

CHATEAU DE ROUANNE

8ème Newsletter Louis Barruol 2020

In Vinsobres, in the county of Grignan,
in the Rhone Valley between Dauphiné and Provence

On May 27, 2019, we became the owners of Château de Rouanne in Vinsobres, a magnificent historic estate surrounded by an outstanding, unbroken, 62-hectare vineyard in an exceptional winegrowing site. Only two years ago, I could never have imagined buying this property, but its roots can in fact be traced back to our family history and our love of the finer things in life. My grandfather Jean Barruol, an historian and archaeologist, and my father Henri Barruol, a former cabinetmaker trained in the art of 18th-century techniques who became a winegrower with a heightened sense of aesthetics, have strongly influenced the way I approach my profession as a winegrower. We can look for beauty wherever it exists, both in tangible and intangible places. The joy of occasionally achieving beauty fosters the courage and determination that are essential to realising projects of any magnitude. The endeavours of our predecessors, which to a certain extent forge the history of a place, are often instrumental in crafting the quality of the wines that can emerge from a great *terroir*.

As part of our negociant partnerships, we had been buying wines from Rouanne for 15 years, so I was familiar with this amazing vineyard and its show-stopping qualities. I had always liked its lay-out and soul. My father often spoke to me about the “monads” which he defined as the soul of a place, or the immutable unity of nature and spirit. In his work as a cabinetmaker and a winegrower, he always set great store by this idea: for example, when he arrived in a place that inspired him, he might say “there are good monads here”. To tell the truth, since the first day I set foot in Rouanne, I found beautiful and powerful monads there. The great German philosopher, Leibniz, who was also a first-rate mathematician and physicist, explored this idea extensively towards the end of his life. Voltaire

scoffed at him over it, an attitude that is certainly not a credit to his reputation. It just goes to show that no one is perfect, not even Voltaire. Leibniz defined monads as an irreducible force that contains within itself the source of all its actions: monads are the elements of all things, both tangible and intangible. Monads can therefore only be conceived by imitating the concept we have of souls. In their own perspective, they express the entire universe, in pre-established harmony with the other substances that make it up.

Rouanne is precisely that. Nothing and no one will ever be able to change the profound nature of this place, such is the extent to which it is “inhabited” by its own geographical configuration and by the souls of all those who have lived and worked here for aeons. In this new venture, I have just one regret, and that is that my father passed away before he could get acquainted with this exceptional place. He would have given us his feelings, his appraisal. He would have been abuzz with ideas, he would have advised us, guided us and fed us a thousand comments, each one more interesting than the last.

The village of Vinsobres obtained Cru status in 2006. Although not as well-known as its peers, its classification puts it on a par with Gigondas, Chateauneuf-du-Pape, Cote-Rotie and Hermitage, which speaks volumes about the quality of its *terroir*. Located along the edge of the Alps, Vinsobres boasts first-rate geology and a cool climate. The village itself has had a long and eventful history, shaped by the presence of the Lords de Verone who owned Rouanne from the Middle Ages through to the Revolution. The youngest branch of the family bore the title of ‘Lord of Rouanne’ for 600 years.

Set on a Gallo-Roman site, which formerly housed a farm or ‘villa’, Rouanne is named after its Late Roman Empire owner (2nd/3rd century AD), possibly a certain ‘Rugius’, as etymologists suggest. Behind its present-day chateau, a grooved column adorned with a carved capital, pottery, ‘dolia’, numerous fragments of tiles, fibulae and dressed stones, to name a few, have been found. It isn’t hard to imagine life at that time in this marvellous, well-populated, fertile site where myriad springs provided water, not far from the river Eygues and the Roman Way.

In the Middle Ages, the family de Verone, who owned the entire hillside, built a fortified castle.

In 1611, Charles I de Verone was “Seigneur de Rouanne”.

In 1649, Charles II de Verone was “Seigneur de Royne”, the change of spelling is noteworthy. Concurrently with this, Francois of Verona, cousin of Charles II, was the “co-lord” of Vinsobres and probably lived in the castle of Verone which still stands today. He represents the oldest branch of the family.

