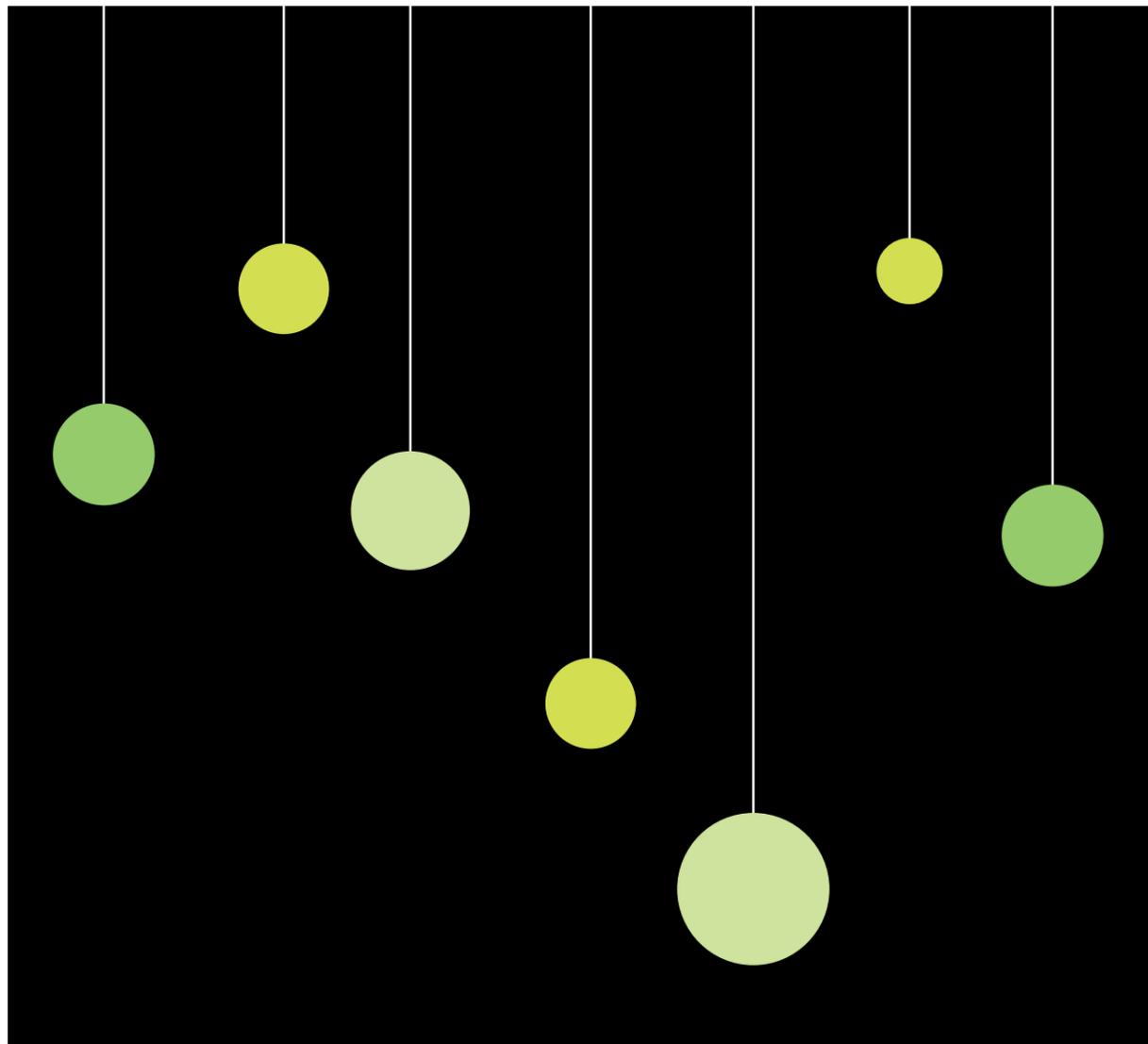


THE NEW ROMORANTIN

Romorantin has a reputation for creating austere acidic, bone-dry, often oxidized white wines in the Cour-Cheverny appellation in the Eastern Touraine. For **Jacqueline Friedrich**, however, this stylistic caricature is but one of many stubborn myths that cling to a grape variety that, in the hands of a new breed of producers, can be thrillingly precise and fine



