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VINS ET EXPÉRIENCES

DOMAINE DES VIGNES DU MAYNES



ARRIVING AT THE DOMAINE DES VIGNES DU MAYNES, YOU IMMEDIATELY SENSE A LONG TRADITION.

France is a country full of hidden surprises. Travelling up a little side road in the hamlet of Sagy, just beyond the limits of the little village of Cruzillé (pop.261), there was little expectation other than to find a nice, presentable cellar, some honest, attractive wines, a little discussion about the highs and lows of rural life and then onto the next destination.

This, however, does nothing to prepare you for the cellars. On one side an ancient Roman wall has been exposed, evidence of at least two thousand years of history. In the tasting room, the amazing collection of old bottles and vessels in an enormous variety of colours, sizes and designs suggests a lengthy evolution in wine production.



How wrong can one be. Arriving at the Domaine des Vignes du Maynes, you immediately sense a long tradition. Ancient basket presses lie adjacent to old barrels, vigneron's tools and corking machines from yesteryear. Cart wheels, yokes for horses and old leather saddles all scatter the yard and you half expect Jean de Florette to appear, mopping his brow.

On another wall is a mural depicting the family tree and linking the site back to the Abbey of Cluny, which was founded in 910 AD. And yet later, we pass through another door into a modern, spacious winery with temperature control and all of the usual winemaking equipment, be they concrete tanks, old foudres or amphorae. Where exactly are we?!

DEPUIS 910



The Clos des Vignes du Maynes is indeed an ancient and historically important property but one that has been respectfully allowed to continue as a working estate rather than stay in the past as a museum piece. Maynes is an old French word for monks and the Clos in which the monks tended their vines dates right back to the beginning of the Abbey of Cluny, meaning that the family today are working on soils that have produced over 1110 vintages, and counting. It belonged to the Abbey until the Revolution where upon it was confiscated and eventually purchased by local families.

The Guillot family arrived at the property in 1952. Grandfather (Pierre) Guillot's health had suffered during the war and the family sought a change of environment.

His particular condition did not permit him to support ingestion of any chemicals, including sulphur and so while most of the rest of his countrymen leapt aboard the agro-chemical express in the 50's and 60's, the Guillots kept a completely natural regime, effectively continuing the methods of the previous millenium. A draft-horse continued to be used in the fields, manure and compost were spread amongst the vines and in the winery, only wild yeasts were permitted and never any further additions to either the musts or the wine.

Alain Guillot succeeded his father in 1970 and as president of the Fédération Nationale d'Agriculture Biologique he was a key force in promoting organic viticulture and working towards a scheme to provide certification for those working that way.



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Today, one doesn't think twice when a vigneron announces that they are organic but fifty years ago this was very definitely a minority pursuit.

Julien Guillot was handed the keys in 1998. His own interest in biodynamics encouraged him to take the step to convert the estate. He admits that the early years were not easy but guided by both his instincts and his mentors, he has never doubted the decision. Today he speaks of the multiple challenges presented by climate change. Practical solutions such as changes to the height of his trellising go hand in hand with the biodynamic preparations and the working of the soils.

The Clos itself is 6.6ha in size and sits on the hills with a 400ha woodland protecting it on one side. The microclimate that this creates is a key component, channeling the air, bringing shade and fresh conditions to an otherwise warming climate. Managing water is a key concern. As well as recycling water in the winery, Julien does everything to encourage his vines to develop deep root systems that search for water in the layers of limestone below the soil.

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The estate today has around 9ha of its own vineyards and roughly the same again in a négociant activity for which they work only with organic and biodynamic growers with the Guillots in charge of picking. The négoce activity is more recent and includes fruit from neighbouring Beaujolais. It helps the family to manage their livelihoods when losses result in their own vineyards from frosts, hail and other violent climatic episodes.

