

Newsletter

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This summer's wine adventure commenced in June with four weeks in the Loire Valley. We rented a gite on the outskirts of Bourgueil, found a French tutor for our daughter and spent the days searching for new wines, visiting old friends and checking out the local sights. As it turned out the timing was excellent as not only were the days warm and the nights (mostly) pleasantly cool but the 2005 vintage was on display and promises to be a great year for both reds and whites.

Although I already represent a number of domaines from the Loire I was keen to expand the selection as in good years they provide superb value (i.e. price to quality ratio). However in less good years one must be very selective and indeed in all my tastings I only found one producer's 2004 reds to be close in quality to their 2005s. This was Yannick Amirault in Bourgueil of which more later. Suffice it to say most of the wines I will be importing are from either the 2003 vintage (especially good for reds) or 2005.

During my tastings, whether during a visit to a domaine or otherwise, I rated the wine one to five stars. I established a criteria for each level with five stars indicating a brilliant 'must have' wine, four a very good example which would stand out in any company and three being a good wine which, at the right price, would be worth drinking. Wines rating two or one stars were average or less and I have not imported any of these. I would strongly recommend you try this or a similar system when jotting down notes as it does help you remember which wines you really should purchase again.

I visited about thirty domaines during my visit. The notes that follow cover the properties from whom I decided to buy. In several cases I was guided to visit by the Revue de Vins de France which reviewed the 2005 vintage throughout France and which by happy coincidence was published shortly before my arrival. In other cases I was given recommendations by winegrowers or a wine merchant at the wine shop Aux Saveurs de la Tonnelle (4 rue de Tonnelle, Saumur - tel: 02 41 52 86 62) who had a wonderful collection of Loire wines.

Domaine les Maisons Rouges

This small domaine is based in the Coteaux du Loir and Jasnières appellations some forty kilometres north of Tours. I had never been to the area before but had read a bit about it and was keen to discover more. The appellation produces both sweet and dry wines from the chenin blanc grape as well as some red from the pineau d'aunis. To ripen fully a warm autumn is essential and 2005 was just such a year.

On driving onto the property, which looked more like a farm than a vineyard, I was met by Benoit Jardin, owner and winemaker, who took me on a tour of the winery.

Somewhat rustic but spotlessly clean it was the antithesis of 'corporate' winemaking. We sat on a bench under a shade tree outside and tasted a number of wines including the following:

Clos des Molières 2005 *****

Superb definition and balance. Dry but with a hint of sweetness. Full, round and elegant. Outstanding wine.

Clos des Jasnières 2003 *****

Lovely nose, great harmony and balance. Sweet and succulent but good acidity considering the year. Will keep for 20-30 years.

Barrel samples of the Clos des Jasnières 2005 suggest this wine should merit five stars when released next year. The reds gave less pleasure although the Alizani 2004 was quite good. The reds tend to be light, somewhat tannic and with too much acidity and too little fruit for my taste. I was advised that they blossom after four or five years!

Domaine de Bellivière

The best known domaine in the area. I met with Madame Nicolas and among the wines tasted the following stood out:

Caligramme 2004 (Jasnières) *****

From vines over fifty years old this is the top cuvee. The wine was powerful and intense. You could taste the effects of low yields, old vines and organic farming methods. Combined with good winemaking you get a purity that shines through.

Esparses 2004 *****

Good balance and a lovely finish. Less intense than the Caligramme but also less expensive.

We then tasted the 2005s from their barrels. Caligramme ***** and Esparses ***** were stunning wines and the top red, Hommage à Louis Derre ***** was also very good. In fact it was the only red I tasted from either Maison Rouges or Bellivière that I really enjoyed.

I will be importing the 2004 and 2005 vintages of Caligramme and 2005 vintages of both Esparses and Hommage à Louis Derre, with the wines arriving in April 2007.

Domaine du Colombier

I represent Domaine du Colombier in Chinon and have three versions of their 2003s in stock. The Vielle Vignes received 90 points in a recent Wine Spectator review – but for current drinking I am really enjoying the regular 2003 (available at Port O'Call). I was really looking forward to tasting the 2005s and was not disappointed.

We started with the 2005 white ***-*, a chenin blanc from a small parcel near the domaine. It had a lovely fresh nose, with lemon notes and a long pure finish. I was very impressed and even better it will retail at around \$15 a bottle.

The reds sampled included:

Chinon 2005 ****

This wine sees no wood but still had considerable depth. Lots of red and black fruit with enough tannin to warrant a year or two of ageing.

Chinon Vielle Vignes 2005 ***-*

Out of the barrel. This had more structure than the regular cuvee, but was a bit more closed.

Chinon Clos de Martinet 2005 ****-*

Again a barrel sample (bottling will take place in March 2007). This was superb. Big, meaty and full-bodied with considerable density. This is built for the longer haul (5-15 years) and I took the opportunity to order some magnums and jeroboams.

Chateau de Coulaïne

I was so excited by the quality of the 2005 reds that I wanted to add a new domaine in Chinon. Ultimately I chose Chateau de Coulaïne. This visit got off to a shaky start as I had called earlier in the day to see if a tasting was possible. As I had some other appointments a time of 1:30 p.m. was agreed with the proprietor's wife and it was a slightly grumpy Etienne Bonnaventure who met me in the chai. I should have known better than to disturb a Frenchman during the lunchtime period. However, his natural enthusiasm soon returned and we tasted through his range, including:

Les Picasses 2003 ****

From one of my favourite vineyards in Chinon this had a slightly subdued nose with hints of black fruits and subtle oak. Quite full and powerful with good structure. For a 2003 it was also quite elegant and I would anticipate it will continue to improve.