In 1710-1714, Jean-Louis de Verone (son of Charles II) was called “Sieur de Royne”.

It is interesting to see how the spelling of Rouanne has changed, sometimes quite rapidly, down through the ages. If we put them side by side, chronologically the result is this:

1594: Roany

1611: Rouanne

1641: Roane

1649: Roanne or Royne

1649 then 1710: Royne

End of the 18th century (map of Cassini): Roanes

1891: Rouane

Contemporary period: Rouanne

Unfortunately burnt down during the French Revolution, Rouanne was restored, rebuilt and extended in the 19th century, after which the property changed hands several times in short succession. Subsequently, Château de Rouanne experienced both good times, but also very challenging times. It is practically a miracle that this unbroken 62-hectare block of old hillside vines survived unscathed and was not divided into countless pieces through inheritance.

300 m from the chateau, at the end of a pretty wood that you have to cross to get there, the beautiful farmhouse complete with dovecote was built in around 1830 on pre-existing buildings that were probably ancient. A constantly flowing spring, harnessed in Gallo-Roman times, is an ever-present feature of the property, gushing into its ponds. Everything has been grown at Rouanne: vines, olive trees, lavender, vegetables, fruit and cereals, and sheep farming was pivotal to the property. Rouanne truly is a land of plenty. The present-day farm houses a magnificent concrete vat house but the beautifully crafted, vaulted basement ageing cellar was once used to mature an altogether different breed of stock – sheep! This is where we now mature our wines.

Rouanne’s impressive hillside, home to the named vineyard sites ‘Les Cotes’, ‘Rouanne et les Cotes’, “Plan Guérin” and ‘La Palud’, has a geographical profile, incline and South-East aspect comparable to the Côte de Nuits in Burgundy. Its propensity for winegrowing is patently obvious. The soils contain red Pliocene clay with a significant proportion of sand and limestone. The prime soils of Rouanne regularly throw up very distinctive aromas of violet, peony and

above all, gingerbread in the wines. Their palate is always fresh, rounded, balanced and saline. Rouanne's wines age incredibly well and for a long period of time. Emotion and patience are inextricably linked!

Rouanne's vineyards were mainly planted between 1955 and 1975. They are home to massal selections of Grenache, Syrah and Mourvèdre that provide us with substantial genetic diversity, a prerequisite in the world of fine wines. I have already converted the entire vineyard over to organic. As with Gigondas, we use whole cluster fermentation and native ferments and do not filter the wines.

The location of Rouanne is highly significant. As Vinsobres is the northernmost of the southern growths or Crus, it is important to understand that the Alps begin to rise just 9 km from Chateau de Rouanne. This proximity creates a cool micro-climate set within a temperate Mediterranean climate. The "Pontias" wind, which picks up cold air as it crosses the Alps, constantly cools the Eygues valley beneath Rouanne.

At Rouanne, we will monitor every step of the way how the essence of the place furthers our understanding. I would be delighted to welcome you and share with you the joy of being a part of its resurrection.

A few words about the 2019 vintage

A great vintage always conceals an element of mystery. Why didn't the extraordinary fruit in 2005 produce a great vintage? And why, against all expectations, did the high-yielding 1990 produce such great wines?

Explanations proffered with hindsight, which can be revisionist and convoluted, are sometimes quite laughable, because the basic tenet of our profession is a sense of foresight. As far as I'm concerned, I don't explain things, I look and learn. You never know, it may come in handy the next time around...

As you will have realised, 2019 is in the same vein as the top mysterious vintages. I still can't understand how the vines didn't show any symptoms of water stress despite such a dry summer. I don't understand why the wines are so fresh and "ethereal". I don't understand either how the yields could be so decent. In the southern Rhone Valley, 2019 is on a par with 2016, 2010, 1998 and 1990. You only have to taste the wines to dispel any doubts about their quality, if there were any to start with. Density vies with finesse, and depth in no way obscures their "nimble" characters. You will be amazed by the standard of the wines.