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Julien is fond of experimenting and constantly tests new ideas. One gets the sense of an inquiring mind, a strength of spirit, determined to work as naturally as possible and to continue the extraordinary legacy for the benefit of future generations. However, he is also someone who loves life, a sociable, lively personality who likes to debate and joke with his friends old and new. His wines are for sharing, he says, for wine drinkers who like conviviality. His own taste is for silky, textured wines with a saline and crystalline edge to them but that reflect their origins and provide refreshment. These are not swaggering, statement pieces: he is more than happy to buck trends and do things his way, just as his father and grandfather did.

The range includes a Bourgogne Blanc, a simple Mâcon villages blended from vineyards in the communes of Chardonnay, Montbellet and Viré-Clessé and a Mâcon Rouge from massal selections of Gamay. However, it is the wines of the Clos that really bring us here and the **Mâcon-Cruzillé Aragonite** truly opens our eyes. The old vines are grown on shallow limestone-clay soils rich in silica and crystallized limestone which helps to promote an intensely mineral style. The grapes are pressed slowly, with the juice allowed to settle for up to 18 hours before decanting into large barrels for fermentation.

The élevage takes place in a mixture of large foudres and enamel tanks, with the wine sitting on its lees before being racked off and blended about a month or so prior to bottling. The result is a textural wine of remarkable personality and tension which can happily keep for 10-15 years if so required and normally demands a couple of years of bottle age as a minimum.

The **Mâcon-Cruzillé Les Chassagnes** comes from virgin soils that had been left fallow since the outbreak of phylloxera in 1880. Replanted only in 2005, the soils are rich in humus from the forest.

Cellar techniques are much the same as for Aragonite but this cuvée is an altogether fuller, denser expression perhaps also influenced by the very low yields. Another wine with considerable keeping potential.

The story of Gamay in the Mâconnais is a painful one: it used to dominate but has lost ground to Chardonnay, particularly in the 20th century post-phylloxera and now is under threat from Pinot Noir too. There used to be more than 200 different sub-types of Gamay but habitually only five are seen now, a staggering loss of diversity. Julien is fighting the fight, however and has propagated at least 20 different strains.



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The **Mâcon-Cruzillé Manganite** is the senior expression of Gamay on the property. The low-yielding strains grown by the Guillots bring a natural concentration and there is a characteristic note of black pepper. Julien likes to bottle it before harvest, locking in the freshness but this is no simple glugger, rather a serious wine of precision and personality that reflects the unusual iron and manganese-rich soil on which the vines are grown. A wine that has something to say, to borrow from Hugh Johnson.

There is Pinot Noir too, however. **Bourgogne Rouge Cuvée Auguste** has a gorgeous, attractive floral nose before revealing an array of black fruit and subtle notes of leather and pepper. The strain used is the famous Pinot Fin, viewed by the likes of DRC and Domaine Leroy as the optimum choice but always low-yielding making it an expensive decision. The gentle vinification in vats with layers of whole bunches interspersed with destemmed fruit, which Julien calls a 'millefeuille', allows a tender extraction but also a semi-carbonic intra-cellular macération, ensuring that tannins are never hard or edgy.

The most unusual wine of all, however, has to be the **Cuvée 910**. As the name suggests, this is a wine that points towards something that the monks of Cluny might recognise. It is a co-fermentation of Chardonnay, Gamay and Pinot Noir with the juice being taken off stage by stage when ready.

Julien and his team pick little bits from the various parcels and sub-varieties, putting the fruit together in the same open-top vessel over the course of 7-10 days but with a short vinification meaning that the colour and tannins are very light.

It then spends only 6-8 months in wood, generally being bottled just after Easter. To the eye, it looks more like a deeper rosé than a light red. Any scepticism is taken away upon tasting, however. It is the most extraordinary experience, twisting and turning your tastebuds and thoughts with a complex array of aromas, utterly original and captivating and alarmingly easy to drink. The production is tiny and the trendiest wine bars around the world clamour for their few bottles.

