



Quarts de Chaume

On the outskirts of the Layon area, on the right bank of the small river, is a small vineyard where you will hardly see any bottles. Before you can get your hands on them the real wine connoisseurs will have snatched them up.



The vineyards of this appellation are situated on the foot of the hill in the municipality of Rochefort-sur-Loire. The ground below was formed well before dinosaurs were roaming around as the bottom was pushed up from Bretagne. The road to our host is flanked by chéning grapevines and is the only business that is allowed in this appellation. When we arrive we see Jo Python busy with a horde of American journalists. When they leave the French Elvis Presley approaches us. He wants to show us everything he says.

The vineyard is on land in the shape of a bowl, which protects the grapevines from the wind. The ocean is close by and wet and dry spells change regularly, which provides ideal soil for the pouriture noble, the grey mould. In the eleventh century, the small area of the Quarts de Chaume belonged to the monastery of Rochefort-sur-Loire. The fathers leased the ground to the local farmers and had the rights to one quarter

of the harvest, hence the name. Jo Python walks with us through the vineyard, gives us a lesson in geography, and plays with his refractometer, a small kind of binocular you fill with a drop of grape juice. Since the dryness of the concentration (in this case sugar) is higher when the sunlight changes, this gadget can accurately read the sweetness of the grape. Depending on the ripening process of the grape, the weather forecast, the concentration of the botrytis mould and the refractometer, Jo will know exactly when to harvest. He lets us taste the mouldy grapes and they taste fantastic. He is happy with the quality of the grapes this year. Jo confides that he made bad wines between 1978 and 1990. He was tired of it and decided to make a drastic change to go for less profit. He stayed away from bad practices. Jo: "A wine grower who makes sweet wines takes enormous risks. One bad year can mean bankruptcy, which is why many growers are dishonest and add sugar."





Development

The land holds 15 hectares. Outside the harvest season there are four steady employees. Pithon: “I plan to extend to 30 hectares, because it has happened a few times that I had to turn down an order of 30,000 bottles.” How can he double the property on such a small appellation? That has to do with the redevelopment of the small area, Les Treilles, now underway. “We have become good clients of the notary. There were people who didn’t even know that they owned a property.”

The harvest of the forty-year-old grapevines happens in three or four stages, when the overripe grapes are picked within a period of eight days. The winegrower carries an enormous responsibility.

Jo: “Botrytis enhances the flavour. The ideal goal is to get it when the grapes are ripe. When a grape isn’t ripe enough you get a concentration of nasty, green flavours.” The selected grapes travel in crates to the

pneumatic press, where they are slowly pressed. The fermentation with local yeasts takes place in oak barrels from the Bourgogne; this lasts until next July. Thereafter the grapes are ripened in tanks for another six months to get a balance and homogenous effect. When we taste the wines later the oak is very subtle. Our grower: “This is the reason why I get the barrels from the Bourgogne. When these are made they are heated longer at a lower temperature, which gives better and more refined aromas.”

Jo has very old wines and gives us the opportunity to thoroughly enjoy them. As far as preservation: “A Quarts de Chaume can almost be kept indefinitely. If it does go bad, it will not happen in our lifetime.” When he takes us again to another old barrel we notice that the concentration becomes higher. Our nose and mouth take us to a Maghreb full of dates and figs. The aftertaste is amazingly complex. The harmonic balance



between freshness and the high content of sugars is extremely pleasant. After the tasting of discreet and even secretive cuvées, like the Ambroise 1997, we have a dinner for the pickers. Anyone who has ever been part of the grape harvest knows that the meals are superb. Pickers, helpers and supervisors alike share their meals, an essential ingredient for the harmony in the group. There is a lot of laughter at the table, but the subject of conversation is of course the wine. Everyone has brought a bottle for blind tasting, and comments fly as the bottles are opened.

Alternative

Not far from the parcels of Jo Pithon we find six hectares of Domaine Baumard, four and a half of which are planted in an interesting manner. The grapevines are very widely spaced and grow about two meters above the well-attended soil. Wine grower Florent Baumard has his own

principles. We can see that by the huge oak tree in the middle of the vineyard. Florent has been in love with this tree since he was a little child. His pruning methods have a reason: “A grapevine should be aloof but that already happens underground. Since I let all the foliage grow, the top leaves can do the work.” In his business, supplied with an abundance of technical equipment, he is able to make the Quarts de Chaume less sweet and of higher quality. We consider Florent a defendant of the terroir.

The two vineyards we saw make different wines with their own characteristics. However, we don't want to be judgmental because a Quarts de Chaume is not a wine that you would drink at a sidewalk café. If you belong to the happy few who are used to drinking this kind of wine, you would drink it at a Christmas dinner, or other noteworthy special occasion.