

CHEVALIER

MAY 2020



VINS NATURELS

ALICE WATERS played a major role in creating the movement toward natural foods, and I like to think that I played a role in the natural wine movement. She

focused both on the better flavors of organic foods and the health of the earth. As I went natural, I confess that not once did I consider even my own health. My eyes, nose, and palate alone guided me—hedonism rather than moral or altruistic considerations. I was selfishly looking for the best possible wines to pour into my glass—aesthetics, not ethics ruled—and I noticed early on that certain viticultural and enological practices were working against instead of for me.

Back in the 1960s and '70s, the biggest culprits in French cellars were filtration and chaptalization. Everyone knows what filtration means—you take things out. Chaptalization means adding sugar to the fermenting grape juice, which increases the alcohol content. Higher alcohol gives an impression of more body—silicone for wine?

As the enologists and chemists increased their savoir faire, we saw the list of possible additives grow longer and longer. In Europe today, fifty-nine additives are permitted, and in the United States a couple dozen more, according to a *New York Times* article. *Permitted* is an important word. You can bet that some items not permitted are used by the unscrupulous. And you should know that organic, as the *Times* points out, does not mean zero additives.

I am not a true-believer type of guy. That's not my style. I will not agree categorically that the less a winemaker does to his or her wine, the better. Ultra-natural does not always taste good, as I learned from decades of tastings and experimentation.

There is a reason all wines are not naturally produced. Here are the most common problems with no-SO₂ wines: oxidation, refermentation, autolysis, and bacterial activity like brettanomyces. SO₂ protects wine, you see? That is why it is used and has been for centuries.

Jules Chauvet was a microbiologist. He had his no-SO₂ wine under the microscope daily to keep his eagle eye on the yeasts and bacteria. Perhaps, in order to make an impeccable wine without SO₂, it takes a scientist like Chauvet. That is what I began to think.

Such marathon tastings [with Marcel Lapierre and the “Gang of Four”] gave me an appreciation of the problems we face as we try to perfect “natural” wines, and they have led to almost zero problems in recent years. And I must say, it is true that SO₂ use was overdone. Wines were often horribly overdosed. Only an extremely minimal sulfur dose is necessary to protect a wine. It won't be noticeable. If the wine is protected from light and heat, you're home safe. Dogmatism has led to a lot of untasty natural wines.

I have worked to introduce to the United States the best, most natural wines possible. I don't accept that flaws are a good sign. They don't even prove that a wine is natural.

I'm against filtration but I import some wines that have been filtered. I'm against harvesting machines but I've imported wines from mechanical harvesters. I'm all for indigenous yeasts, but I'll bet I've offered wines fermented from purchased yeasts. I'm hoping that the result of my experience—years of trial and error, searching the limits and the excesses—will be found in your next glass of wine.

A natural wine that goes off began to seem ridiculous to me. It is unfair to the consumer, of course. At the very least, a wine should be drinkable. But it is also unfair to the wine. Too many times in the past I have purchased a no-SO₂ wine that really struck me as a great wine, only to see it turn bad later. We've made incredible progress, but in my opinion, we're still not all the way down the natural wine road. I'll do my best to see that the progress continues, but I'm not convinced that being an ultra-purist is the best path.

—**HERMIT LUNCH**, excerpts from Epilogue,
Adventures on the Wine Route: 25th Anniversary Edition

2018 LES VIEILLES VIGNES DE SYLVANER

◆ DOMAINE OSTERTAG \$30

TO CALL ANDRÉ OSTERTAG a revolutionary wine-maker is to tell just half the story. He is a pioneer, certainly, but also an ardent environmentalist. Upon joining the family farm, he lowered yields considerably and introduced new viticultural and vinification techniques, focusing on the health of the soil and low-intervention winemaking. In 1997, he converted all his vineyards to biodynamic, which goes several steps beyond organic in terms of being in tune with nature. Those who are familiar with André Oster-tag's wines know him as a genie with the Sylvaner grape. He ferments the juice spontaneously—with indigenous yeasts—and ages the wine for a year on its lees in stainless steel. Beguiling perfume, racy acidity, suave texture—here is a dry white with beautiful complexity, deliciousness, and originality.



