

**Madam Inagaki,
editor of wine magazine “Vinotheque”**

**(Questions to Mr Benoit Tarlant).
(At least for 15 December 2018).**

Q1 . When did you start organic and biodynamic growing? Since the beginning, how have you been feeling the changes in the soil condition, the reaction of the vines, and the quality of the grapes?

The work under the influence of the moon has been passed on to us by my great grand-parents, Georges and Germaine. All their lives, they tended their vineyard and the family garden following this approach, and we enjoyed their fruits and vegetables.

Our grand-parents Geo and Denise were doing their own grafting, and also naturally replaced their French vines in the 50s. As for our Grand-parents Maurice and Suzanne, they passed on their approach on farming and on the working of the land.

Our parents re-implemented cover cropping in 1996 and so stopped using pesticides.

I got my first biodynamic training with Pierre Masson back in 2005, and I got my first dynamic water system in 2007.

Our first crop of vine protecting plants dates back 2009.

Since 2012, we have been performing diagnostics with bio-indicator plants.

From 2014 on, we have been teaching “respectful pruning” (poussard) to the whole team.

In 2018, we implemented a double-grafting project on old varieties of Petit Meslier.

In 2020, we will get our first harvest with all 7 varieties (BAM was project N°1, and now it’s the 5th project).

So it would be an over-simplification to explain my progress only by the bio vision and certification.

Q2 . Is it difficult to implement organic and biodynamic winegrowing in your region? what has been the most difficult for you?

If you are referring to the technical point of view only, the most complicated is to protect the vines from the pressure of the mildew, with only contact remedies. Confronted with this issue, we have to be better observers and very reactive. We face a dilemma between a more and more limited use of copper, its relative effectiveness in case of storm, and at the same time the desire to curb the use of chemicals toxic for men, plants and the planet. So, yes, definitely, it’s complicated.

But I do think that this questioning is much wider than the organic/biodynamic issue.

The question is which Champagne do we want in the future? and I’ll elaborate in Q7.

Q3 . How have you experienced the change of quality of your Champagne after your conversion to organic?

The change in quality is not only due to the conversion to organic, because vines are not tended with over-simplified ideas, but with human values, longer term actions, and care to the whole ecosystem, starting with a sub-soil which is alive and ending in the cellar.

It’s a whole set of ideas about vines, thoughts about wines, and also smaller actions with a lot of manual details which upgrade the quality; in-depth reflections are needed, allowing a better sensitivity to human work.

Q4 . Are you observing the consequences of the climatic change, or the unusual climate? if you are, what do you need to do in your vineyard?

Yes, we are experiencing significant climatic changes. My first harvest happening in August was in 2003. Before that, in Oeuilly, it had been in August 1947 for the Tarlant family. Nowadays, the harvests of 2007, 2011, 2017 and 2018 started at the end of August. There is a clear tendency to earlier harvests. And of course, we adapt our work to this new rhythm.

Vines grow easily in these mediterranean conditions, so we still have some leeway, but we have to be smart about that.

I have a simple example to illustrate this: we called our 2003 vintage “la Matinale” (“the early riser”), as the only way I found to keep the berries hard and fresh for pressing was to pick them up very early, from 6 to 11 am.

Nowadays, in 2018, the obvious thing to do is to put the grapes in the cool pressing room; this room is now very well insulated, taking advantage of the natural coolness of an underground cellar, and so keeps the grapes in a cool atmosphere before pressing. Then the grape juice flows down to the underground tanks, which, being inside the cellar are already at a cool temperature. All these investments have been thought for the last 15 years, having in mind the climatic evolution.

But there is a little anecdote I’d like to convey, told by Georges in 2003 : so our great-grand-father, Georges (1908-2008) told us that his own great-grand-father, Louis Honoré Roch (1814-1872) made the harvest in 1946 at the time of the village festival (the Oeuilly festival is traditionally at the beginning of August), and they also experienced early harvests in the 19th century). This means that the climate and the weather have a strong impact, but our job, as a winegrower, is to know how to adjust.