Scores of obscure grape varieties are cultivated in France, but few are as cloaked in folklore as Romorantin. The offspring of Gouais Blanc and Pinot Fin Teinturier (itself a mutation of Pinot Noir), Romorantin is a white grape grown almost exclusively in the eastern limits of Touraine, notably around Cheverny. It is so indelibly associated with that area that in 1949 a *vin délimité de qualité supérieure*—Mont-Pres-Chambord-Cour-Cheverny—was created for wines made from it, covering four local communes. In 1993, it was promoted to *appellation d'origine contrôlée* status and renamed Cour-Cheverny. (At the same time, its sister appellation Cheverny was accorded the same status.) Cour-Cheverny was still limited to Romorantin, but its reach was extended to 11 communes and will probably stretch a little further to include Romorantin vines recently planted on the grounds of the neighboring Château de Chambord.

Fairytale, fact, and theory

So far, so true. Now we come to fairytale Romorantin. Myths die hard. And the myth of how and when Romorantin arrived in its current home is nothing if not resistant.

The following is my translation of said saga from the website of the Maison des Vins de Cheverny et Cour-Cheverny. "Unique in the world, Romorantin was introduced by François I [other sources give the precise date as 1519] who requested delivery of 80,000 vines from Burgundy in order to plant them around the town of Romorantin, in the *lieu-dit* Le Clos des Baunes, where his mother, Louise de Savoie, often stayed. Legend has it that François I wanted to construct a château there, which turned out to be Chambord."

To pursue the issue, I reached out to two leading ampelographers, Jean-Michel Boursiquot and José Vouillamoz. Here is part of Boursiquot's response (my translation): "In effect, in our article of 1999, we were able to show that Romorantin was a seedling resulting from a cross of Gouais and Pinot Teinturier [...]. It is, therefore, in my opinion, possible and probable—as it is for Chenin by the way—that at the time of François I, vine cuttings, as well as seeds, were brought from

Burgundy to the Loire in order to develop its vineyards and improve the quality of its wines, and that these seeds were then sown. Also, in my opinion, Romorantin could have been selected locally, based on the seeds that had come from Burgundy. But it's also true that this is only a hypothesis because, for the time being, it's not possible for us to put a date on the origin of varieties nor their place of origin."

A "just the facts, ma'am" investigating ampelographer, Vouillamoz has no time for suppositions: "People like to rely on myths and legends when it comes to the origins of grapes. Many people will tell you that Syrah comes from Persia, Altesse from Cyprus, and Chasselas from Egypt. As a scientist, I rely only on evidence. As mentioned in *Wine Grapes*, there is no historical document providing evidence that what François I allegedly planted in 1519 was Romorantin [...]. DNA profiling does not allow us to date the crossings; only literature mentions can give us an idea of when a variety was born. We can only say that Romorantin was born some time before its earliest mention—that is, 1868." Vouillamoz adds that the critical "mention" was in Pierre Rézeau's *Le Dictionnaire des Noms de Cépages de France*, reprinted by CNRS Editions in 1997.

In *Wine Grapes*, which Vouillamoz coauthored with Jancis Robinson MW and Julia Harding MW, there's an alternative theory of how Romorantin arrived near the location from which it took its name—now the provincial town Romorantin-Lanthenay: "According to Mouillefert (1903), local tradition in the Loir-et-Cher has it that Romorantin was introduced into the region in 1830 by an unknown vine grower in Villefranche-sur-Cher, whence it spread to Romorantin and then to the whole of the Loir-et-Cher." An examination by the Institut National de la Recherche Agronomique (INRA) of pre-phylloxera Romorantin vines now owned by Henry Marionnet (*see box at end of article*) led to the conclusion that those vines had actually been planted sometime around 1820.

A different image

Today, Romorantin covers roughly 60ha (150 acres), mostly within the confines of its own appellation, Cour-Cheverny. It is overlapped by Cheverny AOC, which encompasses 24

Phenolic ripeness, lower yields, later harvesting, eco-friendly viticulture, and increased rigor in the cellar all contribute to the New Romorantin. The acidity, far from being shrill, is precise and fine

communes. It produces casual, user-friendly country wines made from blends of Pinot Noir and Gamay for the reds and rosés, and Sauvignon and Chardonnay for the whites. Romorantin, by contrast, is rarely, if ever, a casual, user-friendly country wine. Aggressively acidic, often oxidized, it was an edgy wine that appealed primarily to pursuers of vinous footnotes and, surprisingly, to more than a few Chenin producers, who found that it recalled their wines.