2018 VÉZELAY “LA CHÂTELAINES”

◆ DOMAINE DE LA CADETTE \$35



IN THE PAGES OF OUR NEWSLETTER back in 2007 (and later reprinted in his book *A Really Big Lunch*), Jim Harrison describes a “nasty summer in Montana” during which a heat wave made it impossible to enjoy his typical red wine favorites. A short list of whites replaced them—the select few capable of quenching his thirst—and La Cadette’s Vézelay blanc was among them. To vigneron

Valentin Montanet, this celebrated American author’s acknowledgment is more important than critic Robert Parker’s glowing 2006 Châtelaine rating. “We are very proud that Big Jim had such a good time with *la Châtelaine*,” he says with characteristic cheekiness. “It is a bottle that fits any need; a sure bet that comforts and brings pleasure after a long day of hard work or a long day doing nothing in particular.” Best to tuck a couple bottles away: in case of heat waves, hard work, or no work at all.

2018 MORGON “VIEILLES VIGNES”

◆ GUY BRETON \$37

IT’S NO COINCIDENCE that numerous up-and-coming Beaujolais vigneron, as well as more established ones like Camille and Mathieu Lapierre, called on Guy Breton for advice while vinifying their 2018s. Not only is P’tit Max (as he is known) at the very top of his game, crafting wines of unparalleled purity and finesse, but his extensive experience with low-intervention winemaking makes him a go-to source for anyone seeking wisdom on the subject. His philosophy has not changed much since his debuts, when Camille and Mathieu’s father, Marcel, took him under his wing: Max starts with old vines in great sites, farms them without herbicides, ferments whole-cluster without chaptalization or selected yeasts, and bottles unfiltered with minimal effective sulfur. His gorgeously perfumed, supremely silky and sensual 2018 Morgon demonstrates why he has become the point of reference for Beaujolais producers and consumers alike.

2018 CORBIÈRES “ROZETA”

◆ MAXIME MAGNON \$48

DEEP IN THE HAUTES-CORBIÈRES, a wildly hilly region of the Languedoc midway between Narbonne and Perpignan, a young Maxime Magnon stumbled upon a treasure: ancient vineyard parcels in steep, rocky soils destined to be abandoned, as local farmers were unwilling to break their backs to eke out tiny yields of wine that would ultimately get lost in the town co-op’s generic blend. Maxime seized the opportunity and bought the vineyards, immediately going organic. His Rozeta bottling is a field blend of Carignan, Grenache, and Cinsault that is fermented whole-cluster and bottled unfiltered with very little sulfur. You’ll find an exuberant, inviting perfume and velvety wild fruit, along with a crunchy backbone reminiscent of dark schist and roasted spices. Maxime counts Allemand, Barral, and Lapierre among his strongest influences, and it shows—this drinks like great *cru* Beaujolais infused with southern soul.



2017 PATRIMONIO ROUGE “CRU DES AGRIATES”

◆ DOMAINE GIACOMETTI \$22

DOMAINE GIACOMETTI is one of only two wine domaines in the Désert des Agriates, a dry, maquis- and granite-covered scrubland that unfolds below the narrow road from Saint-Florent to Calvi and extends out to the sea. The



Giacomettis’ Niellucciu vines thrive in this harsh landscape, and the taste of their wine is unmistakable compared to other Patrimonios.

The Giacomettis live close to the sea, and their vines lie under a constant sea breeze, which many consider to have cleansing powers that ward off disease and allow grapes to stay cool. This also facilitates organic farming. As for winemaking, the domaine now speaks of “infusion” rather than extraction, coaxing flavor and spice from the grapes by gently soaking them in their juice—more along the lines of making tea than wine. They do not inoculate or filter, instead relying on precision and touch in the cellar to make clean, balanced wines. Their skillfully crafted Patrimonio expresses this rugged part of Corsica in all its raw glory.