For the northern Rhone valley, I reserve my judgment for a few more months. The vintage is definitely very good. At the moment, I wouldn't go as far as to say that it ranks alongside 1991, 1999 and 2010. Wines from the north can hold some stupendous surprises – either way – and 1991, which most winegrowers failed to fully understand for several months, is a case in point. Let's keep a close watch on them - the truth will inevitably come out at some point.

Wines from the Southern Rhone Valley in 2018

We all remember the incredible humid tropical spring and the extent of downy mildew it caused, the worst in living memory... Ultimately, the grapes ripened well, and the berries were of a respectable size. Of course, it was a vintage where the winegrowers' skills came into their own, a vintage of "toil" if the year's potential was to be maximised. I won't generalise and will only talk about what happened at Saint Cosme. I am delighted with the results we have achieved. Hard work in the vineyards allowed us to save our crop and produce balanced wines. The ultimate result is a huge source of joy for me because it epitomises Saint Cosme's "Burgundy style" that my father cherished so much. In marginally lighter vintages, Saint Cosme instantly expresses the soil characters, in a slender, minimalist style, exuding fine Pinot aromatics including forest floor, red berries and violets. The 2018s remind me of the 2008s (which are now such a pleasure to drink...), the 1997s, the 1991s and the 1986s. None of these wines show any heaviness, overbearing or exaggerated features. They are pleasant, soft and palatable. Every time, I am stunned to see how different vintages can be from one year to the next at Saint Cosme. I think there are two reasons for this. On the one hand, our non-interventionist approach allows the grapes to freely express what nature offers them; conversely, interventionist techniques act as a harmful "filter" for precise expression. On the other hand, in a temperate Mediterranean climate, cool micro-climates are more sensitive to weather variations, and to the "stamp" these variations leave on them.

Wines from the Northern Rhone Valley in 2018

Ironically, this vintage and its rainy spring were easier to handle in the northern Rhone. Because lower temperatures are less conducive to the spread of downy mildew, the growing season was easier to grasp. Subsequently, the beautiful summer, symptomatic of global warming, allowed the grapes to ripen effortlessly. To be frank, challenging vintages, which were relatively commonplace in this region until the end of the 1990s, have become much less

frequent. The Hermitage area fared particularly well in 2018, as did Condrieu. The wines have weight and beautiful fresh aromatics.

In recent years, the Northern Rhone Valley has been undeniably, and deservedly, successful, and this has been amplified by the near absence of poor vintages. Appellations such as Crozes-Hermitage and Saint Joseph have moved up to a higher level in recent times which is highly commendable. Despite this, many vineyards are now planted with cloned vines, including Côte-Rôtie, and a clear-cut reversion to massal selections has become essential. As a reminder, the hillsides of Hermitage and Côte-Rotie are not only prime vineyard sites, they were also the stage where Syrah was propagated and characterised. The importance and grandeur of plants must not be overlooked. We must be mindful not to let others steal that from us and should revert back to the extremely astute wisdom of our grandfathers – they were the ones who made France’s wine industry great.



CHATEAU DE SAINT COSME

News from Saint Cosme

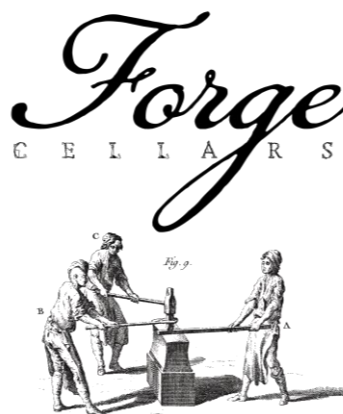
This year’s major event for us was of course our purchase of Château de Rouanne. It is therefore understandable that I should talk to you a lot about this estate, which you are not yet familiar with. But we must not forget that the responsibility for taking over Rouanne fell upon the team at Saint Cosme, and the task is monumental. Obviously, I was at the forefront and I made the 2019s myself, but I was only able to do so with daily help from my team. We have gone from 32 hectares to 94, all of them farmed organically. This is a quantum leap for us – the work involved is similar but on a whole new scale. The team is now 14-strong and we are carrying out a lot of work in the vineyard.

