

Enlightenment chez Bernard Baudry: 1989–2010

Jacqueline Friedrich describes the changes in viticulture and winemaking at this leading Chinon domaine and follows them through to the glass in a fascinating tasting spanning three decades

We wine scribes all have our “go-to” winemakers in the particular regions that we cover. To qualify, in my mind, the winemaker in question should be a master craftsman/artist vigneron, reflective, honest, articulate, and sufficiently mainstream to know what’s going on in his or her appellation. Bernard and Matthieu Baudry easily qualify as my go-to source for anything Chinon. I’m preparing a long chapter on Chinon, so I wanted to discuss the changes in the viticulture, winemaking, and, by necessity, the wines, that have occurred over the past 20 years. A visit chez Baudry seemed indispensable.

Bernard Baudry, who graduated from the Lycée de Beaune, created his eponymous domaine in 1975 with 2ha (5 acres) of vines. His son Matthieu—after studying in Mâcon and Bordeaux and doing *stages* throughout France, as well as in Tasmania at Pipers Brook Vineyards and Domaine Bouchaine in Carneros—joined him in 2000. Following Bernard’s “official” retirement in 2012, Matthieu has taken over, working 32ha (80 acres) of vines, all but two of which are given over to red grapes, including a hectare of Grolleau planted in 2011. They currently make five reds, two whites, and a rosé.

The Baudrys farm organically and are so certified. The conversion to organic farming began officially in 2006 but more accurately in 1997, when Bernard sought a non-chemical way of dealing with *Brettanomyces*. He thought that by hoeing his soils to a depth of 10cm (4in) with a light plow called a *cultivateur* and a harrow, he might raise the wine’s levels of tartaric acid and lower the pH, thus reducing the likelihood of a Brett attack and obviating the need for

chemical treatments to deal with the problem. Satisfied with the results, he has continued this method of “working” his soils to this day.

If memory serves, there were very few winemakers in Chinon committed to organic farming in the mid-1990s—maybe two. The focus was on cellar practices such as temperature control, extraction (by punching down and pumping over), and on aging the wine in new or newish Bordeaux barrels. There now seems to be a move away from that type of vinification. While many Chinon producers now use thermovinification—which the Baudrys decry—others are moving in the direction of less “winemaking” and an increased focus on purity, elegance, and site specificity. And here the Baudrys seem to be at the vanguard.

Less for more

“We do less and less during fermentation,” Bernard said. “The grapes are destemmed, and a conveyor belt delivers them by gravity to the fermentation tanks. Grapes from young vines ferment in stainless-steel tanks; older vines go into cement vats; still older vines and grapes from our best terroirs ferment in open wooden vats. We have no temperature control. Temperatures fluctuate between 20 and 30°C [68–86°F]. Vatting usually lasts between two and three weeks for young drinking cuvées, especially in years like 2013, but tends to be about 15 days. We do a little racking over, just to wet the cap, every day, sheltering the wine from the air. In principle, we don’t rack the wines once they’re in barrel, on their fine lees. We began looking for less extraction as of 2007. Both 2005 and 2006 are more extracted. The last year we punched

down may have been 2011,” Bernard concluded. “In any event, all of the changes disappear in ten to 15 years. It’s the *goût du terroir* that counts.”

As Bernard described the changes that he and Matthieu had undertaken, the latter was pouring our first wine, the 2013 cuvée *Domaine*. The second wine in the Baudry hierarchy, *Domaine* takes 80 percent of its grapes from the *millarges* soils (sand flecked with yellow and red quartz and mixed with sandstone and iron-rich cement) on the plains and plateaus of Chinon and 20 percent from the gravelly soils in Cravant. This was a tank sample. The wine was aging on its fine lees and would be bottled in February or March, perhaps unfiltered.

It’s worth pointing out that 2013 was the worst vintage I can recall in my 20-plus years in the Loire. The growing season was marked by *coulure*, frost, cold weather, and an extremely wet growing season with, in particular, biblical rains from mid-September through the beginning of October. The Baudrys had lightly chaptalized some of the cuvées (0.5g/l)—the first time since 2001—so that the cuvée *Domaine* weighed in at 11.5% ABV. I call that intelligent winemaking, but by all means run for your pitchforks, hypernaturalists!

