

ROBERSON WINE FINE WINE TASTINGS

KING OF CHABLIS: THE WINES OF DOMAINE RAVENEAU

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Chablis

There is little doubt that Chablis is one of the most instantly recognisable names in the wine world - a place that has rightfully developed a reputation over many years, for the excellent quality of its steely dry white wines. To some it comes as a surprise to learn that Chablis is the northern-most major outpost of the Burgundy wine region; to many it is interesting to hear that real 'classic' Chablis is made using oak barrels; and thankfully to an ever dwindling minority it is a shock to discover that Chablis is indeed made from 100% Chardonnay.

Although Chablis is a wine region, it has also come to be thought of in stylistic terms. This became a legal issue when the French set about preventing New World producers from using Chablis as a term to denote dry white wine, as they did with Champagne (for any old sparkling), Burgundy and Hermitage (for various reds). The fact that consumers everywhere have come to associate Chablis with bone dry, mineral driven white wines is because these are *vins de terroir* and that *terroir* is some of the most spectacular and unique in the world of wine.

For believers in the notion of terroir, Chablis is an often cited example of how the climate, situation and soil type can have a profound influence on the final taste of the wine. For those that doubt the influence of terroir, a quick blind tasting of the world's Chardonnays should reveal Chablis' inimitable character pretty quickly - stoney, smokey minerality that is reminiscent of cold winter mornings and mountainside streams.

So what makes Chablis so distinct from other Chardonnays? Well, in geological terms the region sits on what is known as the 'Kimmeridgian Chain'. The soil is a crumbly limestone marl that is chock full of fossils and minerals, named after the village of Kimmeridge in Dorset and seen in numerous other viticultural areas across Champagne and the Loire Valley. The sites on Kimmeridgian limestone are traditionally thought of as Chablis best, while the lesser sites (much of which is 'Chablis' or 'Petit Chablis') are on a different limestone - Portlandian. Chardonnay responds very well to these soils, but there is more to the terroir than just the dirt. The topography may be very hilly, but not all of these slopes are south facing. The best Premier Cru and seven Grand Cru sites tend to be a combination of Kimmeridgian soil and southern facing aspect, but there is a great deal of internal wrangling between those that feel the soil type is all important and those that prioritise aspect and micro-climate. As the INAO have extended and adjusted the appellations over the years (to much controversy in some cases) it has stressed the importance of vineyard position over soil composition and some of the newer Premier Cru sites are on Portlandian soils.

Climate is another key issue for *les Chablisiennes*, as the region is almost on the limit of what is feasible for growing vines. It gets very cold in this part of Burgundy and frost is a real issue in colder winters, especially in the 'frost pocket' on the lower slopes next to the river and many of the higher lying sites that make up the Chablis and Petit Chablis appellations. Wine makers will use a number of tricks to fend off the frosts, but the chilly temperatures are undoubtedly an essential part of Chablis' personality. The freshness and nervosity that is a hallmark of these wines is often eroded in warmer vintages.

DOMAINE RAVENEAU

Francois Raveneau (pictured on the next the page) founded Domaine Raveneau back in 1948 after marrying a Dauvissat and piecing together her share of that family's vines. These two families would go on to become the benchmark producers of quality Chablis, but it is Raveneau that has reached a cult status only matched by the likes of Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, Coche-Dury and Henri Mayer in wider Burgundy. Today's Domaine Raveneau is run by Francois' two sons, Bernard (pictured left) and Jean-Marie (pictured right). They are quiet, modest men that are focused on upholding the standards set by their late father by producing wines that embody both the vineyard and the vintage from which they come.

The domaine built its reputation on the key tenets of fastidious viticulture, low yields (typically 35-40hl/ha, which is low for Chablis), early harvesting and slow ageing (typically 18 months) in old oak barrels. The different wines see the same *élevage*, but each one has a distinct personality and a genuine sense of place. Early in their life it can be difficult to penetrate their austerity, but these are wines that age superbly and as they blossom with age their intensity and identity reveal themselves.

Although Bernard and Jean-Marie are reported to be thoroughly nice chaps, their father had something of a reputation for being a difficult character. There is a famous story told by Kermit Lynch in his book 'Adventures on the Wine Trail' about how he tasted a Raveneau wine at Taillevent in Paris and then struggled for years just to get in to Raveneau's cellar to taste his wines. Having been rejected by Francois despite his numerous attempts to visit the domaine, Lynch was at a loss as to why Raveneau refused to see him. He spoke to his friend Aubert de Villaine (of DRC) about it and before long Aubert had arranged a visit for the two of them - although Francois had no idea it was Lynch that was coming as de Villaine's +1. Following the tasting when the atmosphere had become more relaxed, Lynch revealed his identity and pleaded with the old man for an allocation of his wines. His request was refused, which became a recurring theme over the next few years whenever Lynch would visit (as a friend of de Villaine's he was at least afforded this courtesy). What made the situation all the more frustrating is that this was back in the 1960s, at a time when Domaine Raveneau was not selling all of its wine every year and Kermit could see bins of unsold bottles every time he went there!

Eventually, after years of lobbying from Kermit and his high profile friends in the region, Raveneau relented and gave him a small allocation from the 1971 vintage. So why all the years of refusal? Simple - he didn't want to sell his wines to an American! It was only once that American had become part of the inner circle that Raveneau changed his mind, and Kermit Lynch has gone on to help the domaine establish its global reputation for quality.

Francois handed over responsibility to his two sons in the mid-80s after they had graduated from viticultural college and they have continued to take the domaine forward ever since, without compromising on their father's methods or ideals. The wines are fermented in stainless steel before being transferred to old wooden barrels (up to 8 years old) for 18 months, before being bottled without fining and usually without filtration.