Domaine 2005 ****

Beautiful colour, lovely fragrance with some grip and excellent balance. Typical top chinon from 15 year old vines.

I did not taste the 2005 Les Picasses but have also ordered this cuvee, which I expect will be superb. All the wines will be shipped next April.

Domaine Laureau du Clos Fremur

My next visit was to the Savennières region just south of Angers. The small appellation has a gorgeous setting with rolling hills, many of which face due south giving the vines great exposure. The grape variety is again chenin blanc and on the recommendations of

several winemakers I visited Domaine Laureau du Clos Fremur. Relatively new on the scene Damien Laureau had taken over several family vineyards and set about upgrading the winemaking. This turned out to be a theme throughout the Loire where I met many younger vigneron who were taking over family estates and introducing more modern techniques while respecting the history of their domaines.

We started by tasting the 2003s, one of which I had previously sampled. Both had scored well in a recent Wine Spectator report.

Bel Ouvrage 2003 ****

Fresh nose with hay and white fruits, full-bodied but surprisingly balanced for the year. Even some acidity at the end to ensure some aging potential (approximately 650 cases produced each year).

Les Genets 2003 ****

Quite full-bodied with beautiful balance. A terrific effort drunk later with great pleasure at La Licorne, a Michelin * restaurant in Fontevault, with the family (approximately 1,300 cases produced each year).

The 2004s were tasted and of the two cuvees I preferred the Bel Ouvrage, although they were both going through a slightly closed period.

We then tasted the 2005s. The wines are aged in a mixture of oak barrels (one - five years old) and stainless steel tanks. These wines show great promise and I will certainly be stocking up on them once available next year.

Domaine les Chesnaies

This small domaine in Coteaux du Layon was recommended to me by Damien Laureau. Coteaux du Layon is best known for its sweet wines, and having tasted through their range I selected the following:

Coteaux du Layon 2003 ***

2003 was an excellent vintage for sweet wines throughout the Loire and this example was 'proper', or as the French say typique, with richness, balance and enough acidity to keep it from being cloying.

Quarts de Chaume 2003 ****

This is a significant step up in quality with greater depth. Notes of honey and blood oranges shine through and the finish is long and elegant.

Domaine de la Chevalerie

A brother and sister work with their father in this long established domaine. Having a couple of hours free one morning I drove over unannounced, more in hope than expectation, to see what they had to offer. It turned out to be one of the best decisions I

made on the trip as after a marathon tasting I left with orders placed for three superb wines. Even better the wines in question represented two of the best vintages of the last twenty-five years: 1989 and 1996. The domaine sits in a lovely position with parcels of vines scattered around the house and the cellar dug deep into the tuffeau (local limestone). We tasted through about twenty cuvees and although many were enjoyable it became clear that one parcel of vines stood head and shoulders above the rest. That vineyard was Busardières and the vintages I liked the best were:

19 Heures 2003 ****_*

I did ask for an explanation of the name but my notes do not record the answer. They do reflect a powerful wine primarily from the Busardières vineyard full of fruit yet balanced and pure. This is still a youngster with many good years ahead of it.

Busardières 1996 ****_*

I was quite surprised that Stephanie offered this wine to taste as the vintage was very highly regarded in the Loire. Even more surprising she indicated that I could have a few cases if I wanted as they hold back a decent stock of each vintage to release over time. I almost bit her arm off in accepting. The wine is now approaching its peak and should show well for another ten years.

Busardières 1989 ****_*

After the 1996 Stephanie ventured deep into the cellar and brought out a bottle of the 1989. My notes read 'lovely nose, velvety fruit, fresh still relatively youthful'. I thought it was really kind to allow me to taste such an old vintage. Sheepishly I asked if she had a few bottles to sell. Her answer was I could have 120 bottles and I am delighted to be able to offer the chance for you to try fully mature cabernet franc from the Loire.

Stephanie speaks excellent English and was open to the idea of visiting Les Bermudes. A wine dinner in 2007??

Vincent Pinard

I had heard good things about this domaine in Sancerre even before I reached the Loire. They have established a good reputation for both their sauvignon blancs, oaked and unoaked versions and their pinot noir. I tasted several bottles during my visit and thought they were outstanding with the intensity and purity that so many other sancerres lack. I will be bringing in two white cuvees as well as their young vines pinot noir, all from the exceptional 2005 vintage.

Yannick Amirault

I currently stock this domaine's Le Petit Clos 2003 and Les Malgagnes 2003. Excellent wines that they are I believe that his 2004s and 2005s are even better. As is so often the case a visit intended to last an hour stretched to over three as after tasting through the different cuvees Yannick took me off on a tour of his vineyards throughout Bourgueil and

St. Nicolas de Bourgueil. The following tasting notes cover the wines I will be importing, all arriving in April 2007:

Le Grand Clos 2004 ****

Lovely red and black fruits on the nose. Very 'typical' albeit fine example of Bourgueil. The grapes were harvested between 5th and 15th October, much later than almost all of his neighbours resulting in an alcohol content of 13.7% and considerable depth.

Le Grand Clos 2005 ****, Les Malgagnes 2005 ****-* and Petit Cave 2005 *****
(barrel samples)

Broody and magnificent, these are stunning examples of their appellation. Le Grand Clos is slightly more elegant but all three will make superb drinking in the years to come.

I also tasted a barrel sample of La Pavillion from a tiny parcel right at the top of Le Grand Clos vineyard. Yannick made two barrels (about 60 cases) and agreed that I could have one. This will, in my view, be a reference point for Loire cabernet franc and I cannot wait to see how my tiny stash evolves over the years ahead.

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