The wine’s robe was a pretty purple, a hue that an interior decorator would feature on a color chart. With aromas and flavors of small, wild cherries, pomegranate, and a hint of cherry pits, the wine was extremely alluring. Very pure and very fresh, with an appetizing bitterness that left the palate alert and clean, it was sheer *gourmandise*. And it made the mouth water. It was as pretty a wine as I could imagine, and I could drink buckets of it.

Les Granges is the Baudrys’ entry-level wine. Its vineyards lie on the gravelly soils between the Vienne River and the hillsides of Cravant. The wine fermented in stainless-steel tanks and aged in cement/concrete. As he poured, Bernard said, “We harvested very little of it in 2013. It suffered all the adversities of the vintage.”

Alas, it suffered, too, in comparison with the cuvée *Domaine*. Solid and more masculine, it, too, had that appetizing bitter note but simply needed aeration for its charms to emerge.

Right: Bernard and Matthieu Baudry in their barrel cellar.



Photography courtesy of Domaine Bernard Baudry

Next, a survey of the 2012s, a vintage the Baudrys like a lot, comparing it to 2002 and observing that, despite the less-than-favorable growing season, the wines had turned out better than expected, largely due to low yields.

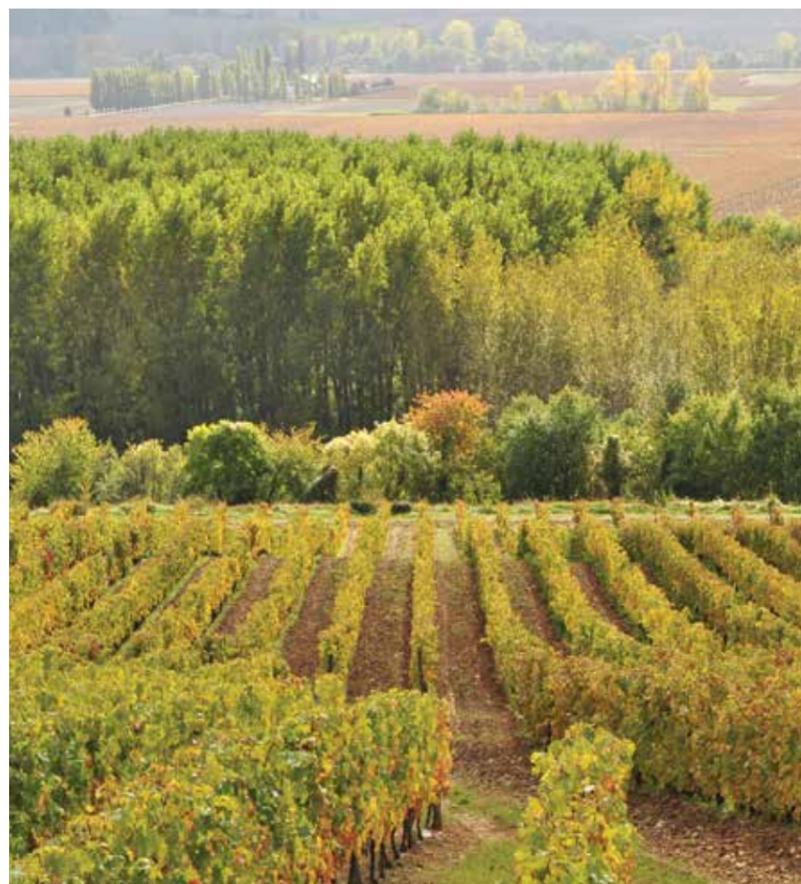
First came Domaine. Bottled unfiltered, the wine had aged for 15 months in covered wooden vats of all sizes. The robe was profound, a veil of black covering a well of deep purple. The nose was gorgeous, fleeting, mingled aromas of small red and black fruit—cherries, blackberries, blueberries. On the palate, the wine was less expressive and more tannic yet was fresh, cool, and structured. I could have followed its evolution for days.

