

Wine Tasting, Vineyards, in France

Wine Terroirs : Wine discovery, wine tasting and vineyards in France .

July 11, 2011

Julien Courtois (Loire)



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Soings en Sologne (Loire)

Julien Courtois lives with his wife Heidi Kuka and their young daughter a few hundreds meters from the family farm (les Cailloux du Paradis). The name of their estate is Clos de la Bruyère, it was created in 1998 and like Les Cailloux du Paradis, it is bathing in the peaceful and diverse environment of this Western-Sologne area. The Sologne, as a reminder, is a wooded, sparsely-populated region east of Blois and south of Orléans in the Loire, with a myriad of ponds large and small, and which is also well known for its hunting culture. There, near Soings-en-Sologne, Julien Courtois grows and vinifies a handful of varieties (including the rare Menu Pineau and Gascon) without the conventional additives routinely used in many places to boost the wines, plus he almost never adds SO₂, this all helping craft wines with a strong personality.

The short drive on the narrow road from his father's wine farm to there makes you pass fields, vineyards and woods. The



winery facility was set up in small building surrounded by vineyards, the family living in a mobile home in the back, with a nice garden around it. The tool first, then the house will come, we could say. Julien got a good teacher in vineyard management and winemaking in the person of his father Claude Courtois, an inspired and opinionated rebel in the French winemaking world, and we can't but be happy that Soings-en-Sologne now counts three artisan vintners instead of one, all their wines having a different story to tell.

Heidi, Julien's wife is a New-Zealander native with Maori blood, and she is the one behind the beautiful labels of the estate bottles. What I like also is that there's no printed text on these labels, just the work of Art (the cuvée name and other infos are found on the back label). You can have an idea of her creation on the slideshow on the [Domaine's website](#) and also on my last pic below.



Clos de la Bruyère vineyards

Julien works on a 4,5 hectare vineyard plus he just planted a year ago 0,5 hectare of Chenin. The existing vineyards had been abandoned for a year when he took over the place, and he also planted some more. His main varieties in the Clos de la Bruyère are Menu Pineau (including some ungrafted) and Gamay, the latter being divided into ordinary Gamay, Gamay Chaudenay and Gamay *Franc de Pied* (ungrafted - were planted in 1978). The rest of the varieties are Romorantin, Côt, Chardonnay and Gascon, plus the newly-planted Chenin. It's all worked organic, no weedkillers and petro-chemicals, he does light plowings and leaves grass between the rows. The bushy hedges and wodded blocks also help for the diversity, the area is far from being monocultural. Like much of France this year, it's quite dry, and the vineyard is very healthy and well.



Whirling the wine

Once in the facility, Julien grabs 2 glasses and we head for the surface cellar where the wine spends its *élevage* time in casks. He makes usually 6 *cuvées* every year. On the vinification side, Julien doesn't use any additives of course, the wine ferments on its wild yeasts and continues its maturation through a long, non-interventionist *élevage* in casks. There's no SO₂ added when the grapes arrive at the *chai* or in the middle of the vinification. If some is added at all (which is not the norm here), it will be just before bottling. This free-rein method where the juice/wine is let free to move without hindrances is in my opinion why these wines are so vivid and alive. When enologists pound their wines with sulphur, it may take the risk away, but it takes away at the same time the life element, what could have made these wines outstanding and unimitable. Again, it is akin to parents who keep their children under strict rules and surveillance, depriving them to grow their own life. At least some parents are discovering that free-range kids may become happier and better adults, so it's time to grow a *free-range wines* culture, with the motto : these wines will make you happy...

End of the digression. We begin by a white taken from a cask :

___ Julien Courtois Romorantin *cuvée* Autochton 2010. Hyper mineral wine, lemon notes, elder tree too. Still lightly perly. Will have a 18 month *élevage* overall. The casks were bought used in Burgundy. The wines aren't moved, the lees go up by themselves at some point with certain temperature conditions, so there is an exchange.

___ Julien Courtois Originel 2010. Menu Pineau & Romorantin. Aromas of dried eucalyptus leaves, menthol notes, incense. The wine is a bit turbid. Julien says that the Romorantin had a bit of residual sugar, like 3 grams, that's why it's perly right now. He adds that that the cask room is a bit warm for a cellar but he has plans to put some insulation under the roof. Very enjoyable, rocky, mineral mouth. the two varieties are pressed separately because they're getting ripe unsynchronously, even if very close. The juices are blended after the press.



Siphoning wine from a cask

The 3rd wine is a red :

___ Gamay 2010, from a cask. Some reduction on the nose, the wine is still in the middle of its *élevage*. Savoury wine in the mouth. Pleasant mouth. Julien says that the tartaric acid should go down next winter with the cold temperatures and reinforce the overall substance. It should be bottled in spring 2012. Usually he bottles the whites a bit earlier than the reds. This way, he minimizes the oxydation and exposition to warmer air for the whites, as they didn't get any SO₂ addings (the reds are more robust). He is less in the oxydative style today compared to a while ago, he adds that the oxydative notes are not always well accepted, beginning with the darker color that these wines get.

___ Element Terre 2010, Gamay Chaudenay. This is a *tenturier* Gamay, dark in color. A bit of reduction too at this stage. He makes 6 to 8 casks of Chaudenay, from a 80-are plot.