At least, such was the conventional wisdom regarding the organoleptic profile of Romorantin. While it may characterize some of the wines made in the appellation today, it misses the mark by a country mile for other versions, which reveal quite a different image of Romorantin.

I think of the latter as the New Romorantin. Phenolic ripeness, lower yields, later harvesting (usually mid- to late October), eco-friendly viticulture, and increased rigor in the cellar all contribute to the New Romorantin, which often seems like a bridge linking the New Touraine Chenin and the New Sancerrois Sauvignon. The wines may still be high in acid, but the acidity, far from being shrill, is precise and fine. What's more, there's rarely so much as a whisper of oxidation. And it's well worth noting that the New Romorantin is deliciously food-friendly. Any preparation of crustaceans, sushi, and Waldorf salads are among the many possibilities.

Cazin: captivating and important

My wake-up call came in 2012, when I tasted a 2005 Cour-Cheverny Cuvée Renaissance from François Cazin of Le Petit Chambord. The wine, with 13.5% ABV and 22g of residual sugar per liter, had aged for two years before being bottled in 2007. A real presence, it was definitive, powerful, and manifestly the product of a specific place. Its firm structure, its flavors of herbal tea, minerals, light butterscotch, and honey captivated me. It was, in a word, important.

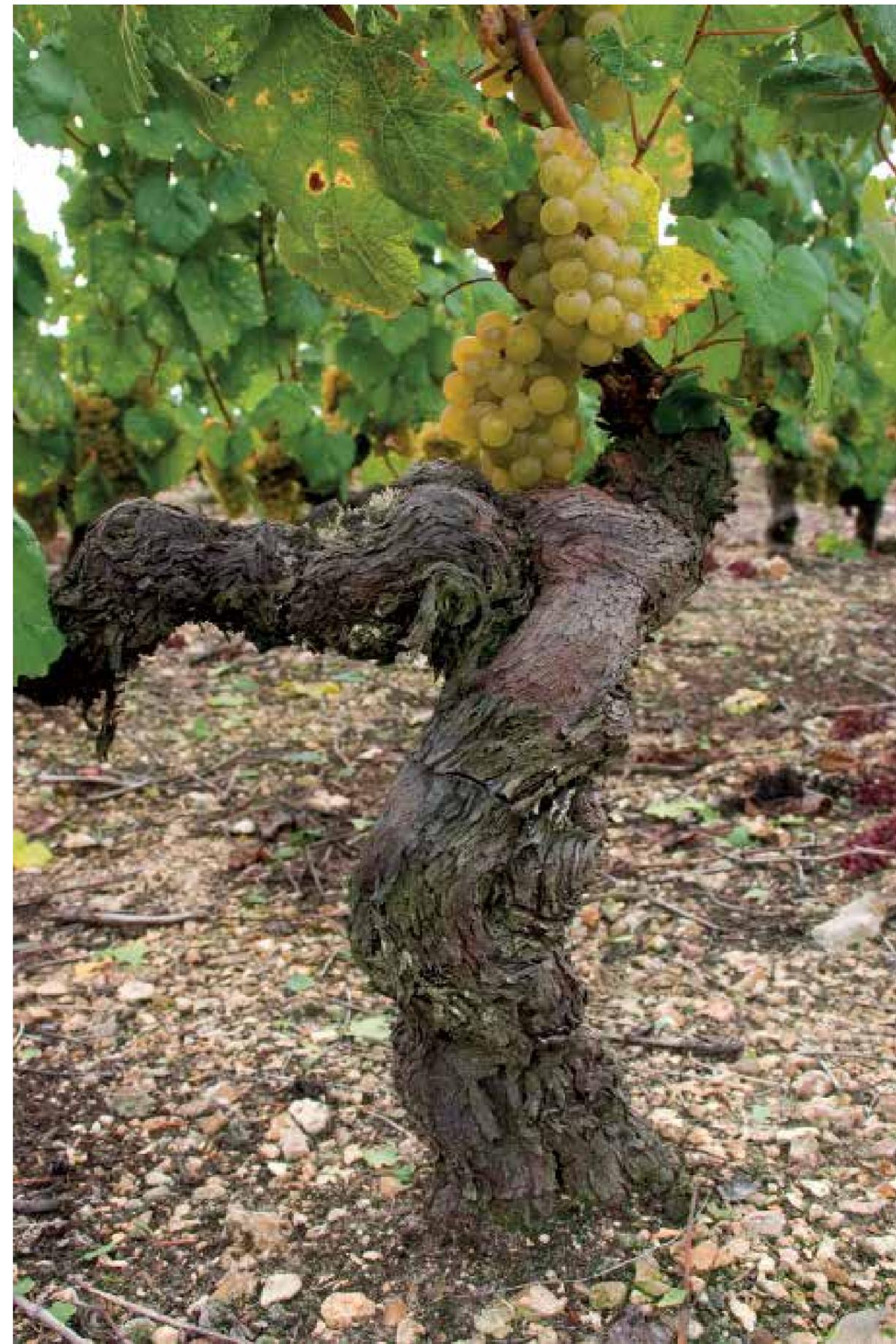
Arriving at the Salon des Vins de Loire in early 2013, I installed myself at Cazin's stand for a long interview and tasting. As I did again, most recently in 2016. Cazin, a fourth-generation