Q5 . Do you need the organic certification?

No, not really, but when you work with Official Bodies which have forgotten the link to human relationship, they require a certification to tender, for example for State Monopolies, which are very standardized, and if you don’t fulfill these requirements, you can’t participate, and so you have no possibility of reaching the customers of these countries.

I don’t know if it’s because the world is increasingly bureaucratic, or if the food and drink industry is dominated by global companies, or the distribution controlled by huge hypermarkets, but this leads to a loss of relationships based upon trust, and so, to provide a short-term confidence, certification systems are required. But I don’t believe that this strict framework allows progress, on the contrary, freedom is the key to a creative desire.

I pay a particular attention to human relationships. As you may know, we’ve been working for more than 25 years with Mr Jono, our Japanese importer. Almost every year, we meet here in Champagne, to taste the future cuvees, obviously, but also to show our work in the cellar, in the vineyard, explain our trials, and the progress we’ve achieved.

A certification by a bureaucratic entity will never replace this relationship.

In spite of the current world evolution, we have to be humanely closer to our customers.

We are always delighted to welcome them in our vineyards to show our work, and that’s what counts.

Q6 . What type of yeast do you use for the first and the second fermentation? Do you think the choice of the yeast for the second fermentation has an influence on the aromas and the taste of Champagne?

For the first fermentation, we typically use a fermentation we can call “indigenous”. It comes mainly from the grapes, but also from the harvesting tools (the press for instance), and then, the residual flora from the barrels and the cellar.

Therefore, it’s a whole set of yeasts which help us make a beautiful first fermentation, sometimes quick, sometimes tempestuous, sometimes slow, sometimes lengthy, but always giving wine (at the time I’m writing this, I have 6 vines in barrels still undergoing the first fermentation, slowly but surely).

And for a few years, we have been comparing this spontaneity with our own selection of plot yeasts. Actually, for 5 years we have been working with researchers to classify and select per plot the yeasts observed on our terroir. (This has been done in the Vigne d'Antan, and the non-grafted Chardonnay with the Meunier of the Vigne d'or, with the Petit Meslier, the Arbanne) it's a long-term research job, but it allows us to carry out the second fermentations with our own "Tarlant" yeasts.

Before that, I used off-the-shelf champenoise yeasts; they are not "bad" actually, but I like to have the choice of a natural diversity for the second fermentation.

If you think of the time the wine stays in contact with the lees in the bottle at our House, the yeasts have better be positive.

Q7 . What is your opinion about sustainable winegrowing (VDC) promoted by CIVC and High Environmental Value (HVE)?

I think this approach also meets the modern world issues. CIVC questioned themselves about the evolution of the practices of the different actors of Champagne. So a kind of certification allows to measure, analyze, quantify, giving a general framework and proposing areas of improvements.

But this method of certification is also useful for the factories which buy grapes. Once again, the relationship with the winegrower is lost for the benefit of a bureaucratic system. So I don't think this is the right solution. According to me, if we want the Champagne region to progress, we have to give them the drive to do better, to own a common quality goal, to aim at making splendid wines.

And because today, those who set the market rules are the global companies, you may wonder about the final objective; they always want bigger quantities, higher yields (which is the opposite of the objectives of the winegrower looking for quality, using soft ways of protecting their vines). These huge companies want to control their sourcing and develop the services through internal or external facilities; therefore, winegrowers gradually lose their know-how and natural feeling.

And there lies a critical paradox.

What Champagne do we want in the future? (see Q3)

A Champagne region controlled by certifications, with standardized production processes, supplying pipelines to these mega structures, mass-producing bottles of Champagne?

Or a Champagne with a strong human connection, working in a meaningful way, careful about nature, in tune with its cycles, and respectful of Time.

This Champagne favors craftsmanship and human creativity while respecting the elders' work and tradition, with the ultimate goal of creating wines able to arouse real human relationships.

This is the very gist of luxury!

You can imagine what we have chosen our side, but you have to know that we are in a spirit of resistance, and our customers all over the world are our best support. I do thank them for that.