuality of my parcels.

What about tradition?

Tradition (traditio in Latin), is a passage on from hand to hand of "*savoir faire*". I do not work like my father or my grandfather. Maybe my great grandfather worked this way: horses, manual plowing, specific barrels, indigenous yeasts and no modern oenology. In the end we never created anything, we just found a way to work. Through wine, we search for our roots...

What wines do you like to drink besides your own?

These days:

Chablis for white.

Vosne-Romanée and Volnay for reds.