Opposite: An ancient Romorantin vine that provides fruit for Marionnet's Provignage.

vigneron, works 23ha (57 acres) of vines bordered on the east by the forest of Cheverny. The domaine's 6ha (15 acres) of Romorantin are, for the most part, planted on siliceous-clay soils. Romorantin has always been cultivated on the estate. It is the domaine's oldest variety. Eighty percent of its vines are more than 40 years old, including an octogenarian parcel, where the vines are currently 83 years old. Viticulture is essentially organic, though Cazin, whose farming practices are certified by Terra Vitis, calls his approach "very, very sustainable." He explains, "I always cultivated my soils. I hand-harvest. But I find it paradoxical to allow the use of copper in organic viticulture, because it stays in the soil. I also let myself treat my vines when necessary. If we find a cure for typiose or esca, I might use it."

Of Romorantin he notes, "It is a productive grape. You have to control the yields. Mine are 30–50hl/ha for the dry wines, less for the *moelleux*, and 25hl/ha for the very old vines. Romorantin is also fragile," he continues. "You must harvest by hand—and wait to harvest until the grapes are ripe, almost pink. You must harvest when the temperature is cool, and then sort the grapes to remove the dodgy ones. Then you need to shelter the fruit from air, because Romorantin oxidizes easily. I put the grapes in a tank under layer of CO₂. And you must avoid all rough handling of the grapes."

Cazin makes two different versions of Cour-Cheverny using only indigenous yeasts. The basic cuvée ferments in stainless-steel or concrete tanks and ages for about six months in barrel. The second, Cuvée Renaissance, a late-harvest wine, is not made every year. It comes from low-yielding (25–30hl/ha) vines ranging from 50 to 80 years old, grown on siliceous-clay soils whose limestone subsoils are close to the surface. The grapes begin their fermentation in stainless-steel tanks before being racked to used oak vats with a capacity of 23hl. The wines may or may not go through malolactic, either full or partial. Cazin, for one, likes Romorantin's redoubtable high-strung friskiness, which he finds in vintages like 2008. (I tasted the 2008 Cuvée Renaissance in 2013; no malolactic, and yes, there was plenty of very vibrant acidity. But the wines *fringant* aspect was beautifully balanced by lovely, ripe fruit and minerality. What's more, the quality of the acidity was admirable. It was refined,



Photography courtesy of Domaine Henry Marionnet



unlike the frankly vulgar acidity that distorted many of the Loire whites of that vintage.)

Before describing the wines tasted with Cazin in February 2016, I want to revisit the wonderful 2005 that I studiously drank over a two-day period this past June (2016). A pale platinum gold, it was younger than springtime. What's more, you'd have sworn it was a splendid Vouvray or Montlouis. Fresh, harmonious, and straight as an arrow, it was an enthralling wine that revealed a broad range of delicate and delicious flavors: apple, many types of citrus, herbal tea, honey... One sip led to another. And then it was gone.

