

The Burgundy Briefing

news, views and tastings

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Grower Profile



Vigneron profile no 6

In brief:

- name:** Benoît Droin
position: Responsible for Domaine Jean-Paul & Benoît Droin.
philosophy: "To accentuate the typicité of each individual wine."
personal: Thirty years old. Lives with his partner Marie Eugene and their son Louis beside the winery
interests: Sport and tasting wine

Thirty year old Benoît Droin is the fourteenth generation of vine growers, in a tradition which has passed unbroken from father to son since 1625. "For me it was evident I had to continue," says Droin. His brother is older, but preferred IT and his eighteen year old sister would like to be in tourism. "When I was fifteen I knew I wanted to work at the domaine and represent the next generation. I had to and I wanted to."

As a child he followed his father in the vines until he was fourteen and made an adolescent bid for independence. "I have a big character and I made a lot of problems for my parents," he admits. By the age of sixteen however he was studying hard, focusing on biology and chemistry and spent five years until 1996 at the Lycée Viticole in Beaune. "When I was there, I changed a lot. I was alone and I studied hard. I wanted to learn more." He found he was most interested in oenology. "The chemistry of wine and the tasting," interested me. Naturally he progressed to Dijon University to do a diploma in oenology.

During this period he did a stage with Vincent Dauvissat and then at Laroche. He chose not to study outside Chablis, although he appreciates it could have widened his perspective. "I like all the wine around the world, but wanted to concentrate on Chablis."

He was determined to make his own way and not be unduly influenced by others. This extended to his relationship with his father, who was there for help if asked, but Droin evidently did not want a mentor figure. "I preferred to train apart from my father and to stand alone."

Competitive spirit

Sport has always been important to Droin. His favourite sport was rugby, but after he broke his collar bone he moved to football and squash. "I don't like athletics and running," he admits. "I like team games and I want to win." He evidently enjoys pitching himself against others and views this as part of his role as a winemaker. "Twenty years ago there were just a few good wine producers, now there are many and I want to be at the top with the best. This is a big challenge because many are good. The competition is tough."

In 1998 he left to do national service. "I like the army," he confesses. "I like their philosophy." After a year with the Police National in Paris, he feels that the discipline had influenced his character and helped him form his method of working. "To be precise in my organisation."

He admits that it was difficult for both father and son when he returned home in 1999. "For me it was difficult because everything was new and I had to learn the style of the appellation." In 1999 Jean-Paul handed over to his son. In 2000 there were a few changes, but only in 2002 did Benoît really begin to apply his philosophy of winemaking. "My father was very, very open. He said I can do what I want and change it all." Benoît was keen to instil some order into the process, which he found chaotic. Father and son were clearly very different in their approach, but it seems that Benoît has convinced his father. "He now realises that you gain time from order." Benoît mentions that his mother was very important at this time. She helped in the tastings. Jean-Paul's style was different, but together the parents agreed that their son should be allowed to follow his own style.

"To stay at the top, you have to change," he remarks. His approach is to stay in touch with the market, but also to be true to his style.

The winery

The first changes Benoît made were in the winery, perhaps not surprisingly for someone most drawn to oenology. He does much more analysis than his father used to. Jean-Paul worked with an oenologist, which is common practice, but Benoît wanted to do it himself: "I said no,"

Domaine Droin and the old winery

Perhaps the most notable change at Domaine Droin is in the oak regime. This was not something Benoît had decided in advance. He liked his father's wine, which he had always tasted in bottle. However when he began to taste from tank, he realised that he liked the minerality and classic profile of the domaine's wine and wanted to preserve it.

In the winery now, things are all pretty much as he wants them. He has new pneumatic presses and new temperature controlled tanks, enabling him to divide the wine into small lots. Six hl is the smallest. The whole harvest can be made in the new winery. Benoît has made other improvements including reduced filtering and fining.

The vineyard

The domaine currently has 25.5 hectares, an increase from the 19 hectares when he took over. This includes 4 hectares of Montmains - a parcel he began renting from a cousin in 2002. 0.8 hectares of Mont de Millieu was added in 2003 together with some new plantings of generic Chablis.

At first Droin made no changes in the vineyard, busy focusing on pulling the winery into shape. Now he is happy with the winery he feels he can move the wine up a quality level by improving the vineyards, specifically Vosgros and Mont de Milleu. His objective is to reduce the vigour and yield of the vines, which he is tackling with debudding, short pruning and cover crops. His father is very instrumental in the latter, experimenting with 'herbes'. These have the added benefit of helping combat erosion, compaction and are beneficial after rain in absorbing the water and in leaving the soil more aerated. Jean-Paul has had some success with grasses which don't need ploughing in. All the vines now have cover crops where the tractors are driven, just in the middle of the row - not under the vine, which is bare soil.

