

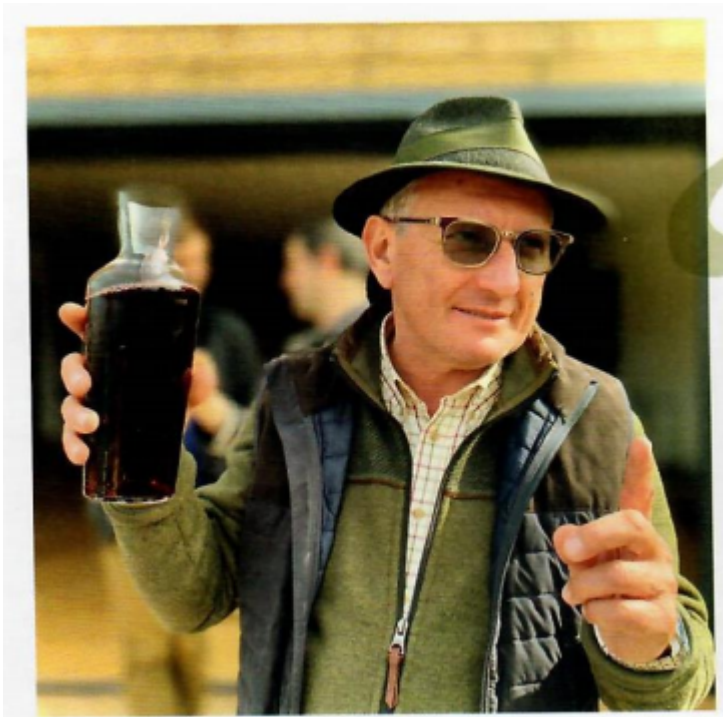


Domaine Abbattucci, Historical Agriculture Reinvented

By Soazig Cornu in *Biodynamis Magazine* N° 110, July 2020

Let's go a little farther south, to Corsica, to discover the Domaine Abbattucci, a domaine whose reputation knows no borders. The Tarvo Valley, where the domaine was born, has been home to vineyards from the seaside to the mountainside. Jean-Charles Abbattucci's vision crosses time periods, inspired as he is by ancient practices while resolutely dedicated to a sustainable future.

We depart from Corte – where the day before our annual viticultural conference had taken place. More than 2 hours on the winding roads of Corsica are necessary before arriving at Domaine Abbattucci, in Casalabriva southwest of Ajaccio. The domaine is entirely fenced to discourage wild boars, but also, possibly, to protect from too much human interaction.



Jean-Charles Abbattucci is one of the pioneers of biodynamic viticulture in Corsica. He very rarely hosts visitors, and we recognize the luck we have to meet him. We visit the domaine by foot, following this passionate *vigneron* from parcel to parcel, with grafted-over vine stocks here and bottom-pruned plants there. We observe the madness of a plantation on a slope at 30%, at the height of the domaine, with an unobstructed view of the property and the valley!

We recognize Barbary fig cacti and flowerbeds of *immortelles*, breathe in the potent perfume of wild lavender. Jean-Charles speaks, shares, and we discover the capacity that certain

people have to anchor themselves upon ancestral agricultural history in order to innovate in the present day and to find ways forward for the future. He speaks of and is inspired by the agriculture that he calls “historical,” which to him means that which was practiced by ancient peoples, based on the observation of nature and the stars. Jean-Charles formulates it well: by



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observing and trying to better understand nature, he finds answers to the major challenges posed by today's viticulture.

Step by Step Evolution

The Abbatucci family has always worked the vines, for local and familial consumption. Jean-Charles' grandfather planted the domaine in Casalabriva, which had been taken over by his father in the sixties, a period of great disruption with the arrival of the *pieds-noirs*, of mechanization and of large-scale plantations. The property grew at this time, from four to 30 hectares!

Jean-Charles took over the domaine in 1992, with very little means and even less equipment. For eight years he focused principally on getting the vineyards back in order. He concentrated on the viticultural side of things: restructuring the parcels, fencing them in to protect from the wild boars.

