

Olivier Lemasson - Les Vins Contés

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Olivier and Cécile Lemasson. Photo by Josefa Concannon.

Profile

Olivier Lemasson is a sommelier who encountered natural wines when he worked for the retailer

Eric Macé in Rennes, Brittany. Lemasson became passionate about these odd wines, and trained at Marcel Lapierre's winery in Morgon, Beaujolais, first by picking grapes four years in a row, then by working for a whole year in his vines and cellar. After a brief stint as a retailer at Square Trousseau in Paris, Lemasson's passion definitely took over, and he settled as a winemaker in Touraine.

The story of les Vins Contés is that of a retailer meeting a winemaker. In 2002, [Hervé Villemade](#) was looking to start a négociant business (i.e. buy grapes from other growers to vinify them). He picked Lemasson to be his partner, and les Vins Contés drew from their complementary talents. In 2006, they amiably parted ways so that Villemade could concentrate on his own estate again. Undeterred, Lemasson continued on with Vins Contés.

For many years the project was 100% purchased fruit; Olivier would source old vineyards worked organically, often seeking the obscure grapes of Touraine like Menu Pineau and Pineau d'Aunis. Eventually he was able to start renting two hectares of vines, and in 2016 was finally able to purchase his own land, nine hectares of vines he had previously been buying grapes from.

The wines are all made in an intentional "vin de soif" style; the whites are direct-pressed, vibrant and bright while the reds are for the most part short macerations and meant to be drunk fruity and young. Two cuvées, *Gamasutra* (from 100+ Gamay vines) and *Cheville de Fer* (from 100+ Côt vines), are made to age, though both are often easy-drinking on release.

Sick of having to fight with the AOC board for the Touraine appellation, Lemasson decided to intentionally de-classify all of his wines to Vin de France in 2012. Depending on the vintage, Olivier will either bottle the wines sulfur free or add a minuscule dose at bottling.

Interview

This interview took place with Olivier Lemasson in Los Angeles in March 2011.

Explain the way that *Vin Contés* works.

The grapes I work with come from two principle sources: the first being 3 hectares of vines that I rent and work myself organically. The second is the equivalent of 7 hectares from which I purchase fruit; my team and I hand harvest the grapes from these sites when they are ready to bring back to the cellar. The furthest vineyards I purchase grapes from is 40 kilometers away from my house; this permits me to get grapes from nice terroirs I wouldn't be able to work with in my area.

How did you pick these sites you purchase from?

I'm not at all from the area. I'm originally from Brittany, where I ran a retail space. The problem with Brittany is that there are no vines! Through my work at my retailer, I came to know and befriend Thierry Puzelat, Christian Chaussard, René Mosse and all the Loire guys, and that was the first step for me moving to the Loire.

I did some research and found some parcels that weren't necessarily being worked organically, but the vigneron were still working the old fashioned, traditional way, and this initially suited my needs. Today everyone I work with has converted to organic agriculture, which is great. I've been working with the same vigneron for 9 years: there were a few kinks to work out when we first started working together but at this point I am loyal to them and trust them entirely in their good work. I stay in regular contact with them and we debrief each other on any concerns, but other than that,

they work independently.

As far as what I'm looking for, it tends to be old parcels: old Gamay, old Pineau D'Aunis, old Menu Pineau, old Romorantin. Having a negociant gave me the opportunity to work with parcels from all over; they're spread out far and wide!

Have you always worked organically?

I've always been an advocate of organic agriculture. Again I wasn't from the area and finding organic grapes wasn't easy at first; the guys were working well but they were used to working a certain way and having them convert wasn't exactly a simple process. I've always been "organic" because I worked for Marcel Lapierre, and always pushed organic, or rather natural wines as a retailer and sommelier. I plan to get everything certified in the next two years so expect to see the A.B (*agriculture biologique*) label on the bottles!

What's the cellar work like?

The first step is hand harvesting the grapes from their respective sites and bringing them back to the cellar. We then place the grapes (always in whole clusters) in large vats, followed by carbonic maceration: no pigeages, no remontages. We let the grapes macerate between 10 and 30 days depending on the cuvée.

You source grapes from Touraine and Cheverny but none of your wines sport AOC labels. Instead you've chosen to only make Vin de Table (as of the 2010 vintage, VDT are now called Vin de France, and are legally allowed to display the vintage on the label). How did this decision come about?

At first it wasn't a choice. In 2006 I presented the 300 hl of wine I'd made to the AOC board and they denied all my cuvées for being "atypical". Same thing in 07. Same thing in 08. When they classified my wines as atypical, it wasn't because of the chemical analysis; those came out fine. There was no volatile acidity and it wasn't vinegar. It was just a question of taste: "this tastes different from what you usually get in the area, and therefore it cannot be classified as an AOC wine".

At this point you could imagine I was worried about selling 300 hl of wine as VDT, but it worked out really well. It's harder to sell than Touraine or Cheverny, but we were able to sell them anyway and since then I've decided to not worry about making AOC wine and continuing to work the way I want to.

Does this permit you to be more adventurous and experimental in your work?

Absolutely. At this point I take full advantage of it. But to reiterate that was never the original plan; I believe appellations are at their core a good thing and I am not crusading against them by any means. Some of my friends like fighting for their wines to be AOC wines; I just don't feel like making a big deal out of it anymore.

