



## THE BIRTH OF SOUFRE RAISONNÉ IN BURGUNDY

While some Côte d'Or producers are increasing the amount of sulfur dioxide they use, in response to the problems of premature oxidation, a small but growing band of natural-winemakers is heading in the opposite direction. Alice Feiring charts the rise of the movement and introduces some of the producers whose curiosity is broadening the definition of Burgundy and offering other interpretations of its myriad terroirs

**N**o wine region, not even prestigious Burgundy, is ever stagnant. Prior to the late 1800s, when phylloxera killed most of the vines, the region cultivated diversity: Aligoté grew on the hill of Corton; César might have been among the vines in Vosne; Volnay was considered a delicate flower of a wine. Some would say that the biggest revolution in Burgundy since then came in the late 1980s or early 1990s, when new barriques were introduced, or when consultant Guy Accad introduced his fancy high-sulfur cold soak, or when the use of stems fell from, and then more recently returned to, favor. Others say, No, the big rumble came when people like Dominique Lafon went back to the vines and worked the earth, as well as making the wine, when *négoce* became domaine.

I am convinced that another evolution, if not revolution, is in motion and that it is bound to jostle the carriage more than a bit. The effect of the natural-wine movement is being felt not only on the fringes of the Mâconnais but right in the heart of the Côte d'Or. You see the evidence in Beaune *cavistes*, wine bars, and restaurants. The big news, as I see it, is that winemakers are experimenting with doing less. Wait. Don't panic. That doesn't mean that classic producers need lock the gates against the

anti-sulfur hipsters who have no fear of volatility or who make carbonic-maceration wines for early drinking. It could well mean, however, that there is growing curiosity and that local winemaking methodologies are being increasingly questioned.

I compiled a list of Burgundy producers who are already working with a nod to natural. I concentrated on the Côte d'Or, even though I could have added many more names if I had included the less pricey parts of the region. I wanted to focus on the high-rent districts where there is more at risk when shaking the status quo. When my list grew to more than two dozen producers, I booked my ticket back to France to see if this turn of events was a blip or a burst.

### The blurring of lines

My focus is left-field wines, organic viticulture, minimal handling in the cellar, the naturals. And even in Burgundy, those are the wines that give me most pleasure. Trust me: You won't see me pouring away wines from DRC or D'Auvenay, Lafarge, Mugnier, or Fourrier. But I know many classic drinkers would be shocked by how many Burgundies are just too flat for my palate.

While one well-known authority in the region denied that much is changing, it does not seem that way to me. I remember

## feature / ferment / Soufre Raisonné in Burgundy

an unusual event at the 2014 Grands Jours de Bourgogne, the biennial trade tastings, where thousands of visitors traipse through the region's villages to sample the new releases. Before the gala dinner in Marsannay, there was a viewing of the new documentary film *Natural Resistance*, by Jonathan Nossiter (of *Mondovino* fame), which celebrates Italian natural winemakers. I heard afterward that some left the dinner disgruntled, but others circled the filmmaker for his autograph. I saw the lines between conventional and outsider blurring.

Sitting in the field behind the stone farmhouse of wine shipper Becky Wasserman in Bouilland, I pondered the issue further. After a huge tasting, I was unwinding with some bubbles, swirling my glass while struggling to eavesdrop on the rapid French conversations around me. Within earshot sat a cluster from the new Burgundy generation, deep into a schmooze. One of them was Nicolas Faure, who farms in Nuits-St-Georges and Pernand-Vergelesses and whose wines I found striking, gulpable. His manner of working? "*Soufre raisonné*," he joked, riffing on the well-known term *lutte raisonnée*, a form of viticulture that might be mostly organic but allows for the use of man-made chemicals when deemed necessary. Another notable producer was young, fair-haired Armand Heitz of Domaine Heitz-Lochardet in Puligny-Montrachet, his hands tough from working the vines. He is also experimenting with less sulfur dioxide. At the middle of it all was Sylvain Pataille, the pope of this new movement, based in Marsannay. His recent Pinot Noirs and Aligotés had no added sulfur dioxide during vinification. Near him sat his neighbor, Bruno Clair's son Edouard, who, still working under his father's supervision, was talking about his desire to make no-sulfur wine. His father might have been a firebrand in Marsannay, but was he really ready for this radical change? Was Burgundy ready for what might prove to be not a fad but the future?

