



Loire Valley, home of organic wines

The banks of France's longest river are home to an increasing number of winegrowers who are switching to organic farming. What are the reasons behind organic's lasting popularity, particularly in a region that seems to be one of the most challenging for organic viticulture?

By Alain Echaliér - Photographs: Courtesy of the estates

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Vincent and Tania Carême take a walk through their vineyards



Vincent Carême lavishes care and attention on his vines

Although the Loire Valley wine region dates back, like most other French wine regions, to Roman times, making organic wine there is not the easiest option. Once the grapes are brought to the winery, winemaking is not much more challenging than elsewhere, but before they get there, growing organic grapes is a tall order. To display the AB (“Agriculture Biologique”) logo on bottles of wine there can be no insecticides/pesticides, no fungicides and no herbicides for at least three consecutive years.

A REAL CHALLENGE

‘Tucked away’ in the northern half of France, the region is relatively wet. From the mouth of the river (Muscadet, in Brittany) to Sancerre, rainfall can easily reach between 600 and 800 mm a year. Vines, the ultimate Mediterranean plant, are very fragile. Downy mildew, a fungal disease, wreaks havoc there, and grass grows in abundance, particularly due to the famous mild Loire climate which creates an explosive combination of water and warmth. With no fungicides or herbicides to fall back on, organic winegrowing here is not for the faint-hearted!

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MOTIVES

Ask Vincent Carême in Vouvray about what led him to switch to organic farming (starting with the switch-over phase in 2003 then certification in 2007), and his answer is instant. “Respect for the environment, and also for ourselves. My staff and I are in the vineyards all day long!” Putting on an astronaut’s outfit to spray his vines is not an option for Carême. “The environment is more enjoyable, you can take pleasure in walking around your vineyards, and notice greater biodiversity”.

For Sylvain Bruneau, a winegrower in Saint-Nicolas de Bourgueil, whose switch-over to organic farming began in 2013, it’s just “natural”. The son and grandson of a conventional winegrower, the noble task of soil management seemed the obvious choice to him. “It’s like working with wood”, he says.

At Domaine des Roy in Touraine, Anne-Cécile Roy, who also took over a family estate, in 2005, stresses the quality of the wines. “In my family, we like good products and good food. Organic wine is a natural part of this. My father had already stopped using weedkillers. As soon as I arrived, I began the switch-over to organic and was certified in 2008”.

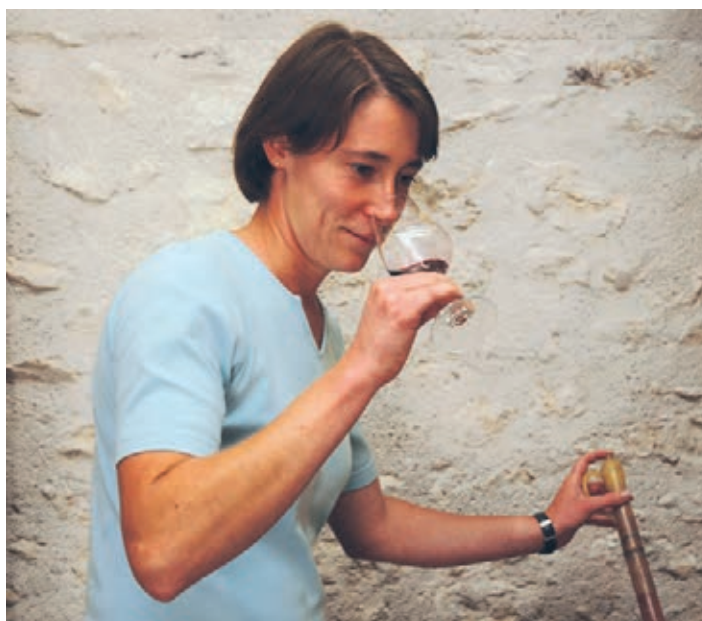
Organic farming produces great fruit, but more importantly it changes the plant itself. “The roots are deeper”, says Vincent Carême. “This creates a good basis - the grapes are more flavourful and have more character”. How can you refer to ‘terroir’ when the plants are frail and their roots do not go down deep into the soil because it is so depleted by years of chemical vineyard management?

INDUSTRY CONTEXT

When they did their viticultural training, organic farming was virtually non-existent. Sylvain Bruneau remembers that when he studied for his technician’s certificate in viticulture and winemaking, followed by a higher diploma in wine marketing in the 1980-90s, it was just not an option. Anne-Cécile Roy also recalls that during her higher diploma studies in winemaking, followed by her training as a winemaker in Bordeaux in 2002, there was hardly any organic winegrowing. More recently, Edouard Massart, who took over a Muscadet estate in 2013 after training in Beaune, remembers organic modules, and even biodynamics. But



Sylvain Bruneau



Anne-Cécile Roy

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Jérôme and Emeline, the novice winegrowers at Domaine de la Fessardière

on the whole, the courses were more akin to a “product catalogue. A medical approach to treatment”, whereas he believes it is especially important to understand the biology of the plant.

