

New World Wines

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Newsletter

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My travels to the vineyards of Europe this year were defined by the weather, the hottest, driest summer in northern France and Germany since at least 1976 I was told.

The journey started in Chinon where the Cabernet Franc grape rules. I have had a soft spot for this region since my wife and I visited almost 15 years ago and this time we travelled with various relatives, taking over a bed and breakfast establishment (of which more later) for four days.

I was interested in finding a Chinon producer to promote in Bermuda and to this end had made an appointment with ***Bernard Baudry***, with the intention of visiting several other domaines as well.

My pre-arrival discussions had been with Bernard's son, Mathieu, whose English was excellent. Unfortunately he had left on holiday so my French was once again called upon as Bernard spoke virtually no English.

The tasting was fascinating in that his wines were unlike any others I had tasted from Chinon. Most wineries try to emphasize the fruit and reduce the structure to provide a pleasant wine drinkable on release and in the short term. This domaine clearly does not believe in this and instead the recent vintages were all somewhat austere. The wines were pure, however, and after drinking a 1996 (admittedly a great vintage in Chinon) I could get some picture how the wines might evolve.

What was clear, and become ever more obvious as I tasted through other wineries' offerings was the years 1998, 1999, 2000 and 2001 were somewhat average (although one or two 2000's were excellent), and that only the best producers are going to make wines from these vintages which are going to be enjoyable for more than a few years.

I tasted Les Granges 2002, Les Grezeaux 2002, Le Domaine 2001, Le Clos Guillot 2000, Croix Boisse 2000 and Croix Boisse 1996.

All the wines see some oak ageing and are not fined or filtered. The theme here was purity and structure. These are not flashy up front wines but rather built for the longer haul. The 1996 Croix Boisse was a brilliant cabernet franc, still youthful but full of style and promise.

My next visit was to *Chateau de la Grille*. I had heard good reports about this domaine and there was further incentive in that I was visiting Champagne Gosset later in the trip and understood the property was owned by the same family. As it turned out the Gosset family had sold their Champagne house a few years earlier, a victim of French inheritance laws and taxes. Laurent, one of the children, had then bought out the remaining family members to take control of Chateau de la Grille. We started with a tour of the cellars with their winemaker, Monsieur Manceau, then tasted the following:

Rosé 2002

Light, refreshing and easy drinking.

1999

Good colour and nice refreshing nose with the cabernet franc shining brightly. Good fruit and flavours. 12% alcohol content. Very enjoyable.

1998

Medium to light colour, pleasing nose of red fruits and a little more tannin than the 1999 although more dilute with less fruit.

1996

Much more powerful nose of red fruits. More structure than the 99 but perhaps not yet as well integrated. Perhaps yields were higher in 96 although it was a great year in Chinon generally.

2000

This wine like all the reds at the domaine is not released until the fourth year after the vintage, unusual in Chinon to say the least. Very good colour, excellent fruit and a fine effort for the vintage.

1989

Laurent then produced a bottle of the 1989 made from selected vineyard lots. I had earlier drank an Olga Raffault 'Les Picasses' 1989 at dinner at Au Plaisir Gourmand, Chinon's top restaurant, which was superb so I was not surprised to find the Chateau de la Grille to be equally good. Apparently it will be released soon but at a price in the region of \$50 a bottle.

My other question regarding the wines were whether the very light filtration could take away some 'stuffing' from the wines. Laurent said he was considering experimenting with non filtered batches to find out.

I plan to order some of these wines so look out for them later this year.

Next stop was *Domaine Olga Raffault*, named after the founder of the estate who is still involved at 90 years old, a testament to the benefits of a life of winedrinking. We tasted with Madame Raffault's grand-daughter.

1999 Les Picasses

Light, fruity soft and easy drinking. A little bit unsubstantial.

1998 Les Picasses

Light and rather thin, reflective of the poor quality of the vintage.