As far as *élevage*, vinification and bottling, before constructing his own cellar, he worked with his neighbor, the Domaine Peraldi in Ajaccio. In 2000, there was a general turn toward organic and biodynamic viticulture: after an initial beginning on 6 hectares, the entire domaine was converted during the same year and certified Demeter in 2005.

Three years later, an unfortunate experiment allowed Jean-Charles to understand horn-silica preparations. During a year marked by an extreme heat wave, following a treatment of 3g/ha of silica on a 2 hectare parcel, he harvested 2 tons of dried grapes! A revelation for him, as he realized that man must be the conductor that accompanies nature, but that he will never be its master. The effects that one can expect from silica had become concrete: heat effect, fire, fructification, ripening of the wood, creation of starch, early ripening...as well as the obvious importance of the conditions of pulverization for each biodynamic treatment.

This endearing man broke away from the appellations in 2010 to have more freedom to do what he thought was right for his land and his vines. And, he succeeded in making his wines shine across the globe.

Conservatory of Indigenous varieties

In 2006, in continuity with his interest for historical agriculture, this atypical and determined *vigneron* dedicated himself to the work realized by his father 40 years earlier. At the time president of the chamber of agriculture of Corsica, his father had initiated an important work on the research of indigenous varieties. Old varieties were sought and an inventory taken across the entire island. This work was the indispensable forerunner to the conservatory of 19 indigenous varieties put into place at Domaine Abbatucci. The richness of the conservatory resides equally in the fact that these varieties had been grafted onto different types of rootstock in order to study the behavior of the vine, its growth, and its health.



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Ten years of monitoring of this collection, from 1965 to 1975, permitted to collect precious information, with the creation of ampelographic [botanical] records of the Corsican grapes (phenological characteristics, resistance to maladies, technological values of the wines...). It is also thanks to this work that a rootstock at the time seldom used was identified as advantageous: the Rupestris du Lot.

Today, Jean-Charles cultivates uniquely indigenous varieties, and since 2006 has been the pioneer of old-varietal blends using the vines planted by his father in the conservatory.

“The call of the rootstock”

The *vigneron* has various needs, constraints, hopes: to change a grape variety while maintaining the root system in place, to rejuvenate the vines, to plant in a Mediterranean climate. The discovery of the richness and the potential of Corsican varieties led Jean-Charles to replant old varieties. Many factors were favorable came together for the realization of this project: the *terroir*, the cultivation types, the climatic environment, biodynamics, but to his great regret, Jean-Charles could not plant vines that would immediately be 50 years old! That’s why he became interested in *surgreffage*, which permits to graft a new variety onto an existing vine and thus to take advantage of the root system already in place while only losing one year of production. As he did not want to “graft-on” to young vines, which is the usual practice, he tried on 30 year old vines, then on 40 year old, then 50, even 60 year old vines. And, it worked! The graft used is called Chip-Bud. With a few years of hindsight, the results are very gratifying.

In order to better resist the increasingly hot Mediterranean climate, since 2013 the plantations have been made by planting, first the “rooted” -- the grafted – stock exclusively. His choice was the Rupestris du Lot, in line with his father’s work. The grafting of the variety follows about 3 years later, when the rootstock is well implanted.

“The call of the rootstock” is the name given by Jean-Charles to another technique used in the vines, *recépage* or bottom pruning, used to re-form a new trunk with a young leafy branch (a young branch from the same year, before the lignification, beginning from the bottom of the vine), which permits the conservation of the generally well-developed root system. The vine that is bottom pruned will enter into production rapidly and much more quickly than a (normal) young plant. Jean-Charles’ objective being to rejuvenate his plants, to regenerate them, he was again inspired by a viticultural tradition. This bottom pruning method might even allow him to get rid of Esca and other rootstock maladies, which motivated a 15-year experiment on one parcel. At the beginning, more than 30% of the rootstocks displayed symptoms of Esca. Fifteen years later, less than 1% of the symptoms were identified! As a result of this experiment, his team responds to the “call of the rootstock” during the pruning period across the entirety of the domaine. All of the employees who care for the vines have instructions to conserve any



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new buds growing directly on the rootstock. At the end of the year the original trunk will be decapitated and serve as a support for the young branch.