So what is the best way to get started? Vincent Carême insists that meeting some of the winegrowers who pioneered the movement is essential. At the Loire wine show (Ed: the region’s major trade fair), sharing ideas and information with top winegrowers like Mark Angeli and Jo Pithon helped him. He was able to taste wines and engage with them. In present-day Vouvray, there is a small group of “winegrowing buddies”, farming organically or almost, who are confronted with the same problems. Meeting up, tasting, discussing and creating a sense of community is sometimes more demonstrative among organic folk. But the transition is never easy, as pioneers are often perceived as “quirky”, and colleagues sometimes make hurtful remarks. However, gradually, as small groups of growers make the switch, things snowball. Winegrowers see that it can work, and in many Loire appellations around 20% of winegrowers have now taken the plunge.

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THE NEWLY-MINTED WINEGROWERS

Another reason for the significance of organic farming in the Loire Valley is probably due to the arrival of newly-minted winegrowers (“Néo-vignerons”). Although the profession often witnesses properties being passed down from one generation to the next, the Loire Valley is home to a large number of newcomers, some of whom have left behind very different careers. Vincent Carême believes that it is this new blood, people who are not set in their ways and are “tradition-free” that is fuelling this undeniable impetus, as well as the new generations of winegrowers coming through. Edouard Massart is a good example of this, because although he does have a few ancestors who had vines, he did not grow up in a winery, and did not inherit an estate. An engineer by training, he worked for many years in major international industrial groups - until he heeded his vinous calling. He partnered with a Muscadet winegrower reaching the end of his career, Clair Moreau, and then took over the estate, now called ‘Jardin d’Edouard’.

At Domaine de la Fessardière, also in Muscadet, Jérôme and Emeline are another such example. Both were agricultural engineers but worked in consultancy and management. Passionate about wine, they took the plunge. Why Muscadet? Because the price of land is still affordable, at around €25,000/hectare. The Loire is a million miles away from prices fetched in Champagne or Burgundy, even if the outlay in Anjou is now quite high (€80-100k/ha). For people entering the industry, this can certainly factor into the equation.

Were they aware of the poor quality image Muscadet was still suffering from not that long ago? Not necessarily, and that’s good news, because otherwise the region might have been deprived of their creativity. Edouard did not immediately start farming organically. His predecessor used sustainable vineyard management, i.e. fewer chemicals than conventional viticulture. He was already reluctant to use products like glyphosate, but because of his scientific background he wanted to understand first, and then take action. His decision came last summer. The felicitous 2018 harvest prompted him to start the switch-over process, and to indulge his interest in new techniques. Recently he rented sheep from the island of Ushant. In the middle of winter, when the vines are dormant, the sheep come to



Muscadet in the making at La Fessardière



Ushant sheep head off to graze at Jardin d’Edouard

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The walled vineyard at Château de Chaintres

graze on the weeds around the base of the vines, the hardest place to remove them from by machine. And as this breed of sheep is very low to the ground, it is perfect for running below the trellising wires! Edouard has also innovated by using tanks covered with glass tiles to make them totally inert, which is unique.

Like all winegrowers, Emeline and Jérôme are confronted with downy mildew. The classic technique involves putting copper sulphate on the leaves - the famous 'Bordeaux mixture'. But some of it seeps into the ground, and the copper that eventually accumulates there is toxic. The DIY engineers are working with others on a prototype that sprays the vines then immediately recovers whatever drips off the leaves, before it reaches the ground. Neo-winegrowers are certainly creative!

THE SWITCH-OVER IMPLIES REAL CHANGES

Organic certification requires three years with no agrichemical spraying, so that the products have time to dissipate and the soils to regenerate, but the entire approach involves much more time. As a relatively self-taught winegrower, Sylvain Bruneau initially read the relevant literature and talked to a few winegrowers around him. He then went to get the

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old inter-vine hoe that his grandparents used, but that the intervening generation had cast aside, and adapted and repaired it. At first, tillage to remove weeds seemed “easy”, but the residual herbicides were still in the soil and hid the reality! Also, use of the tool required special knowledge, and Sylvain, like many others, began to break quite a few vines. Yields, which previously stood at 55 to 65 hectolitres per hectare, began to dwindle to around 40 hl/ha.