1996 Les Picasses

Good structure and lots of red fruit on the nose and palate. Very good wine capable of aging for a number of years.

2002 White

Made from Chenin Blanc grapes this was a very pleasant surprise. Off dry but with considerable flavour and intensity it proved an excellent match with food.

During this part of the trip we stayed at **La Renaudiere** (<http://perso.wanadoo.fr/larenaudiere/>), a renovated part of Chateau Chavigny near Lerné, southwest of Chinon. The accommodation was superb, with huge rooms and comfortable beds and bathrooms. La Renaudiere had a swimming pool and Monsieur André and Madame Marie-Claire Geoffroy served a lovely breakfast as well as tea and coffee during the day. There are four large bedrooms and it was perfect for a large family group. I heartily recommend it to anyone visiting the area. As to restaurants we had three excellent experiences as follows:

Auberge de la Route d'Or (tel: 02 47 95 81 10) in Candes St. Martin was a small restaurant run by a young husband and wife team. Excellent food and wine at very reasonable cost in a lovely setting near the river.

L'Aigue Marine, a restaurant barge moored by the quai at Monsoreau, featured eels fresh from the river as its speciality. Not a gourmet stop but the service and food were quite acceptable and the setting on the outside deck extremely pleasant.

Au Plaisir Gourmand, Chinon. Probably the top restaurant in the area. We had the set menu and, among others, a bottle of Olga Raffault Les Picasses 1989. The food was exemplary and the wine a stunning example of how Chinon can age and improve. One interesting feature that is clearly becoming more common is that very few French people are dressing up for dinner as open neck shirts and no jacket were the rule, this in a Michelin starred restaurant.

After Chinon we drove to Sancerre, via Chenonceau. There I had arranged to meet **Alphonse Mellot**, my Sancerre supplier for a tasting of his latest vintages. Alphonse is full of enthusiasm and in no time we were traipsing through the cellars trying various barrel samples of the younger vintages. Among these the 2002 Generation XIX Pinot Noir stood out for its superb length and lovely fresh nose of red fruits. Out of the bottle the following wines were sampled:

Cuvee Edmond 2000 Blanc

Fermented in 30% new oak and 70% one year old oak barrels the wine was round and quite sweet with nuances of oak in the background.

2001 XIX Blanc

Slightly sweeter than the 2000 Edmond and less powerful.

La Moussiere 2002

Very fruity with slightly less acidity than some previous vintages. Very smooth and harmonious.

In addition to his own wines Alphonse is an avid taster of other producers' efforts. In his cellar he has hundreds of bottles from all over France. I had mentioned that I would be looking for a good Saumur Champigny producer and he quickly opened a bottle of Thierry Germain's La Marginale 2000. I had read of this producer's efforts to 'push the envelope' in the appellation but I was taken aback by the wine. It was extracted, inky black and with considerable structure. There was lots of fruit too, if partly obscured by oak. Alphonse felt it was dangerous to be too extreme in both the vineyard and the cellars. In other words tiny yields and late harvesting followed by cold soaking, extended maceration and new oak might be too much of a good thing. Part of me was incredibly impressed by Thierry Germain's effort but the other asked is this a wine I would enjoy to drink. Perhaps it just needs time.

The visit to Sancerre concluded the Loire Valley section of my trip. Still to come were visits to Chablis, the Champagne region and the Mosel, details of which will be highlighted in Part 2 of this newsletter to be published in a few weeks' time.

News and Notes

October brings the first of the new arrivals and this year promises to be very interesting. Among others we will be bringing in Lake's Folly Cabernet Sauvignon from the Hunter Valley in Australia and Moss Wood Cabernet and Chardonnay from Western Australia. Both of these wineries are at the head of the class in their regions. A new champagne house and wines from the Saar region in Germany will also be available in addition to new vintages of current favourites. A trip to California and Oregon is upcoming soon as well and I have been talking to several top pinot noir producers there so stay tuned.

John M. Sharpe

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