The Cuvée Grézeaux was next. A *lieu-dit*, its vines—some of which are over 60 years old—grow on a mix of gravel and large stones worn down by the river. Vatting (in tank) lasted for three weeks. After malolactic, it aged for a year in barriques of three to ten wines. Discussing barrique aging, Bernard observed that he buys his barrels from top Bordeaux châteaux and, to his everlasting mystification, finds a number of them so bad that he tosses them out. How, he wondered, could someone age a classed growth in such barrels? But I digress. Back to the Grézeaux. Bottled in April 2014, it was still unsettled, its lovely fruit masked by oak. It called out for aging and/or aeration.

Crème de la crème: Clos and Croix

The Baudrys' top cuvées are Clos Guillot and Croix Boissée. The former is a slope with soils composed of yellow limestone, *millarges*, and the kind of hard clay used in pottery-making. Bernard planted it when he took over the vineyard in 1994. The wine ages in Burgundy barrels of four to ten wines. More expressive than the Grézeaux, it exuded rich black cherry mixed with oak aromas. It was extremely fresh and breezy, evidently from a well-ventilated slope. So dynamic it almost pulsated with energy, it was also nuanced and long.

If the color purple had a flavor, it would be the 2012 Croix Boissée. From another privileged site—this one a slope facing full south, with a diversity of soils including sand, silica-streaked clay, and porous, granular white tuffeau from the middle Turonien period—the wine actually shared many of the



characteristics of the Clos Guillot. Both had satisfying density, breeziness, and length, as well as mingled flavors of black cherry and oak. But the Croix Boissée's texture was stunning, a sensual weave of silk and velvet—lick-your-lips delicious. The wine should be glorious.

The procession of 2012s ended with the Croix Boissée Blanc. Planted in 1994, the grapes, harvested at 13% potential alcohol, fermented with indigenous yeasts in 500-liter barrels, one of which was new. "It ferments as long as it wants," Matthieu said, adding that malolactic conversion occurred by itself and that they believe that malo adds stability while changing very little organoleptically. (Malolactic for Chenin is a divisive topic in the Loire today. In the past, it was studiously avoided, and the generous use of sulfur certainly aided in that endeavor. An increasing number of producers now allow malolactic to occur, and some actively encourage it.) The Baudrys had been hoping for dry wine, but there was enough residual sugar in evidence—1.7g/l—to qualify the wine as *sec tendre*. While they agreed that the wine was not

anything a Vouvrillon would consider "sweet," they added, "In Vouvray they leave 10 grams of residual sugar and call it dry." "What about *bâtonnage* [stirring up of the lees]?" I asked. "That's a dirty word," came the rapid reply. Whatever, the wine was beautiful. It had been bottled two months earlier and will certainly improve but was already ravishing. Pure and long, it mingled flavors of preserved lemon, lime, minerals, ginger, and cinnamon. It was big and saline, with attractive bitterness, and it reminded me of a Rhône white—a Roussanne or Marsanne or a blend of the two.

Just for fun: A young-vines 1999 Croix Boissée blanc, with 14% ABV, was a tad oxidized but still very much alive, with flavors of honey, butterscotch, and *tilleul*.

It was time for the serious tasting of nine vintages of the top cuvées and an '89 Grézeaux. The notes below are in the same order that the Baudrys presented the wines.

Above: The favorably situated Croix Boissée vineyard. Opposite: The very varied soil profiles for the wines.

CLOS GUILLOT AND CROIX BOISSÉE

2004

I had wondered about the 2004 vintage since serving a bottle from a very good Chinon producer for Thanksgiving in 2010. The wine was obdurate, unyielding. One guest, who has a prominent position in the wine industry, refused to drink it. Bernard reasoned that this was due to the drought conditions. When relief finally came in August, it was too late. Thus, many of the wines were severe, with root-like, vegetal, and earthy flavors.

2004 Clos Guillot

A bright red, with a tinge of orange at the rim. It was austere but not hard; fresh and clear, with herby flavors, it wasn't a wine that would charm everyone but I quite liked it. What's more, while there was nothing vegetal about it, I found that it went quite well with the organic tomatoes from the Baudry garden. The marriage interested me because I've come to the conclusion that contemporary red wines—with their perfumes and flavors of fresh, small red and black fruit—no longer pair well with tomato-based dishes. But this wine had some of the characteristics of old-fashioned, extremely dry, leathery reds that did go well with tomato or tomato-sauce based dishes.

