

Philippe Chevarin

Interview

This interview with Philippe Chevarin took place over Skype in April, 2017.

You aren't from an agricultural background right?

Not at all. I used to be an audio engineer. I would go on tour with bands and singers doing live sound.

No recording studio work?

I worked in studios a bit but ended up being really focused on live music.

What kind of music?

It went from noisy, dirty rock n' roll to larger acts like Vanessa Paradis.

How did you end up as an audio engineer?

I started as a musician. When I realized I wasn't good enough to ever make a living at it, I shifted my focus to the technical side of sound! I read some books and learned everything on my own.

How long did this first career last?

From 1991 to 2015.

So what made you change paths and start making wine?

I'd been around the block with my job, and growing meant doing bigger productions, stuff like Vanessa Paradis... I was really turned off by the business side of shows of this scale, and knew it wasn't for me.

So I decided it was time for a change. One idea was to open a wine bar with my wife, because I was already completely in love with it. But it just so happens she is childhood friends with Thierry Puzelat's wife Cécile. Through Thierry I was introduced to Pierre-O Bonhomme, René Mosse... It was inspiring.

Because I had a lot of down-time with work, I decided to study viticulture and oenology on the side. This placed me in a two year stage at Domaine de la Paonnerie, about 30 minutes from Nantes. After two years with Jacques and Agnès, I knew I wanted to be a vigneron. And since I'd gotten used to that area, I asked them to help me find vines close by.

Did you move from Nantes?

No, we still live in Nantes. It's about a 35 minute drive.

Tell me about the vines you were able to acquire.

It was a bit of a particular situation. The vines had been abandoned for three years. The vigneron next to them treated them once a year to make sure they wouldn't get sick and affect his own vines, but other than that not much was happening.

Basically a guy was taking care of them and disappeared overnight. He didn't pay for his rentals, there was a trial... Anyhow, when I took them over they were a little bit damaged. But by hanging out in the village, I started meeting farmers and some offered me more land.

So with how much land did you start, and where are you at today?

I started with 2.8 hectares of Melon de Bourgogne, Gamay and Cabernet. I took those over in March, 2014. That year I sold my grapes to Pierre-O Bonhomme and René Mosse. 2015 was my first vintage working the vines full time and making my own wine.

So how much land are you working now, and what is the breakdown grape-wise?

I'm at 5.3 hectares now. I'm buying 40 ares of vines this year, and the rest is in fermage; I give them some wine and they let me work their land. Essentially it's people who care about keeping their vines alive but can't work them themselves. They don't want the vines ripped out.

As far as my surface, I'm at around 2/3 in Melon, 1/3 of Gamay and a tiny bit of Cabernet and Grolleau. The soils consist principally of schist, quartz and sandstone. These are really "vineyard soils": nothing else can grow in them.

How old are the vines?

I have two main plots. In the first, the oldest vines were planted in 1969, but most are from the 80's. For the the second plot, I've got some Gamay from the 50's. And I'm about to get some Melon de Bourgogne planted in 1948.

Can you break down the wines you make?

The Melon is called *Le Souffle*. It's a blend of all my parcels; I don't have enough juice or space in my cellar to do otherwise. I do a direct, slow-press with the old screw-press I own, about 4 hours. Malo happens and so far I have succeeded in not adding any sulfur. It worked my first two vintages so we'll see.

Then I have a Gamay rosé called *La Goulée* but I'm going to change the name because Benoit Courault also makes a wine with that name. But that's what it's called for now. It's also direct-press, and ends up as a fairly colored rosé.

My Gamay is called **Les Sentinelles**, which is a more ample style, with nice structure and tannin. In 2015 I made it whole-cluster, so it has a semi-carbonic profile. In 2016, I made it half whole-cluster, half de-stemmed.

Then there is a Grolleau called *L'Oublie*, which is in tiny quantities.

Then there is a Cabernet PET NAT called *Coup d'Pouce* that I harvest with my friends and neighbors.

Finally there is a Gamay PET NAT called *La Houle*, made half with Gamay Teinturier (Gamay with red pulp) and half Gamay Noir à jus blanc. I decided to take out the Teinturier from *Les Sentinelles* because it gave the wine an animal quality I wasn't into. I'm really happy because having the red pulp gives the wine a great color. So I think I'll stick with this.

I'll admit that I'm really new at this and still experimenting with vinification. I don't know if the way I make wine today will always be the same.

What's the work in the vines like?

I'm converting the vines to organics, and waiting to get certified by Ecocert. Whenever I get some new land, it's immediately converted.

I work the soils with a tractor. We only use copper and sulfur in the vineyards, and last year I experimented with some essential oils. This year I will try some biodynamic preparations and see how it goes.

Was it always in your plan to work "naturally"?

□I can't envision any other way. It's a matter of personal taste: I was drawn to wine through natural wine, and that's what I want to drink and what I want to make.

But at the same time, if I feel I need to add sulfur, I'll do it. There is an economic reality to what we do, and as a young vigneron who suffered a very rough second vintage (2016), I can't permit myself to have an unsellable product.

Your wines are all intentionally declassified as *Vin de France*. Can you elaborate on that?

If I were under the appellation system, the whites would fall under Muscadet des Coteaux de la Loire and the reds would be Coteaux D'Ancenis. Entering an appellation takes time and costs money. Add to that I'm making an un-sulphured Melon de Bourgogne that goes through malo, it's not even worth trying to present them.

My neighbor Jacques Février, who also works naturally, had approached the appellation about being more open to trying wines like ours. A woman came to his house and started criticizing the wild grass in his parcels! If it's to hear shit like that, it's not worth it for me.

However, we have mobilized with a group of like-minded growers and started an association called Pinards et Jus. We take our wines by boat from Oudon to Nantes and organize a tasting there. The goal is to promote what we are doing in the region. All of us work organically and "naturally" in the cellar, and only one of us is in the appellation. He's fought hard to be in the appellation, and is really trying to shape the tasting panel into understanding the characteristics of our wines, particularly ones without added sulfur.

So there is SOME movement. And the truth is, if we want to see change it will depend on our actions. Nothing is going to change on its own.

Are you from the Loire?

No, no, I'm from the South-West. I came to Nantes in 2002 after a 15 year stint in Bordeaux. I had

been planning to move, but I met someone from there and that was a good excuse as any.

Anything you'd like to add?

I often say that my goal, at least for the time being, is to make simple wine. I'm still learning how to do this, but all I want is to do the best possible work in the vineyards, to give them as much life as possible to in turn pick beautiful grapes. I want to make a simple, approachable wine with the least amount of intervention possible.