My most recent tasting with Cazin was at the Salon des Vins de Loire in early 2016. First came a tank sample of the 2015 Cour-Cheverny. Cazin is not alone in considering this vintage exceptional—a year with low yields, superb concentration, and great ripeness. And his wines certainly reflected the growing season. Diamond-bright, the 2015 was pellucid. Although it had not gone through malolactic, it was creamy, its richness enlivened by flavors of citrus peel. Complex and lip-smacking, it was a gorgeous example of Romorantin. Many of the same descriptors could be used for the Cuvée Renaissance, save for the honeyed notes from overripe and shriveled grapes (residual sugar of 30g/l), the more nuanced, voluptuous texture, and a beautifully long finish. But there's more. Bear with me, dear reader. Sometimes a wine is so mesmerizing that it spirals me into wine orbit. And that is what happened tasting this 2015. In a vast hall with thousands of people milling around me, I was alone. The world had fallen away... until I shook myself out of my wine trance to taste the 2014s.

Neither of these had been bottled at the time. A good to very good vintage, the wines tend to be high in acidity. Cazin put a proportion of his wines through malolactic to soften them. Both the Cour-Cheverny (13% ABV) and the Renaissance (19g/l residual sugar), made from overripe and botrytized grapes, were a bit closed at the Salon, but I got to taste the former slowly, over three days, in June, just after it had been bottled: delicate flavors of gooseberry mixed with mild citrus, mineral, and honey. There

Above: François Cazin of Le Petit Chambord engaged in the crucial task of pruning.

A feast for the taste buds, simultaneously meaty and subtle, Cazin's 2010 Cuvée Renaissance was a beautiful Vouvray/Montlouis doppelgänger. And each time I sipped it, it swirled me into wine orbit

was also a fine thread of salinity. Smooth and attractively textured, the wine should blossom after six months in bottle.

Now, 2013 was, in my opinion, the worst Loire vintage since 1984. Yet Cazin's Cour-Cheverny (11.5% ABV) was delicate and clear as a stream, with a bright lemon finish. On the other hand, 2010 is perhaps my favorite Loire vintage. True, 2005 and 2009 had warmer growing seasons, producing very ripe fruit. But few vintages engendered wines with the structure and elegance of the 2010s. The 2010 Cuvée Renaissance embodied its vintage. Made from overripe grapes, it had 22g/l residual sugar, 5.7g/l acidity, and, when tasted in 2013 and again in 2016, it was simply sensational. A crystalline liquid, its harmony of honey-licked sweetness and lemon- and lime-zest acidity threaded with minerals seemed to linger forever. It was gracious; it was elegant and pedigreed. A feast for the taste buds, simultaneously meaty and subtle, it was another beautiful Vouvray/Montlouis doppelgänger. And each time I sipped it, it swirled me into wine orbit. For me, it was an illustration of the awesome possibilities of one human being working with nature and with history—the embodiment of civilization. This does not happen alone. ■

Photography courtesy of Le Petit Chambord

OTHER RECOMMENDED PRODUCERS

Although Cazin's Cour-Cheverny is the finest, most complex, and subtlest Romorantins I've ever tasted, the wines from the two producers below come very close. I'm also following several relative newcomers with great interest—prime among them, Laura Semeria, an Italian businesswoman who fell in love with wine and, in 2007, bought the Domaine de Montcy, where she makes stylish if somewhat neutral versions of Cour-Cheverny. (The 2005 was particularly successful.) The wines described below, like Cazin's, were tasted both in salons, as well as at home in June 2016, where I could linger over them for several days and pair them with food.

Domaine Henry Marionnet

In 1998, an old vigneron came to Henry Marionnet, the producer many credit with having put the wines of Sologne on the map and on restaurant lists, and proposed that Marionnet take possession of 36 ares (0.9 acre) of pre-phyloxera Romorantin. The man didn't know precisely when they were planted but thought it was sometime between 1800 and 1850. "At the time," recalled Marionnet, "I immediately wanted to have the vines examined by the world's greatest living ampelographer, Denis Boubals of INRA. After dissecting the vines, Boubals confirmed that they were indeed pre-phyloxeric, because they hadn't been grafted and were very old, but he couldn't give me a precise age because the vines were hollow. He thought, however, that they must have been planted around 1820."