How do you feel about the whole natural wine debate? The term, the wines, the people making them?

If you check the AVN (*Association des Vins Naturals*) website, you'll see that we've done our best to come up with a clear definition of natural wine: organic agriculture (certification is not a prerequisite), native yeasts and hand harvesting.

It's not the easiest thing to explain which is why I feel you need to define it. If you don't define it then people will, and in my opinion already have, start taking advantage or wrongfully using the term to define their wines. I'm just worried that the work and ideas that we have all contributed to this style of wine will be mass-marketed, disfigured and misinterpreted for all the wrong reasons.

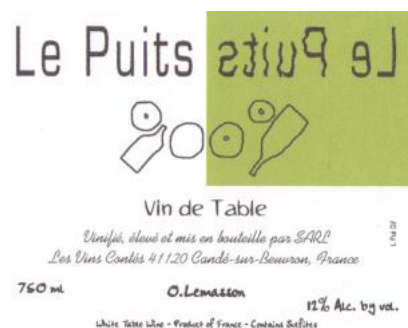
You make what you define as *vin de soif* (thirst wine) but do you make any wine with food in mind?

Yes. I think this plays more on the varietals though. My Côt cuvée "La Cheville de Fer" ages a year in old oak, as does the Romanrantin, and these I would recommend as gastronomical wines. And to be clear, when I say **vin de soif**, I'm not claiming these wines are simple; they can be complex in their own right. What I mean by that is they are easy to drink on their own. Sometimes it's the vigneron's choice. Pineau D'aunis is a good example: some vigneron's make very structured Pineau D'Aunis but mine focuses more on the fruit.

Any wines you particularly like to drink?

I love the Beaujolais. My formative years in winemaking were at Marcel Lapierre's, and this whole *vin de soif* thing stems from the Beaujolais style. Even though his Morgon was very complex, beautiful wine, it was also very easy to drink! This is also what inspired me to work with carbonic maceration. If you tweak carbonic work and don't clear the juice everyday, you can still express and define a terroir in your wines, as well as its varietal. At least that's what I try to do!

Wines

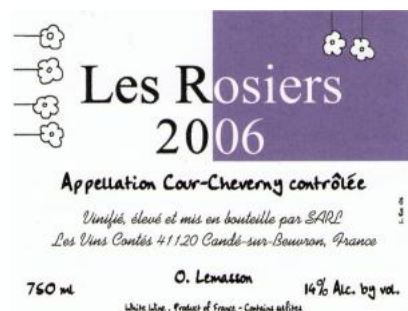


VdF "Les Puits":

Soil: Sandy Flint

Grape: Sauvignon Blanc

Vines: Between 20 and 60 years old.



A.O.C Cour-Cheverny "Les Rosiers":

Soil: Sand

Grape: Romorantin
Vines: 40 years old.

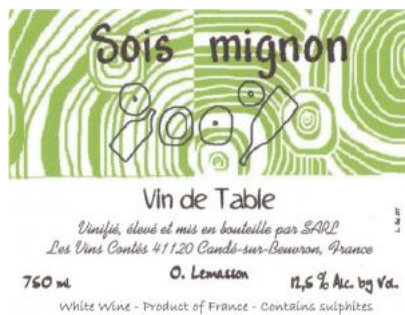


VdF "Aligotest":

Soil: Sand

Grape: Aligoté

Vines: 62 years old, from the only Aligoté parcel in the entire Loire valley!



VdF "Sois Mignon":

Soil: Clay and Flint

Grape: Sauvignon Blanc

Vines: 40 years old.



VdF "Bois Sans Soif"

Grapes: 50% Romorantin and 50% Menu Pineau

Vines: 20 to 60 years old.



VdF "Le P'tit Rouquin":

Soil: Flint and Clay

Grape: Gamay

Vines: 20 to 60 years old.



VdF "Pinoir de Soif":

Soil: Flint and Clay

Grape: Pinot Noir

Vines: 30 years old



VdF "R"

Soil: Flint and Clay

Grapes: blend changes every year.

Note: the "10" is a reference to the vintage. In such the 2011 vintage will be "R11" and so forth.

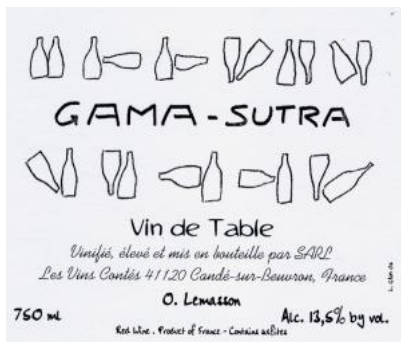


VdF "Poivre et Sel":

Soil: Sand and flint

Grapes: 90% Pineau D'Aunis, 10% Gamay

Vines: The Pineau D'Aunis vines are 60 years old and the Gamay vines are 20 years old.



VdF "Gama Sutra":

Soil: Flint and Clay

Grape: Gamay

Vines: 80 years old.

Vinification: aged 7 months in barrel.



VdF "Cheville de Fer":

Soil: Heavy Clay and Flinty Clay

Grape: Côt

Vines: 20 to 50 years old.

Vinification: aged 7 months in barrel.