2004 Croix Boissée

Aged in old *fûts*, this was a dark crimson with a Burlat cherry rim. It displayed notes of button mushrooms, menthol, and red fruit. Tight, compact, and closed, it came across as rather Bordelais. "It's from a time when we did more extraction," Bernard explained.

As it happened, each of the 2004s ended up in my car. Tasting them the next day, the Clos Guillot was on the decline; the Croix Boissée was fresh and thirst-quenching, with flavors of dried cherries, dried cranberry, and mild old oak. It was both homey and specific, bringing to mind a handmade patchwork quilt.

2003

Anyone who lived through the summer of 2003 in France will never forget the paralyzing heat. We took cold baths and froze our sheets but couldn't install air conditioners in the vineyards. Low yields, high sugars with correspondingly high alcohol levels, high pH, and low acidity—not wines built to last. Ah, conventional wisdom! One thing to remember about the Loire is that the wines will rarely lose their freshness or acidity.

2003 Clos Guillot

This wine proved more in line with expectations for the vintage: rich, and so ripe it seemed sweet.

2003 Croix Boissée

This delighted us all with its freshness and its delicious flavors of multiple expressions of cherry—fresh, macerated, baked in clafoutis—along with truffles. The wine was still young, full of sap; fluid, supple, not at all hot or heavy. Bernard credited the wine's terroir for its freshness, despite its relatively low acidity, adding that, yes, the wine tasted very young, yet you could tell that it had "lived." Meanwhile, I scribbled, "This is contrary to everything we thought 2003 would be as it aged!"

2002 Clos Guillot

Only the first or second vintage: attractively fresh.

2002 Croix Boissée

Downright energetic. Sapid, pure, and with toothsome flavors of cherries and baking spices, the wine was simultaneously youthful and mature, moving gracefully toward the stripped-to-its-essentials expression of Old Chinon.

1996 Croix Boissée

This was beginning to resemble an Old Chinon in the poetic austerity of its dried-fruit perfumes. Yet it was still fresh and showed no signs of fatigue.

2006 Croix Boissée

Young and sappy. After a half-hour in the glass, it began to manifest characteristics of an old wine. And like all Old Chinons, it was very, very dry.

At the 2006 Salon des Vins de Loire, Bernard had told me that 2005 was the greatest vintage of his life. I later wondered if that was still true, given the impressive 2009 and 2010 vintages. His response: "2009 is not as grand as 2005; 2005 is richer, but 2009 is more chiseled. 2010 is a year for *grands amateurs de vin*."

2009 Clos Guillot

Subtle, complex, and gentle, with mingled aromas of fresh and dried fruit, this came across as less imposing than the Boissée. No problem there, however, as it just drifted down the gullet.

2009 Croix Boissée

Profoundly dark and profoundly deep, this gave off hints of licorice, menthol, and mild oak, with other treasures in store. It demands cellaring and promises to be grandiose.

2010 Clos Guillot

A veritable catalog of cherry flavors mildly seasoned by oak. Clearly a young wine, with flawless structure, it will surely evolve into a layered, nuanced, extremely fine Chinon.

2010 Croix Boissée

Bernard said that this wine finished fermenting in barrel—with nary a whisper of volatile acidity. "Another example of enologists not knowing what they're talking about," he added. Darker and deeper than the Guillot, it was already a ravishing wine, with the richness and depth of fruit flavors overshadowing the oak. Simultaneously smooth and energetic, it had no jagged edges. And while it clearly needed cellaring, it was so delectable that I could have finished the bottle on the spot.

2005 Croix Boissée

Dark, with dense color saturation, this was fresh and fluid until the tannins kicked in. Bernard was disappointed, but I found the wine very promising: fully realized but simply too young. It offered mingled aromas of fruit, herbs, mild oak, musk, and graphite. The breezes of its exposed slope swept through it, bringing lift to the density and richness of the wine. Like the 2010, it wanted cellaring but was so seductive you would be hard put to wait to drink it.

1989 Grézeaux

This wine topped lab analysis charts for Brett. Well, I didn't detect any. What I found was a subtle wine, still evolving, with delicate aromas of dried fruit and herbs. And Bernard didn't find any Brett either. So, does Brett disappear if you age a wine long enough? A mystery. And one that I'm counting on the Baudrys to resolve.