Experiments with saltwater

In Corsica, the history of wine dates back over 3000 years. Documents attest that many of the historical vineyards were planted on the seafront. This despite the fact that the risks of maritime invasions were high and the tendency was generally to plant and to live inland. There must have been a particular interest to plant vines near the sea. Did the maritime ambience have a positive influence?

This is Jean-Charles' hunch. He did an experiment in 2017 to recreate the maritime ambience on his biodynamic vines. His protocol: a vineyard (Carcajolo Nero) cultivated biodynamically and with horse labor, with saltwater treatments that replace all use of copper and sulfur. Method: saltwater at around 3% of the total volume, spring water, dynamization for one hour, pulverization as with horn silica, but at a dose of 150 l/ha.

Jean-Charles associated his sensory and visual observations with analysis by sensitive crystallization. He observed:

- An all-around impression of vegetative strength.
- A faster healing from damages due to strong winds when compared to vines in other parcels.
- An exceptional quality of the grape berries and an intact bloom at harvest (which permits the development of yeasts and the creation of natural sulfur in the wine).
- The ripening of the wood as early as August, in advance of the other parcels, and consequently an early shift to vegetative resting state.
- An equivalent yield.

The sensitive crystallization analysis of the branches by Margarethe Chapelle confirmed the observations:

- 2017: no signs of malady
- 2018: high-performance immunity system
- 2019: Complete effectiveness of the treatments

The idea is to associate the curative effects of the sea, its energy, with the physical phenomenon of salt (NaCl) associated with micro and oligo-elements. The first observations were encouraging but of course, it will be necessary to see with time and according to the vintages if these observations will be confirmed and sustained.

Jean-Charles was at any rate sufficiently intrigued by this experimentation and extended the process over an additional hectare of Schiacarello in 2020.



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In advance of its release, we tasted the cuvée 2019 made from the original saltwater parcel, and the result was a true success. This method could be explored as a solution to reduce or eliminate the doses of copper and sulfur in certain conditions.

The instincts for the future

Jean-Charles Abbatucci pursues his path with an approach that is instinctive, philosophical, and sensitive to biodynamic viticulture.

The observation of biodiversity takes increasing importance at the domaine: conservation and maintenance of the natural environment, the hedges, isolated trees, priority given to the presence of wild medicinal plants, lavender, *immortelles*, Barbary figs, myrtles, strawberries. Used in herbal infusions during the treatments, their presence in and around the vines quite probably has a positive influence. A herd of Merino sheep grazes in extensive herding at the domaine. Animals work the vines on a large part of the domaine. The winemaker hopes that the perfumes of the wines will be enhanced by the diversity of animals and plants and the symbiosis that flows from it.

Another one of Jean-Charles' original experiments takes place in the Monte Bianco parcel. A musician friend, a renowned violinist, comes to play several pieces of classical music during each of the human interventions such as the pruning, debudding, vine training, harvest, etc. The vine dances in the wind along with the music. The idea of the artist-winemaker (or winemaker-artist?) in this experiment is to give a vibrating impulsion in the wines. Tasting to follow!

As actions follow convictions, Jean-Charles has just completed a high-density plantation on a slope of 30% with the rootstock *Rupestris du Lot*, which will be worked uniquely by horse, and treated exclusively with saltwater. Will the vine remain healthy while producing a normal yield? Only time will tell.

This *vigneron*, so supported and inspired by nature likes to say, "When we take a step toward nature, she takes two toward us." Here's hoping that nature and Jean-Charles Abbatucci will continue walking in harmony for many years to come, to the delight of the environment and wine lovers alike.