2001 BOURGUEIL “LES PERRIÈRES”

◆ C. & P. BRETON \$110

BASED JUST EAST of Bourgueil in the village of Restigné, Catherine and Pierre Breton have become international icons for natural wine, having pioneered the movement since its early days and honed their techniques to near-perfection over an impressive career. They first introduced biodynamic practices into their viticulture in 1994, just three years after receiving their organic certification.

Their Perrières bottling is one of the greatest wines being made in the Loire: old-vine Cabernet Franc planted on slopes of clay over chalky limestone known as *tuffeau*, giving a full-bodied and extremely long-lived Bourgueil. In their immense wisdom they thought to stash away great vintages in their cool, limestone *caves*, and here we are able to present you with a perfectly preserved old bottle. Perrières typically showcases firm structure, fine tannins, and deep concentration of fruit without being overpowering or heavy. With lively acidity and enticing suggestions of menthol, forest floor, graphite, and freshly turned earth, the 2001 is in its prime and will live on for many more years.





<p>2018 Les Vieilles Vignes de Sylvaner</p> <p><i>Domaine Ostertag</i></p> <p>ALSACE</p>	Sylvaner	55-year-old vines Clay, granite, gravel	Serve <i>cold</i> 46–52° F Decant optional	Green apple, orchard fruit, lime blossom, gunflint Bright, focused, suave, mineral	Drink now
<p>2018 Vézelay “La Châtelaine”</p> <p><i>Domaine de la Cadette</i></p> <p>BURGUNDY</p>	Chardonnay	25-year-old vines Clay, limestone	Serve <i>cold</i> 46–52° F Decant optional	Acacia, white peach, citrus, salted butter Crisp, lively, brisk, stony	Drink now
<p>2018 Morgon “Vieilles Vignes”</p> <p><i>Guy Breton</i></p> <p>BEAUJOLAIS</p>	Gamay	80-year-old vines Granite	Serve <i>cool</i> 54–58° F Decant optional	Cherry, cranberry, spice, flowers Silky, seductive, high-toned, delicate	Drink now through 2030
<p>2018 Corbières “Rozeta”</p> <p><i>Maxime Magnon</i></p> <p>LANGUEDOC</p>	Carignan, Grenache, Syrah, Grenache Gris, Macabou, Terret	50- to 60-year-old vines Limestone, schist	Serve <i>cool</i> 56–60° F Decant optional	Blueberry, wild fruit, violets, underbrush Lively, earthy, crunchy, fine-grained	Drink now through 2030
<p>2017 Patrimoine Rouge “Cru des Agriate”</p> <p><i>Domaine Giacometti</i></p> <p>CORSICA</p>	97% Niellucciu, 3% Grenache	10- to 45-year-old vines Clay, granite	Serve <i>slightly cool</i> 60–64° F Decant optional	Maquis herbs, black cherry, smoke, game Chewy, resinous, rustic, savory	Drink now through 2025
<p>2001 Bourgueil “Les Perrières”</p> <p><i>C. & P. Breton</i></p> <p>LOIRE</p>	Cabernet Franc	Vines planted in 1947 Clay, limestone	Serve <i>slightly cool</i> 58–62° F Decant 1–2 hours	Menthol, graphite, wet earth, eucalyptus Chalky, lean, elegant, structured	Drink now through 2030

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In the winter of 1980, Marcel Lapierre (left) met local vigneron Jules Chauvet, and quickly fell under his influence. Since taking over the family domaine following the passing of his father in 1973, Lapierre dabbled with old-fashioned vinifications in the style his father and grandfather practiced before the days of chaptalization and industrial yeast. Chauvet, a skilled chemist, had already spent decades studying—under the microscope—how to make a “natural” wine without chaptalization, laboratory yeast, filtration, or any added sulfur, from grapes farmed with no chemical fertilizers or herbicides. Lapierre quickly became a convert to Chauvet’s school of vinification, and enticed his childhood friends “P’tit Max” Breton (center), “Polpo” Thévenet (right), and Jean Foillard (not pictured) to do the same. The “Gang of Four” would forever change the course of wine history.

