

The Burgundy Briefing

news, views and tastings

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Grower Profile

François Mikulski



Vigneron profile no 7

In brief:

name: François Milkuski
position: Responsable for Domaine François Mikulski, Meursault

Philosophy :

In Burgundy we are lucky to have good potential, so we should explain the different terroir, but I don't like the way the industry makes a show about wine. It's food, not a movie star!

personal: Lives with his wife and three daughters in Meursault

interests: Riding, mountain biking and scuba diving

Behind the smooth exterior, behind the laid back veneer of this winemaker lies an interesting story. As might be supposed by the name Mikulski, François did not have the Burgundian upbringing of most who have been profiled to date in The Burgundy Briefing. He is of Polish descent on his paternal side. His father was just 19 when war broke out in 1939 and escaped with to England to fight with Polish troops based in England and then to Scotland where he was based for the duration of the war. He is named in the film A Bridge To Far. After the war he worked for NATO in Luxembourg where his son went to school.

On François Mikulski's maternal side, his grandfather is part of the extended Boillot family in Meursault (not Henri or Jean Marc). His grandfather and his uncle Pierre Boillot, who was to become an important role model, were winemakers. Although not the well known Boillots, his direct family have a claim to fame. In 1946 his grandfather designed the first enjambeur (over vine tractor) in the Côte d'Or which he built with Monsieur Dock a garage mechanic. The original model is still with his uncle. A subsequent model, which was built in 1947, can be seen in the museum of Château-de-Savigny.

François Mikulski was born on July 25, 1963 in Dijon. During his childhood, he had many foreign friends. For the sixteen year old Mikulski Meursault represented the fun of camp group and summer vacations. As an adolescent he was drawn to Burgundy by the vision of an endless summer holiday. He was not quite sure what to do with his life, but at the age of seventeen he decided to knuckle down and learn about winemaking, something his mother encouraged.

While we were talking, Mikulski brought out a couple of older wines for me to try....first up was Poruzot.

Meursault, Poruzot 2000

This has an exotic aroma with some tertiary mushroom characters. It is very expressive and opulent on the palate with sweet fruit and savoury biscuit flavours. It is dense, broad and quite muscular – a silky, rippling muscularity, and it has a firm toasty finish. Score 17.5-18

Study

He wasn't keen to go to the Lycée Viticole in Beaune (the path taken by most aspiring Burgundian winemakers). "I studied in a school interesting for people like me, where you alternate between work and school. It gives you practical experience." This school, called Grand Champs, specialises in teaching agriculture and viticulture. "I preferred the spirit of this school." Not only did he feel that the curriculum was more in touch with the times, but he liked his fellow pupils. "I studied with people from the middle of nowhere. Farmers really, while at the lycée I would have been studying with people like me. I wanted to be more in touch with people who worked in the fields. These people know a lot. At the Lycée the people were less practical."

The school was also much more rural and very disciplined which appealed. "You had to clean everything at the end of the week...like being in the army. This self-discipline became engrained." He evidently had a good time here. He was sporty and played a lot of rugby. The school gave him a plenty of practical experience in the vineyard. If one of François' daughters decided to become a winemaker, he would want her to have this practical experience, but also to work in different places and countries, "to see the best and the worst," before coming back to work in Burgundy.

Fireman François

From the age of four François had fancied becoming a fireman. His year of military service gave him the opportunity. He became a fire fighter in Paris. He was following in family footsteps, for his uncle was a not only a Meursault winemaker, but a fireman for the village. "It must be the best job with the army. It was a good year. I learnt a lot about safety."

OS experience

When he came home, Mikulski met the Californian winemaker Ted Lemon. (Ted Lemon produces excellent Californian Pinot Noir under the label Littoria. When I visited him a few years ago, I was impressed by his Burgundian approach. He makes individual terroir based cuvée in a very non-interventionist way). Mikulski was also impressed and keen to go to the States, but the government had just stopped the programme of sending students. His father stepped in and paid for his flight. He worked for Calera with Josh Johnson and then Steve Doener (now at Christom in Oregon). The experience, he tells me, helped on the practical side with his English, which is excellent. "I loved California. When you're 20 years old it's wonderful. Calera had a Burgundian way of making wine. It was my first proper winemaking experience. They worked by gravity. The winery, which was on a hillside, had seven levels and they never used a pump." Mikulski was

clearly impressed by this. "Today I use this idea with an air compressor and now I have a peristaltic pump. The wine does not touch anything mechanic. Basically it pushes the wine through. This is a simple thing, but effective - like using gravity."

