

The Burgundy Briefing

news, views and tastings

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Opinion

Jean-Loup Michel, Domaine Louis Michel et Fils, Chablis

The Interview:

In Brief:

Jean-Loup speaks about the new generation of vigneronns and their use of oak; and the effect of a changing climate – weather and market.



Jean-Loup Michel is one of Chablis's finest and most experienced vigneronns. He is unusual in making Chablis, including grand cru, in one hundred percent stainless steel. I asked him to comment on the new generation of vigneronns and their approach to winemaking, and on any other issues on which he cared to voice an opinion.

The new generation

Jean-Loup Michel divides young vigneronns into two camps. Those who are in tune with the older generation and who learn with their fathers (there are fewer of these nowadays), and those who study winemaking, travel and do *stages* with winemakers abroad. "The younger winemakers who have travelled widely, to Australia for example, are very influenced by their new experiences. They are influenced by winemaking in these countries which have enjoyed great success making wine in the style the consumer demands, rather than our way which was to make wine given what we have. These young guys have the market firmly in mind."

Jean-Loup's greatest concern, unsurprisingly, is the indiscriminate use of oak. "Most use it now, yet in the old days using barrels had nothing to do with taste. They were old barrels. There was

no money for new oak and we didn't want it or think about it. When stainless steel appeared, it was very easy to switch to tank, because we didn't care about the taste of wood. Now young people use it to make their wines less austere and the danger of this is standardization for Chablis."

The here and now market and mature Chablis

"Traditional Chablis takes a while to come around. There are two kinds of people. The traditional person who knows about wine and traditional Chablis, which means mature Chablis, but this group is shrinking and the other kind of people want wine now." It doesn't bother Jean-Loup too much as he feels that traditional Chablis can be drunk young, "It's fresh and pleasant... Petit Chablis to 1er Cru, but with grand cru you have to wait. If you make a wine which *must be* aged to be enjoyed, then you have a problem."

The days of austerity

"We are lucky, over thirty years ago Chablis could not be drunk young. It had too much acidity. You had to wait, but people were accustomed to drinking older wine." There was no one reason for this austerity, he believes, but rather a combination of factors. "Climate, cultivation of the vines, harvesting times...the whole thing has changed. In the old days people were very nervous of losing their crop. They had little money. The vineyards were not protected against frost and maladies and they were very vulnerable and very nervous. They did not wait long enough for harvest, not for full maturity, so they had higher acidity." However this doesn't mean they were harvesting earlier in the year. Jean-Loup's father harvested later, because the season was cooler. "Only since 1985 has the harvest taken place at the end of September, although in 2001 it was Oct 1st." Jean-Loup consulted his record of harvest dates in past years to see if there had been a notable shift.

1992 September 21st

1993 September 21st

2002 September 23rd

2003 August 30th

2004 October 4th

2005 September 17th

As can be seen, vintage has taken place generally in the latter third of September for the past 12 years with the exception of 2003. Jean-Loup thinks his parents harvest a week or so earlier, but the marked difference was in his grandfather's day (this is a fifth generation domaine) when it would snow directly after the harvest. The other big difference is the length of harvest. Where there is a predominance of one clone, or a limited number the grapes ripen at the same time, or at least the harvest is short, whereas in the older vineyards of his father and grandfather, planted with massal selection, there is a traditional, longer harvest.

Climate change and the vine cycle

Jean-Loup comments that harvest dates are not the only thing to have changed. "One might imagine that with the temperature increasing, the risk of frost would decrease, but the frost is still a danger, just not at the same time. The risk is a month earlier, because the budding is two weeks sooner. Although it was two weeks late in 2006, more normally it is earlier in April, so when there is frost in April, the vineyard is vulnerable." He gives the example of 2003. A severe

winter frost struck on April 7th when the buds were quite developed. "Frosts in April are common. It is still winter. Before, the vineyard was not fragile at this time as the vines were still in winter mode, but now the vines are in advance. The warmer climate - we can observe that the winters are not as hard, except this year - brings them forward."

Frosty issues

Jean-Loup's father started to use the traditional chaufettes (smudge pots or heaters) to heat the vineyard in 1959/60. He used a system with a lighter to go from pot to pot. This system exists today, but it is no longer manual. "Then came aspersion, but we never used it. You need water next to your vineyard and you must be very precise. It can be a catastrophe if it is too late or you finish too soon. Chaufettes are easier to control." Jean-Loup remarks that on the 7th April in 2003, the temperature plummeted to 6 degrees below zero. "Aspersion was not efficient. Some vineyards got frost." Aspersion is expensive to install, but cheaper to run, but Jean-Luc points out that one must apply to the authorities for a permit, which they are happy to grant at the moment, but in a period of water shortage, they might not be so accommodating.

Chaufettes can be fuelled by diesel or liquid gas. Jean-Loup found the latter less effective when he trialled it in the grand cru as the fuel needs heating, although he mentions that Duplessis uses it effectively. However gas is better for the environment than diesel and pollution is an issue, as is the price of diesel.

There is also the more recent option of using wires warmed by electricity, but Jean-Luc is sceptical about the efficiency of this system. "When the vegetation is early and grows away from the wire, it will not be so effective and may not be powerful enough against a very strong frost. The big houses went with electricity, but it is also expensive to establish and you need a source of electricity next to the vineyards."

The cost of frost

Jean-Loup will continue to use the traditional method, at no insubstantial cost. We worked out this cost:

400 chaufettes per hectare.

1 chaufette uses 2 litres of fuel per hour

= 1 hectare uses 800 litres per hour

1 litre of fuel costs E0.56.

Cost per hour is E448

For an extreme frost (eg April 4th 1990) they might heat the vineyard for 6 hours from 12am-6am (although a more normal period might be 2 to 3 hours starting early in the morning before dawn).

The price per hectare of Chaufettes for one (severe) night = E 2688

Bearing the costs of making wine in a marginal climate, remarks Jean-Loup "makes it impossible to compete with cost-effectively produced wines. People are not aware of the work and the cost of making quality wines. When you explain it the situation improves." However he is concerned that in the long term explaining will not suffice. "The connoisseurs are a shrinking group and young people want wines to drink immediately as they have no cellars. We cannot change our strategy of quality. We cannot make cheap wines. We cannot compete there, so we are condemned to produce quality and expensive wines." However, Jean-Loup is happy to be a man

condemned to such a fate. It entails more targeted and selective selling. "We aim to place our wine carefully in specific restaurants."

Manpower

He does worry about increasing costs however. "The costs are higher every year, because we do so much work in the vineyard. Salaries are very high and we have the 35 hour week. Every extra hour is overtime." The domaine employs one person to look after two to three hectares. There are 25 hectares, 12 of which are worked the 5 full-time domaine employees. "We cannot lose our spirit. We must adapt. Before we used to wait for the client. Now my sister and I are out in the market explaining the wines."

Is it more difficult to sell a premium wine without wood

"It doesn't help. Our wines are austere at the beginning, particularly because we have dropped the yield." Although they are austere, Jean-Loup points out that they hide nothing for oak is sometimes used to conceal thinness in wine. "We have a real position," points out his sister, "Jean-Loup is the guy who does not use wood. All those who come to our door do so because we *do not* use wood. Certainly this isn't easy in a trend where wood is loved, but we use it positively. We believe that people who love Chablis are looking for minerality." Feedback on trips to the States have encouraged the family that customers see their stainless steel approach as part of the domaine's identity and do not want change. "We have something very unique in the terroir. We want to allow the vineyard to express the minerality and not be market driven."