

STARS OF THE LOIRE

DAGUENEAU

VS

COTAT

*“Didier Dagueneau, the great, iconoclastic Loire Valley vigneron, who made some of the world’s most beautiful sauvignon blanc wines”*

Eric Asimov

*“Cotat produces.... some of the finest Sauvignon Blancs I have ever put to my lips”*

Robert Parker

ROBERSON WINE

Wednesday 7th November 2012

# DAGUENEAU vs COTAT

# DOMAINE DAGUENEAU

Rebel. Iconoclast. Legend. All words (and there are many more besides) that have been used to describe Didier Dagueneau down the years. The last one - legend - is the one you will hear most often nowadays, since Didier's tragic death in a microlite accident back in 2008. Since then, his son Louis-Benjamin has been thrust into the limelight as the new head of this world famous domaine and he has continued the work that his father began back in the early 1980s. When Didier arrived in St Andelain to set up his own domaine in 1982, it was not as an outsider or a newcomer. His family had been making wine in the village for generations, although Didier had initially rejected the idea and flew the nest to pursue a career in motorbike-sidecar racing. By all accounts he was very good at it, but following two accidents in quick succession (and the birth of his son Benjamin), Didier decided to retire. On returning to the town he had grown up in, winemaking was an automatic career choice, but rather than join the family winery he decided immediately to set-up his own, separate domaine. Didier was heavily critical of what his family were doing (the first of many vigneron he would insult and fall-out with during his career) and declared that he was going to make the best Sauvignon Blanc in the world. That would involve doing things differently to the winemakers he was surrounded by in Pouilly.

One member of his family that Didier did take some inspiration from was his grandfather. His methods were the traditional ones and he was a perfectionist. Didier said: *"My grandfather was like that...all the parameters, at every stage, every day, should be at the maximum"*. He decided that he wanted to go back to basics and focus on the land - which may sound like a cliché today, but in 1982 that was a rare attitude indeed. The only local Loire Valley vigneron that Didier respected was a man called Edmond Vatan in Sancerre, a winemaker that inhabits the same pantheon as domaines like D.R.C, Leflaive, Chave, Rayas and the like. You may never have heard of him, but Vatan's Sancerre 'Clos de la Neore' is a legendary wine that is made today by his daughter Anne. The microscopic production (couple of hundred cases a year) means that it is virtually unknown, but Didier wanted to do something similar to Vatan and make Sauvignon Blanc that was site (and terroir) specific. This conviction was further entrenched by his admiration for the wines of Burgundy (Henri Jayer was a big influence), where domaines would present a roll call of different cuvées, each with their own story to tell about the terroir that they were grown on.

He purchased a 1.2 hectare plot of En Chailloux and made his first wine from the 1982 vintage. Three years later Didier acquired some vines planted on 'Silex' soil and vinified a separate cuvée of the same name. From 1988 a third wine was added to the range, 'Pur Sang', which was made from vines planted on soils with a high clay and limestone content. Since then, a single vineyard cuvée from a vineyard called 'Buisson Menard' was added, with Didier changing the name of to 'Buisson Renard' after a journalist misspelt it in a report (Didier preferred the new spelling, which means 'fox bush'). From time to time there has been a wine made from ungrafted vines in a vineyard called 'Clos de Calvaire', although harvests from this site were so irregular that Benjamin replanted it after the 2008 vintage in an attempt to get a consistent crop from it. Another sporadic cuvée is a sweet wine called 'Asteroide', made only in certain vintages and always eye-wateringly expensive. Finally, there is a small plot of Sancerre 'Monts Damnés', from which the first vintage was made in 2006. Today the domaine totals just over 12 hectares and production hovers around the 4000-5000 case mark.

Didier's rebellious streak was in evidence throughout his career. He was always open to trying new ideas in the vineyard and winery, but was never afraid to take what he wanted from a practice and discard the rest. Over the years he converted his vineyards to organic farming and then started to work with biodynamics, before deciding to cut-out a lot of the more extreme of Steiner's ideas and revert back to something akin to Organic+.

In the winery he experimented with low and zero SO<sub>2</sub> during the mid-1990s, but went back to using conventional doses of sulphur as he decided the wines hadn't aged as well as he expected. Wide ranging experiments with oak led to Didier deciding that he liked new oak for the way it allowed the wines to 'breathe' during their élevage, but didn't like the oaky flavours that the barrels imparted - so he worked with his cooper to develop large (450 and 600 lt) sized barrels that had a very low toast. He also developed smaller (350lt) barrels in an elongated, cigar-like shape, which keep the lees moving throughout the élevage and thus needed less aggressive batonnage.