Mikulski was in California for the 1983 harvest. "Not a good vintage for Pinot!" However there were other tasting experiences to make up for this, "Zinfandel was a big discovery!" he lost no time in extending his palate - tasting Zinfandel and Chenin Blanc. He rented a room "in a huge winery in Almaden", which he shared with one of the oenologists. "Every night we tried something different. The winery chef was living next door, so there was plenty of food and wine. I gained 7 kilos in 5 months."

Exchanges with the New World

Mikulski considers the most useful things Californian winemakers have learnt from Burgundy include "our traditional ways and spirit of winemaking. While from them, we learnt the importance of recognising the competition. To sell our wine (Pinot Noir especially) we have to better than them. If we say that Burgundy is the best for Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, we have no choice we must prove it. We must fight where we are strongest...on terroir. We must prove that terroir is there and is important." Mikulski considers that Burgundy has changed in its approach, but more changes are needed in the vineyard. In terms of oenology, he thinks they have benefited from the New World approach in some areas.

Back in Burgundy

In 1984 Mikulski returned to Burgundy, where he worked until 1991 for his uncle Pierre Boillot. "I was like his right arm. The most important thing he taught me was to think with the weather and with the 'outside' which would include the market." His uncle was very strict. He inspired Mikulski to be organised as well as influencing his commercial approach. "He told me, 'if you want to be free, you must bottle the wine yourself... and this has always been my vision. If your name is on the bottle, you are accountable for the wine in the bottle. You need to be able to set your price and quality and to manage the future.'" This was not always easy. "The price in the late 80s and in 1998 was the same if you bottled yourself or if sold to negociant, so you have to hold firm in these times." He sees these years as a good learning curve. He learnt how to receive people in the cellar and hone his communication skills. However, as is expected from the younger generation, he disagreed with his uncle in some areas and wanted to make more radical changes. "To progress you must take the best and synthesise it."

By 1991 his uncle was 60. Mikulski considered the time had come for him to move on. As he is not Pierre Boillot's son, he could not inherit. Two weeks after informing his uncle of this decision, Pierre Boillot came up with an alternative - Mikulski could rent the Boillot vines. This was a turning point. Just 2 months later a neighbour (Monsieur d'Autume) phoned to give him the option of renting 2 hectares of Meursault, Poruzot, Charmes and Genevrières. It was perfect timing, but Mikulski and his wife Marie-Pierre didn't have the money. Marie-Pierre went to the bank and came away with a loan for a house in the village and rent for the land. Their new home, built in 1870, needed work, but it had an excellent, cold and humid cellar built into the rock.

"It was an exciting time, but we had no money and the price of Meursault was very low; the lowest for many years. One barrel in 1992 would sell for (the equivalent of) 1000E or less. It made me want to bottle my own." So with this in mind it was back to the bank to borrow more money to buy bottles and corks. They started in 1991 and the first vintage was the 1992 harvest,

bottled in 1993. "Two years with no money, borrowing from the bank, but we were beginning from the bottom, so we couldn't fall lower." Meanwhile the couple were busy integrating into Meursault. "You must belong to an association. I was a voluntary fire fighter and played tennis. We socialised." He mentions Hubert Chavy, one of the people who was helpful in these early years and lent him equipment.

Changes

Mikulski changed the way the vineyards were managed. He stopped using chemicals, introduced ploughing, changed the approach to pruning and lowered the yields. He spreads 5-10 tonnes of compost every 3 years, ploughing it in "to help make the fragile vines strong." He considers that Guyot helps produce smaller grapes, but if the whole vineyard is pruned to guyot can become too productive. Hence in every 7 plants in the row, two are cordon pruned.

In California Mikulski had picked up some useful tips on cleanliness. "Calera cleaned every night." He was impressed with their thoroughness, but has modified their approach. "They used a harsh soap. We don't want to kill everything...we want natural yeast...we must use natural yeast if we want to speak about terroir." He does not want to fight the Californian's at their own game. "In the New World they are much freer than we are. You can do interesting things with this. You can create a wine to suit the taste of the market, using for example added yeast, but we are in Meursault and should emphasise our terroir and identity. We cannot fight their battle. We must be part of tradition. We sell dreams, when you drink a bottle of our wine you drink a part of Burgundy. As Burgundy is very small there will always be a place for us in the wine world. Meursault, for example, produces just 2.5 million bottles." He points out that using 'New World' quantities of new oak did Meursault no favours.