### Defining Burgundy and terroir

I suppose something depends on how narrowly we define Burgundy. For example, does Burgundy have to be super-concentrated? Does it really need, as Robert Parker once said, "100 per cent toasty new oak"? Does all Meursault have to emulate Coche-Dury? Do the wines need to age longer than 30 years? Is Burgundy a style, like Napa, or is it a place? Or is it wine from beautiful soil and well-tended vines, sensibly made? I posed the question to Wasserman, an American who has lived and worked in the area since 1970 and who has witnessed the changes firsthand. She replied, "The composer is the geology; the instrument, the vineyards; the musician, the vigneron. But the tendency today is to admire the song rather than the singer. In the end, no single interpretation has ever served Burgundy well."

The question of what Burgundy is has also been debated by the Bureau Interprofessionnel des Vins de Bourgogne (BIVB), in charge of marketing the wines. I discovered during the 2014 Grands Jours that the organization was trying to find an acceptable term for wines that were out of the ordinary and might not, therefore, qualify for appellation status but that deserved something more dignified than the existing Vin de France. Finding the perfect phrase was like trying to empty a lake with a slotted spoon. Claire Naudin—a passionate advocate for sensible winemaking, who makes the wine at her family domaine, Naudin-Ferrand in Magny-lès-Villers—suggested

Vins à Forte Personnalité (VFP)—"Wines with a Strong Personality." I suggested Eccentrique. But finally, in the fall of 2015, an agreement was reached. From now on, those at initial peer tastings who try to identify wines with what they consider to be faults, to prevent the wines from reaching the market, will have a new option. They can flag wines that might step outside the norm but are not crazily bacterial as VFP. This is a serious acknowledgment that another expression of terroir is possible.

### A new holy grail

While natural wines are about more than having no added sulfur dioxide, the additive is the sticking point for many. Often considered essential for stabilization and longevity, it also reduces a wine's liveliness. Nevertheless, making a wine without sulfur dioxide—or at least with as little as possible—is the new holy grail that many, even in Burgundy, seem ready to seek. Some are venturing into risky terrain, but the reward is greater vibrancy.

Naudin and her like-minded husband, Jean-Yves Bizot, live near his vines in Vosne-Romanée. Claire's largest family holdings are in the Hautes-Côtes. She started to ease up on extraction 15 years ago. When I first met her in 2011, she fretted about the wines she fermented and raised without sulfur dioxide: "Some people don't understand," she lamented. But during my most recent visit she noted, "Now when people taste Orchis [Mascula, her Bourgogne Hautes-Côtes de Beaune], no one says that its color is too light." She admits that she might have lost some old customers, but the new ones she attracts more than make up for them.

Some are taking small steps, one at a time. Domaine Henri & Gilles Buisson in St-Romain now has two no-sulfur cuvées. At his family domaine, Chandon de Briailles in Savigny-lès-Beaune, François de Nicolay makes wine with his sister Claude. He has not only started a natural-wine *négoce* but has also convinced Claude that they should reduce sulfur dioxide levels at Chandon de Briailles itself; so, in 2014 they made one barrel of their Savigny-lès-Beaune Premier Cru Les Lavières without it. The changes at Domaine Simon Bize could be dramatic. Patrick Bize's widow Chisa told me that she had long wanted her husband to start working biodynamically. He was skeptical. But after I tasted with her on a stormy day in June 2015, she explained to me, "I was reading the last interview Patrick gave before he died in 2013. In it, he told the writer that we were biodynamic, even though we were not. It was like a message, a present, he sent to me after his death. Or at least I took it that way." More recently there has also been a shift in sulfur dioxide usage. "Before, we were systematic about it; now, we taste and think, *Do we need it or not?*" She found that one of the benefits of using less is a more aromatic wine with a broader palate.