Low yields and oak ageing give weight and depth to the Dagueneau wines, but it is their unmistakable precision and clarity that separate them from the average Sauvignon that surrounds them. The fact that he was never shy about pointing out the mistakes of others, meant that Didier was never part of the local winemaking community (they refused to allow him to join the Pouilly-Fumé vigneron association), but there is no doubt that he was responsible for establishing Pouilly-Fumé as one of the Loire's most famous appellations. Who knows, maybe he even achieved his goal of making the best Sauvignon Blanc in the world?

# DAGUENEAU vs COTAT

# DOMAINE F COTAT

Perhaps the most famous appellation in the Loire Valley, Sancerre is much more of a modern phenomenon than most people may think. Until the post-Phylloxera recovery began in the early 20th century, Sancerre was best known for producing red wines from a variety of local grapes (Gamay, Pinot Noir, Grolleau etc) and white wines from Sauvignon Blanc were practically unheard of. When the louse-ravaged vineyards were replanted however, Sauvignon became the dominant variety and today 80% of the appellation is planted to it. When you throw in a mildew crisis and two world wars, it is no surprise that the modern image of Sancerre didn't really get going until the middle of the last century. It was around this time - 1947 to be exact - that two brothers by the name of Francis and Paul Cotat set up a small domaine in the village of Chavignol. They farmed traditionally right from the start, and eschewed the chemicals and treatments that were being hawked around by salesmen in the '60s, '70s and '80s in favour of methods that are today labelled as organic but back then were just the 'right' way to do things. The brothers developed a taste for broader wines than were typically found in Sancerre and to achieve this they harvested later than their neighbours - in some vintages much, much later. They became known for an opulent, weighty style that would age prodigiously, but the price to pay for this would be tiny yields that meant the small domaine (6 ha at the time) was anything but a goldmine.

The brothers Cotat worked together modestly for many years, making their wines together and then labelling them separately under their respective names (although, confusingly, the design of the label was identical). Over time their two sons became involved in the domaine and, in 1990, Francis and Paul retired, so the holdings were divided equally between Francois (son of Francis) and Pascal (son of Paul). Presumably the son's names were carefully selected to allow continuation of the first initial/surname system that the family had operated! Since the 'split', Pascal has moved to a winery in Sancerre, while Francois elected to stay put in Chavignol. As such, the wines now *do* represent different production (unlike before), although the cousins work in largely the same way for both their viticulture and vinification.

Everything in the organically farmed vineyards is done by hand. It has to be this way, as Francois' holdings span some of the steepest slopes in the appellation. During harvest, the workers apparently use a cushion strapped to their backsides as this is the only way they can comfortably harvest the grapes! Yields are typically 40-50hl/ha, which is small in an appellation that permits up to 65hl/ha, and the terroir is high in clay and limestone - this is the chalky soil shared by Chablis and parts of Champagne that is famous for gilding the wines with their racy acidity. As mentioned before, the harvest chez Cotat is very very late - in 2010 Francois waited until October 4th before picking, which is a couple of weeks after most of the appellation!

In the winery, processes remain old school (with the exception of a pneumatic press that Francois brought in to replace the hand press his father used). The wines undergo wild ferments and see no addition of sugar, enzymes or acids, or any fining or filtration. Sulphur is used sparingly (only added before the bottling) and batonnage is used only once (after the fermentation is complete). Racking and bottling are done with the moon, although this is the only nod to biodynamic practices. Each cuvée is raised in a variety of used wooden vessels, from small 200lt barrels up to large foudres, some of which are 80 years old. The idea is to add depth and breadth to the texture of the wines without imparting any oak-related flavours. Following their élevage, the wines are bottled in May.

Despite the total surface of the estate covering just 3ha, Francis makes a range of wines from his different parcels. The range starts with a young vine cuvée that features fruit from the various plots that has had to be replanted in recent years (for example, a 65 year old plot of Grand Côte had to be replaced a few years back, much to Francois' chagrin). Each of the domaine's sites are then vinified separately, including 'Culs de Beaujeau', 'Monts Damnés' and 'La Grand Côte'. There is a rosé made from Pinot Noir and even a red wine, although this never sees the light of commercial day - it is strictly for family consumption! Finally, a late harvested wine called Cuvée Paul is made in the best vintages when the residual sugar levels allow for it.