___ Julien Courtois Ancestral 2010. This is a red blend made with non-grafted Gamay, Côt and Gascon. Of course all these wines are bottled as table wine, they're out of the Appellation system, which gives more freedom for the blends, the varieties and the aromatic characteristics of the wines. The ungrafted Gamay is a 35-are surface which was planted in 1978. The wine has an interesting intensity in the mouth, the substance and minerality make a nice balance.



The presses

Back to a white, from a cask :

___ Julien Courtois Menu Pineau (or Orbois) dry late harvest (*tardive sèche*) 2009. The nose is opulent and flowery with notes of ripe white fruits, like pear. Very nice mouth and swallowing, nice wine. May be named Exquiss' or Savasol (for Savagnin de Sologne), he doesn't know yet. That's a dry late harvest, there's no residual sugar, which gives this beautiful character in the mouth. Julien loves the Menu Pineau, he says it is a rustic variety with unfatigable yeasts which never stop. Plus, he says, you can do everything with Menu Pineau, even sparkling, you can pick it up at different maturities and make wines accordingly. He used to like the oxydative wines but now he tries other wines because people aren't always open to these sort of wines. Birds loved the grapes so he made only 3 casks of this wine.

___ Julien Courtois Menu Pineau late harvest 2010, from another cask. This time, he made 4 casks (the parcel makes almost 1 hectare). The temperatures dropped last autumn under freezing levels and he had to harvest these grapes earlier than usual, the juice was at minus 1 ° C, this was the first time he had a juice this cold, making small crystals, it was almost an ice wine. The wine is still perly and it has some residual sugar. Exceptionally, he says, the yeasts of the Menu Pineau which usually complete their work seem to have halted along the way. He thinks that the freeze put some toll on the yeast population here, thus the lagging transformation and the residual sugar. This wine will stay for a long time in the cask, 1, 2 or 3 years, he'll see. Like Claude Courtois his father, he isn't shy of leaving wines for years in the barrels until they reach their time.



8-spout gravity bottle filler

___ Julien Courtois. Menu Pineau 2008. From another cask, another white, superb amber color with a beautiful viscosity that you can almost feel visually. Not turbid. Nose of ripe grapes, raisins. in the mouth, the wine is exceptional, a revelation. Such a classy white. He says that this wine used to taste like the one we tasted before, it had lots of residual sugar, and by waiting long enough, the remaining yeasts finished the job at last, allowing this gem to be. Very beautiful, for sure you understand with this wine what patience and non-intervention can make. this said, he tries to go away from this oxydative style because while he also loves these wines, they're difficult to sell. Asked about the price of this cuvée for individual buyers, he says it's 19 €. Quite cheap for this sort of stuff.

at one point we pass open cubicles where Julien puts maceration vats so that the temperature doesn't go too low. He draws a sheet in front of the opening so that by the fermentation temperature of the 2 or 3 of tanks inside, a warm enough atmosphere bathes the whole cubicle.

The 8-spout bottle filler on the left allows a quiet filling by gravity, which is also an important aspect of the careful handling of the wine. On the other hand, Julien says that he could have one day a small machine which could be softer on the wine because it has the wine flow smoothly along the inside walls of the bottle instead of the torrentuous fall in the central part of the bottle tat you get with these things.





Julien Courtois' cuvées

We now taste a couple of bottles. If you don't want look to the back label each time, you will learn to be familiar with the different works of Heidi, and you'll sure associate your preferred cuvée with its visual representation.

___ Julien Courtois, L'Ancestral 2009. Bottled 2 months before. Gascon, non-grafted Gamay and Côt. Nice, inspiring nose, going in many directions, with spicy notes. Well blended tannins already. Julien who knows what this wine can yield, says that it will offer more by september, it needs time to recover from leaving the cask and make itself home in the bottle. He adds that beyond the élevage in cask, the élevage in bottle is important too, 6 months being a minimum. One day if he can afford, he'll push the bottle élevage to 12 or 18 months. Lots of minerality in this wine. He says that it is important to balance the extraction by maceration here, as well as the alcohol level. Asked about which part of the soil gives this minerality (silica, clay or flint), he says this comes from the flint stone (silex) which you find in both the silica of the surface, under the powder form, and underneath in the clay under the form of various-size stones and gravels.

___ Julien Courtois Originel 2009. A white. Blend of Menu Pineau & Romorantin. that is a nice blend ! Noticeable legs on the inside of the glass. Julien says that the wine gets darker with time, almost amber, a very nice gold actually. Nose on the opulent, generous flower aromas. Also fruity. The mouth is very fresh. Classy wine, no residual sugar at all. He presses the whites with the stems, it helps drain the juice.

Julien Courtois wines are sold in the U.K. ([Dynamic Vines - Caves de Pyrene](#)), the U.S. ([Savio Soares](#)), in Japan (Mr Ito, [eno Connexion](#)), Canada (Quebec- [Moine Echanson](#) and [QV](#)), Denmark (anders frederik steen, [Hvirvel Vin](#)).

In Paris, you can find his wines at [Saturne](#), [Racines](#), [Vivant](#) (these 3 wine bars/restaurants being also cavistes), and at [Crus & Découvertes](#) (caviste).

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Great article. Drinking in if their wines right now in Melbourne Australia at awesome little place called the town mouse. It aus too!!!!

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