Apart from keeping his winery somewhat cleaner than was 'traditional' in Burgundy some time ago, he has taken a different approach from his uncle in the length of ageing. Whereas the wine was fermented in tank and left the winery within a year, Mikulski ferments the white in barrel and gives it 16-18 months in barrel before bottling. The red fermentation has stretched from 10 days to 15-16 days. He of course uses a pneumatic press and has recently acquired a new bottling machine.

The Milkuski name is not very traditional so he decided to create a non-traditional label, a modern label to appeal to younger customers. (Although he found his uncle's customers just didn't relate to the label.) He found a crest for Mikulski in a book which he has used on his corks.

I wondered how he feel he has evolved as a winemaker? "I am almost in the middle, but it is a question of money. I need money to invest. Twenty barrels it is a lot... and it is very small. When you buy a very expensive press and you use it for just 30 hours an year. So when you begin, it is difficult to get high quality, because you don't have sufficient funds. After ten years you can, for example, can buy the bottling machine to make the bottling as perfect as possible and then you think about the future."

Mikulski is adamant about 'preserving' his vineyards, "to work intelligently." Although he is aware of those around him moving to biodynamics, he is not yet ready for this move. "I don't think it makes the best wine." he takes a lutte raisonnée approach, but says this doesn't really say much. He is sure that for alternative ways to work, such as the use of pheromones, everyone must follow the same approach and mentions a communal project organised by the syndicate to use pheromones against cochylis. "From Blangy to Auxey-Duresses, everyone put capsules in their vineyards. It seemed to be successful, and since we stopped we have no cochylis, but we don't know the capsules were responsible for this." While he concedes that biodynamics seems a good

way to tackle certain problems he is not fully convinced, not least because of the difficulties of persuading everyone to participate.

Objectives

"I have my winery. I don't want to buy vineyards." It makes no sense for him to buy. He will have the vineyards for as long as he needs them. "When renting you are protected if you can prove that it is economically necessary for you to rent. You can then keep the vineyards until you retire." He admits that given the opportunity he would like some Perrières to work with. "Maybe one day I will be lucky."

This all seems quite conservative, but he harbours a wacky dream to plant wines in tropical area. His brother lives in New Caledonia and Mikulski fancies planting on coral atoll.

Strengths and weaknesses

"I am not patient enough – with computers for instance. I hate it if they are not fast enough."

He struggles a bit to think of some strengths, as any modest man might... "I am professional...and I always want to learn more. I never think I know best."

Philosophy

"What I don't like about the wine business is making a show about wine. For me it's like food. It's simple. One doesn't need to talk about it, like the big stars of the cinema." He is not keen on journalists, particularly when editorial is linked with advertising. "I liked Clive (Coates) approach because he tasted and wrote. I don't like La Revue du Vin de France. Bourgogne Aujourd'hui is OK."

We are lucky here in Burgundy because we have good potential, but we are just passing though." He sees it as part of his responsibility as a winemaker in Burgundy is to try and explain terroir. "We must show the difference between Poruzot and Genevrières and we must preserve this difference. Now we are on the right track, unlike 10 years ago, when reds were dark and oaky." He takes the view that terroir is a combination of three factors – "the vines, the ground and the people – it has to include the winemakers." ...

Personal

Mikulski married to Marie-Pierre Germain (Château-de-Chorey) in 1993. She has been involved with the business since the beginning and handles the accounts. Her husband describes her as the 'super-secretary.' They have three girls 12, 13 and 17 who love horses and family interests include riding and cycling, including mountain biking. Mikulski also enjoys scuba diving and last year the family bought a small boat, which they keep on the river. They live in Meursault in the C19th house the couple renovated.

Genevrières 2000

This has a firm rich and generous bouquet. The palate shows secondary characters with toasted almonds. It has a pleasant flowing profile, good clarity and reasonable depth and complexity and

a slightly exotic twist. It is nicely balanced and drinking well now. I rather prefer the Porusot.
Score 17

Mikulski's desert island wine

No domaines sadly...

Bourgogne Aligoté 2004 "because there's nothing better with shells or small fishes fried."

Meursault Genevrières "because it's my roots, and I don't want to forget it (2001 vintage)"

Montrachet "in case if I have a surprise visit, for big occasion (1986 for instance)"

Grand Cru Côte de Nuits 1991, "something like Vosne Romanée or Chambolle Grand Cru, just in case if I can trap some winged game."

"A sweet wine like Chenin Blanc 97 from Anjou could be correct before a little nap."