These 36 ares are among the oldest vineyards in France, if not the oldest. And they make Marionnet's Provignage. The vineyard, which has clay-rich soils flecked with silex, is in Soings-en-Sologne, 8 miles (13km) south of the Château de Cheverny. It lies outside the bounds of Cour-Cheverny AOC but within those of Touraine AOC.

But Provignage is sold as a Vin de France for the simple, dumbfounding reason that the Institut National de l'Origine et de la Qualité (INAO) does not allow pure Romorantin wines in the Touraine appellation. So much for François I.

The 2014, tasted and drunk over two days in June 2016, was a fine, pale gold, a shimmering satin. I was first struck by the expression of freshness and harmony. There were notes of apple, fresh lemon juice, and lemon peel. Elegant and racy, it was a beautiful wine with a long, stony finish—a Romorantin that once again made me think of Chenin, of Vouvray and Montlouis.

The 2005 Provignage, again a pale gold, mixing flavors of apples, citrus, and minerals, weighed in at 14.3% ABV and 6g/l acidity. (The 2014 was under 13% ABV.) But it was fresh, as well as plush and stylish, and would have been at home on a Michelin-starred table. My first experience with the wine was at the 2006 Salon des Vins de Loire, where I noted that it was a "must taste"—a crystalline wine that was full, complex, and elegant, mingling flavors of peach and ginger. Total pleasure.

In 2006, Henry's son Jean-Sebastien, who has joined his father on the domaine, took cuttings of the Provignage vines and planted them on an adjacent 36-are plot. The resulting wine is called La Pucelle de Romorantin, and it is also a Vin de France. The 2014 had a delicate, lightly floral nose. On the palate, it was fresh and vivacious, a tangy wine with vivid lemon, passion-fruit, and yuzu flavors, as well as notes of mineral and stone—a chip off the old block.

Domaine Philippe Tessier

Philippe Tessier's father created this domaine of 24ha (60 acres) in 1961. Philippe took over in 1981, and by 1998 he had converted the estate to organic viticulture. He makes at least three different cuvées of Cour-Cheverny each year, and sometimes as many as five. Harvest is by hand, and Tessier uses only natural yeasts.

I tasted the 2014s twice—at the Salon des Vins de Loire in early 2016 and again in June. All had gone between 13.3% and 13.5% ABV, and all had gone through malolactic. The first Cour-Cheverny is made from young vines—roughly ten years old—grown on siliceous-clay soils. It ferments and ages in tank. A pale, brilliant gold, the wine was smooth, pure, and fresh, with vibrant acidity and flavors of passion fruit and yuzu. A 2010 of the same cuvée, tasted in June, was precise, focused, and lively, with flavors of ripe apples, citrus, and minerals.

Next comes the Les Sables cuvée, from 20–40-year-old vines grown on soils with more silica. The wine ages in *demi-muids* and 1,500hl oak vats before being transferred to cement tanks for an additional five months. The 2014 was suave and creamy. Limpid and pure, with citrus and citrus-peel notes, it was mellower than the first cuvée but equally fresh. Quite lovely.

La Porte Dorée is the name of Tessier's old-vines bottling (from plants aged 45 years and over). The grapes ferment and age in barriques and *demi-muids*. The 2014 had the aroma of just-picked garden apples, crisp and juicy. Textured and fresh, the wine's flavors seemed to have been mellowed—but not masked—by oak. Indeed, there was a veritable citrus salad of flavors, running from lemon to yuzu. There were also notes of ginger and minerals. Pure, balanced, and suave, it was another handsome Romorantin.

And then there's Romorantique. If the name suggests a dulcet *moelleux* cuvée, think again. This bottling is made from destemmed grapes macerated in a Georgian amphora for six months, then aged in tank for another three, before being bottled unfiltered and sans SO₂. Bordering on amber-orange, the 2014 was stony, citric, and lightly tannic, with a very dry finish. Mostly, however, it tasted matte, monotonal, and as earthy as the clay on a potter's wheel. It was as if the wine had somehow pierced the beeswax lining of the amphora and leached flavor directly from the terra cotta—which, if true, might suggest a new range of flavors that are not part of UC Davis's philosophy.