### Growing momentum

How and why have such changes come about? It's not that difficult to track them. Natural wine is, of course, linked to organic or biodynamic farming. Now widespread in Burgundy, biodynamics was introduced to the area in 1979 by Jean-Claude Rateau, who continues to make Beaune wines of great and

Opposite (clockwise from top left): François de Nicolay and his sister Claude at Domaine Chandon de Briailles; Claire Naudin; Sylvain Pataille; Jean-Claude Rateau.



## TASTING

### Le Vin Plus Simplement 2009 En Busigny Gamay

Planted in 1957, *échalas*-trained recently, there was lots of material here. At first there was a popcorn, malo-like note and the delightful scratch of tannin, but even though it was cloud-like, there was density and so much life. After conversation, it opened up like a day lily, and the popcorn faded. From the massive, warm 2009 vintage, the alcohol was 14%—unlike any other vintage for him. I wanted to take this away and study it for days, but I was too timid to ask.

### Domaine Prieuré Roch 2001 Chambertin Clos de Bèze

Oh. My. Lord. Goodness gracious me. You pretty little piece of intensity, you. Twiggy and intense and a reader of erotica, as well as Dostoevsky. Mild tannins. Blood. Powder. Limpid. Grip.

### Chantrèves 2013 Volnay

This is Volnay as the history books say it should be, dancing and light, and it unveils with every day. Day five, it did somersaults with acid and perk. There was that cherry and zip. It gave joy. I call it a classic, but those who are used to more sturdy wines might find it not so much. Just give into it; this is Burgundy with grace.

### Maison En Belles Lies 2013 Aloxe and 2013 Corton

The Aloxe carries the whole cluster with delicacy; open tank, very elegant, ethereal, and spicy. The Corton has more profound tannins, the whole cluster isn't as marked; it has a tiny bit of new wood and a long grip. These are serious wines and no sulfur added.

### Domaine Naudin-Ferrand 2011 Orchis Masculine Bourgogne Hautes- Côtes de Beaune

From the Hautes-Côtes, just above Pernand-Vergelesses. Elegant, inviting, generous; bloom and roses. The wine made me think of some romantic 1950s movie star with the most subtle yet come-hither perfume.



underrated beauty. A decade later, natural and no-sulfur wines were introduced by Dominique Derain in St-Aubin and Domaine Prieuré Roch in Nuits-St-Georges.

Domaine de Chassorney in St-Romain, and the almost-organic *négoce* Philippe Pacalet in Beaune, came next. But it was Prieuré Roch's wines that most confounded the locals, as well as some wine experts. "Too stemmy and light," Burgundy authority Clive Coates MW called the wines of Henry Roch, the nephew of Lalou Bize-Leroy. The wines, made using whole-bunch fermentation, seemed too light, too perfumed, and too like *vin-de-soif* to be from Burgundy. Yet in certain circles in Scandinavia, the United States, and Japan, those more natural expressions achieved cult status.

By 2005, biodynamic and organic were entrenched, and devotees of no-sulfur wines could find more local outposts. Natural wine was quietly growing. It helped that older techniques were coming back: stems and whole-bunch fermentation were embraced; extraction was no longer the ideal; color was less important. Now, if you combine the hardcore no-SO<sub>2</sub> producers with those such as Claire Naudin who allow sulfur additions "but not too much," there's more than enough noise for the movement to be heard.

One of the new producers to watch is Chanterèves in Savigny. I'm not sure the "strong personality" sticker will be invoked for their bottles, since they are neither strong nor eccentric, but haunting. This is a serious *négoce*, headed up by Tomoko Kuriyama and her husband Guillaume Bott. Tomoko came from a high-sulfite background in Germany, where she studied enology and worked in the Rheingau. The couple still hold other day jobs—she with Domaine Chandon de Briailles, and he with Domaine Simon Bize.