The pruning has been changed to just one baguette or two small canes, which has decreased the yield by 30%. Droin feels the traditional system bunches the canes together and he wants something more like Guyot for better aeration and fewer problems with rot. He feels that in 2005 the change in pruning and cover crops have had a significant effect on reducing yield. The average yield was 50 hl/ha for the Chablis and 40-45 for the premier and grand cru.

Droin's Philosophy



"To accentuate the typicité of each individual wine. So if it is mineral - express it, but if it is not, then to do something different. I want to have the extremes; to accentuate the differences."

He assesses the soil and exposition of each vineyard and tailors his approach in the winery accordingly. "The vineyard changes the winemaking. For example in Vaucoupin you are on stone – kimmeridgian, which is mineral and I want to reveal this in the wine so it all goes into tank and not in barrel. I did this first in 2000 and you could really see the difference. When I decide to change the approach it is always a combination of two things...tasting the wine without oak and seeing the vineyard and the soil."

He does not follow a totally organic approach, but *lutte raisonnée*, which he describes as 80% of the way there. "When you respect the soil and the vines you have more life, more bacteria in the soil," but he is not interested in certification, preferring the freedom of using a product when necessary.

I wondered if and how he feels he has evolved as a winemaker in the past seven years. He worries that he is less than he was then. At the beginning he didn't judge himself and just got on with things. "Now I always want to be better." He vacillates between being happy and unhappy with his wine. "It is very difficult work. When you are older some say it is easier, but when you are older you must be better and better. We do strange work. It is a little community and you always must be good. You don't appreciate this when you are young. Also when you are young, you don't imagine you can do badly." He reflected on the death this year of Denis Mortet, commenting on the expectations of journalists "and colleagues may want to knock you at the top – not for me yet – but I understand the huge pressure from your peers – like showbiz in wine. The consumer is the best. They just like wine."

Personal

Weaknesses: "I am too assured sometimes. It is good for competition but not good for me." (Droin had evidently rallied after the moment of introspection. One gets the impression that any doubts about his wine are immediately followed by action to address the issue).

Strengths: "I am a perfectionist, but I could exchange the two. They are both strengths and weaknesses."

Ambitions: "To make wine which people like. This is not easily evident. You really must keep in touch with what is wanted."

"I always say that if I had to change my job I would prefer not to be a winemaker, but someone tasting and buying wine...the good part of the job. Here you have to do the best that you can, but when you buy, you can taste widely and it is easier to control what you want."

He lives next to the new winery on the outskirts of Chablis, in a house built for him by his parents. "It's important for me to be close." He has a son, Louis, aged 18 months and his partner Marie Eugene Tupinier is a lawyer.

Main interests outside wine: He admits these are few. When he is not at work he is jet skiing and quad biking, among other sports. He doesn't like to read or watch television. In fact his main interest is tasting wine. He meets with a group of friends every week to taste wine blind and have a meal in a different venue. Some of these friends are winemakers, but as many are not. "Those not in winemaking, are broader minded," he remarks. He tries to taste as widely as possible. "At my table it is very rare you will have Chablis." He likes the whites of Saint Aubin and Meursault and while he likes the reds of the Languedoc, the Rhone and Chile, he *loves* the reds of Italy, particularly Barbera and Barolo. "It is in my character to like the best and for me the best whites come Burgundy, so in my cellar there is white Burgundy and red Italian."

Droin's desert island wine

Le Montrachet 1960, Domaine Ramonet. "It was a monster and very great. I had it in 1995."

Château Sociando-Mallet, Cru Bourgeois, Haut-Médoc. "I like Bordeaux and this is more Merlot which I prefer this to Cabernet Sauvignon. I would like a 1993."

Michele Chiarlo 1988, Barbera d'Asti. "I don't know if it is a great vintage. I bought it in Paris at a show. They showed me this wine and I thought it is wonderful. I said I would like 6 bottles and I had to persuade them to sell me some."

Cluizel Roche, Cote Rotie, 1991 "I love this wine. It was rich and fine. It was everything - very complete."

Meursault, Tesson, Domaine Roulot. "I tried a half bottle of 1996, Les Tesson. It was very mineral and very rich. The kind of wine I like."

Next issue: François Mikulski, Meursault