At Château de Chaintres, Jean-Philippe Louis took over production of Saumur-Champigny two years ago. But despite his many years of organic and biodynamic farming in Menetou-Salon, he had to get a handle on his new vineyard sites. Certainly, the chateau’s magnificent vineyard – an unbroken plot surrounded by an old wall – protects the vines from possible pollution from neighbours, and is a tremendous showcase of biodiversity. But this does not imply that there should be too much grass at the precise moment when budburst occurs. With his many different soils, it was difficult to get the timing right for all the plots, as Jean-Philippe Louis now knows!

Gradually, as work progressed, Sylvain Bruneau noticed that his plants and soils were beginning to get healthier. Production then increased, with yields now in the 50 hl/ha range. Although he does use some plant cover, the Saint-Nicolas vineyard contains quite a lot of sand. So having too much cover could force Sylvain to add more fertiliser, which he doesn’t want to do. “Every vineyard site is different!” he too believes, adding: “You have to learn”. And then there is this damned fungus that grows. To avoid it spreading, Sylvain prefers to apply micro-doses, but whenever necessary. As Vincent Carême points out, “if it rains, however lightly, just after spraying, you have to start all over again”. Are the maximum copper doses that have recently been lowered at European level a problem? “Not really” says a confident Sylvain, because even in the most challenging years he was still well below the maximum amount.

In the winery, there are also adjustments to be made. The maximum amounts of sulphur also drop when you switch to organic; they are about half of what can be used for conventional winemaking. Jean-Philippe Louis explains that just because you’re organic doesn’t mean you don’t have to comply with the rules. His wines undergo extensive



Jean-Philippe Louis in the vineyard



Sylvain Bruneau’s vines with their neat grass cover

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Many organic winegrowers remove buds by hand (here at Domaine de la Fessardière)

analyses by a laboratory in Bordeaux. “Let’s not mistake organic for natural wine; I want wines that are flavourful and differ from one plot to the next, not wines that all taste the same”.

ONE LAST GEM, IN SAVENNIÈRES

Loïc Mahé is also a neo-winegrower. After years of training farmers to convert to organic farming, he looked for a few hectares of vines to take over. When he didn’t find them, he planted 10 hectares of vines in Savennières, and started to farm them “almost organically”; in the village, the vast majority of farms are organic or biodynamic, such as the famous Coulée de Serrant. Once the vines had grown and a clientele had been found, Loïc was able to dedicate his time and attention solely to his estate. “With organic farming, you have to be able to react immediately, after even the lightest shower of rain”, he says. His optimistic mindset prompted him to extend his estate in Anjou, but two years of frost led to major setbacks. Now, he has refocused on 4.5 hectares of Savennières, the size he initially dreamed of, which he believes is ideal for doing quality work.

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His “Les Fougeraies” and “Equilibre” wines, respectively from sandy and schist soils, stem from the selection of his finest grapes, followed by fermentation with wild ferments and a year of barrel maturation. They are an absolute delight. The next step, biodynamics, is already on his mind. As a modest winegrower, he feels he does not yet have the “requisite rigour”, but it’s plain for all to see that he is working hard at it already.

WHEN ALL IS SAID AND DONE

Although winegrowers are spared the cost of chemical sprays, they do need to buy organic products. More importantly, though, the increased price tag is due to all the extra work involved. Edouard Massart likes to do vineyard management by hand, such as leaf removal and disbudding. A lot of preventative work can be done, to naturally improve the vine’s health. This enabled him to avoid botrytis - rot that grows on the clusters - and to forego the use of insecticides. But all this has to be done on foot. He believes the equation is simple: “chemical equipment is replaced by elbow grease!”

Everyone concurs that, overall, the additional production cost is around 20% higher, and for those who also want to pick by hand, like Vincent Carême, it can be 30% more. This is his choice, though, because organic specifications do allow machine harvesting. Finally, for those aiming to go the extra mile and use biodynamics, there are some more additional costs.

Sylvain Bruneau points out that Loire Valley winegrowers often sell a significant proportion of their wines direct to the consumer. Very often, estates have a private clientele, and so this kind of price hike needs to be explained. Also, although organic certification entails a lot of administrative work, he believes it is essential to prove implementation. The move, though, is rewarded by evident quality. As ecotourism develops, it fosters environmental quality and as consumers increasingly move upmarket, product quality is also in tune with demand. Edouard Massart, with his engineering background, puts things into perspective: “Let’s not talk about prices, let’s talk about value”. Wine is about pleasure, and the more pleasure wine drinkers get, the happier they are.



Edouard in his vineyard



Vincent Carême picks his grapes by hand