Their wine philosophy is emblematic of the newcomers in the *soufre raisonné* group. Why the attitude toward added sulfites? It probably helps that she is highly allergic, but she would make the sacrifice and suffer the nausea and headaches if she felt sulfites helped make better wine. Her deeper answer reveals how this movement has caught fire. "The first eye-opener was Yvon Metras's Fleury," she says of the Beaujolais producer. Then she met Philippe Pacalet, Frédéric Cossard (of Domaine de Chassorney), and Jean-Yves Bizot—and drank their wines. "We simply love the aesthetic elements and the raw energy of low-SO<sub>2</sub> wines." But she makes sure to add, "The wines should be clean and low on volatility." As for the manner in which they're made, it's "infusion instead of extraction." Tomoko told me the first time I visited her, as she siphoned some of the 2013 Volnay into my glass. What does that mean? She thinks winemaking is more like making a cup of tea than juicing. I've since had that 2013 in bottle—even in a blind tasting it shone—and for days afterward it kept on revealing itself. The note that I scribbled on its label read, "High-note perfume, cherry and acid, with a long finish on a checkmark, even after day 5." The wine was positively transparent.

But will conventional customers balk when they come across such a wine? I asked Jason Haynes, a director of Flint Wines, Chanterève's London importer, whether these wines would offend the sensibilities of longtime Burgundy collectors. "I am sure some old-school Burgundy drinkers will continue to

Opposite: Diagrams indicating the thought devoted to SO<sub>2</sub> at Chandon de Briailles, where in 2014 a barrel of Savigny-lès-Beaune Les Lavières was made entirely without.

buy the more extracted, powerful Burgundies they have been drinking for the past 20 years. The likes of Chanterèves will perhaps never register on their radar, and they are unlikely to change at this stage. However," he continued, "there are so many new drinkers and recent converts to Burgundy that there is plenty of demand for this new style of Burgundy already. A large proportion of current Burgundy drinkers may well believe that this is what Burgundy has always been about. They have never known anything else."

### An inspirational visit

On one of my last nights in Beaune I sat at the bar of Les Lunes, a good little dinner spot just opposite Hôtel Le Cep. I was going over my notes from visits where I had been tasting for the first time. Pierre Fenals, of Maison En Belles Lies in St-Aubin, discovered biodynamics through a book he was compelled to pick up at a flea market in Paris; he raised cows at first, and then brought his passion to the vine. He is now over 70, he does all the vineyard work himself, and he glows with joy; he's never been happier in his life. It was an inspirational visit that I had with him, and his red Corton was particularly stunning, the first unsulfured Corton for me.

Equally inspirational for other reasons was Bernard van Berg and his Le Vin Le Plus Simplement. Van Berg works unconventionally in Meursault. To start with, he made sure he bought 4ha (10 acres) of land so that 2ha could be free of vines. To do so, he had to buy in less ritzy territory, such as the land producing what used to be called *grand vin ordinaire*. He uses a variety of trellising, including *échalas*, so his Chardonnay and Gamay in En Busigny look as though they belong on the slopes of Cornas rather than in Meursault. His work in the vines is painstaking; he makes minuscule amounts of wine; and yes, for a Vin de France, the prices are breathtaking. He uses no sulfites in his reds, and no other additives either. He's a purist in life and in his work as well.

Fenals and Van Berg both make wine I fell for in very different ways. Both older men, they came to winemaking late in life and are utterly passionate about what they do, unconcerned about finding conventional drinkers. As I looked back over my visits—the people, the different generations, the age span, and the motivations—I saw that this remarkable change was coming from the winemaker's curiosity, not from an enologist's, or consultant's, or critic's recommendations.

Taking a break, I looked up to watch the chef work, then looked down the bar and saw a silver-haired gentleman, perhaps 70 years old. I focused on the bottle in front of him. I had quickly stereotyped him and decided he'd be drinking Domaine de la Pousse d'Or or similar. But instead he was drinking a Philippe Pacalet 2009 Gevrey-Chambertin. Perhaps he was American? An importer? The man held the glass up to the light, bemused by its translucence. I had this fantasy that he was shocked by it, perhaps even offended by it. Where did that fruit come from? Was that really Burgundy? Why was the color so delicate? I then turned my attention back to my own glass of Pataille Bourgogne Rouge and dinner. But when I paid my bill, I saw the diner was still there and had gone on to some sake. I couldn't contain my curiosity any longer. I excused myself for imposing and asked the gentleman if he would mind telling me what he thought of the Pacalet? He looked at me, smiled broadly, and replied forcefully, "*Le Pacalet? Formidable!*" ■