At Saint Cosme, life goes on. Renovation work on the former stables continues and restoration of Saint Cosme chapel, launched with the Gigondas village council, will soon get underway, after lengthy preparations by heritage architect Xavier Boutin.

Our work in the vineyard continues, drawing on our own methods and ideas. Today I would like to clarify one point: all our vines are certified organic by Ecocert. Although our ideas are akin to those of biodynamic farming in some

respects, I do not want to be certified biodynamic for several reasons. First of all, I consider the use of silica in summer in a Mediterranean climate to be nonsense. Silica has a totally harmful effect on old vines, but it is one of the four mandatory preparations for Demeter and Biodyvin certifications. Secondly, I don't subscribe to the school of thought among biodynamic groups. I like sharing ideas, being open-minded and looking for the truth through experimentation. When a technique doesn't work, you just have to accept it and more importantly, not replace reality with concepts that you are not allowed to discuss. Also, you just cannot apply the same rules for winegrowing in Champagne as you can in Provence – the weather patterns bear no similarities and the vines have different needs. Even a child can understand that. Finally, I don't really like “groups”, I like my independence and freedom of thought. I don't like marketing or trends, and I run a mile from people who take the liberty of lecturing others when quite often they are the worst offenders.

I am following the path marked out by my father, based on the observation and protection of nature, which generates life and biodiversity. His farming practices and his everyday life were part and parcel of a holistic eco-system. His work with Mr. Raymond Pellegrin (a rather brilliant man in his own way) from the SAMA in the 1970s was vital. Come for a walk in Saint Cosme valley and you will immediately see for yourself: quality organic farming practices start with love and respect for nature. We prune in March, when the moon is right; our soils are alive and well; we use companion plants and apply many other organic practices stemming from our progress and observations accrued since the early 1960s. I will write about this at greater length one day, because it requires clarification that goes beyond the realms of our small estate.



News from Forge Cellars, our American estate

The story of Forge on the banks of Seneca Lake, continues... Year after year, we continue to plant more Riesling and Pinot Noir vineyards. We have built a

lovely tasting “pavilion” so that the cellar can be set aside entirely for winemaking. For the 2018 vintage, as part of the classification of our hillside sites – which has been a work in progress now for several years – we have released 12 different vineyard-designated wines that read like the title of a hypothetical book: “The Secrets of the South-East Bank of Seneca Lake”. Forge has been extremely well-received by both the media and customers and has now carved out a permanent place for itself as the leading estate in the Finger Lakes. Their comment, not ours...

We will continue the fight to help people understand that residual sugar in Riesling is neither the norm, nor an obligation, nor a “style”, and even less so a prerequisite for this grape variety. I maintain that residual sugar has detracted from the quality of this extraordinary grape variety and taken it down a substandard track. The real route that Riesling must follow is the same as that of the great Chardonnays of Burgundy: the route towards site-expressiveness, ripe grapes, balance and minerality. I have a question: if Burgundy winegrowers produced acidic, green, high-yielding Chardonnays with residual sugar to conceal their lack of complexity, what would have happened to Chardonnay and its global reputation?? The answer is in the question.

Forgive me but I'm tired of all these dull speeches about sugar in Rieslings, which pertain more to ideological vested interests than to the real job of a winegrower. I know full well that residual sugar is still the most common practice in the world of Riesling, but don't count on us to rally to the ideas of the vocal majority. Time and wine enthusiasts will separate the wheat from the chaff and the truth will come out.

Please feel free to come and visit Forge. We would be delighted to welcome you and you will not regret discovering such a beautiful, unspoilt region with its extensive glacial lakes and fantastic granite soils.