

AZAY-LE-RIDEAU REVOLUTION

Jacqueline Friedrich charts the exciting recent changes in this historic but isolated Touraine village, identifying the dynamic new producers whose scintillating Chenin Blancs and sparkling wines deserve far greater recognition—including, she suggests, an appellation of their own

Azay-le-Rideau is a magical little town in the heart of Touraine. You cross a small bridge looking down on a succession of willows, whose arching branches trail their leaves in the slow moving waters of the Indre River, then follow narrow streets lined with medieval houses to an idyllic park in which sits a jewel of a Renaissance château, perfectly symmetrical, perfectly situated. Lush green valleys and ivy-covered farmhouses lead you to Saché, where Balzac wrote *Le Lys dans la Vallée* and where a mobile by former resident Alexander Calder commands the village square.

The remains of a Gallo-Roman wine press found in the neighboring village of Cheillé support the widely held belief that the Ridellois is the birthplace of vine cultivation and winemaking in Touraine. Today, wines from Azay-le-Rideau and seven surrounding communes fall into one of several appellations. The most significant, Touraine-Azay-le-Rideau, encompasses whites made from Chenin Blanc (1953) and rosés (1977). The latter must be based at least 60 percent on Grolleau. The broad Touraine AOC covers reds and sparkling wines made by the *méthode traditionnelle*. There are also Crémants de Loire, as well as an ever-increasing number of Vins de France.

Until very recently, however, the local wines, with the

notable exception of Azays from Robert Denis, were of interest only in a “fare of the country” setting. Underachievers of whom no one expected very much anyway, the wines rarely made it beyond the local restaurants and fairs that served the château country’s brisk tourist industry. Sure, Daniel Jahan’s biting tart Chenins, tasting of Granny Smith apples, had a certain charm when paired with the *plat du jour* at his café in Saché, as did Jean-Pierre Perdriau’s vigorous rosés when knocked back at a summer street fair. Context was key.

Times have changed. In the permanent revolution that is the vinous Loire, it is Azay-le-Rideau’s turn to surprise the wine world with the birth of a new cru for racy, elegant, distinctive Chenin Blancs. And unlike their forebears, these wines are sold the world over and are featured in tasting notes throughout the blogosphere.

The basics for making exceptional wine—the right climate and soils—were always there. But it took a new generation, as embodied by Nicolas Paget, and an influx of newcomers, such as Nicolas Grosbois, to begin to realize the region’s vinous potential—a confluence of circumstances that is barely more than five years old.

Grosbois—a rising star in Chinon, as well as winemaker and 25 percent owner of the vineyards of Château de la Cour du Berruyer—brings a particularly insightful and personal

understanding to the evolution. His grandfather had a 7ha (17-acre) vineyard and made wine in Lignièrès, part of the Azay AOC, and Grosbois hopes to replant those vines.

What, I asked him, made Azay so special. “We’re the sole appellation on the Indre River,” he answered. “We have a special microclimate. Because we escape the airstreams coming from the Atlantic that heat up the atmosphere and we escape the effects of El Niño, our temperatures are on average 2–3 degrees [3.6°–5.4°F] lower than the Loire Valley. This gives our wines more acidity and vivacity. When you combine the cold soils of clay and silex with the microclimate of the Indre Valley, you get acidity and minerality. You can’t grow Cabernet Franc here.”

The soils of the Azay appellation are similar to those of other top Touraine zones: flinty clay, locally called *perruches*; limestone and clay, locally called *aubuis*; siliceous rocks mixed with clay, windblown sands mixed with clay, all on a bed of yellow *tuffeau*.

One of the reasons it has taken so long for Azay-le-Rideau to realize its winemaking potential is its location: it is completely isolated, separated from the nearest appellations, notably Chinon, by forests and rivers, highways and industrial

Above: Château d’Azay-le-Rideau: a perfectly symmetrical Renaissance jewel.

zones. There has never been a cooperative; never a négociant; very little in the way of outside influence.

Robert Denis, who had been the president of Azay’s growers’ *syndicat* for more than 20 years prior to his death in the late 1990s, once outlined Azay’s postwar history for me: “We’re in a region of polyculture. In the past, we had cows and cereal crops; now, just wine and fruit trees. Twenty-five years ago, wines weren’t selling. Regions with no other options continued to concentrate on wine, but we could plant orchards. People ripped up their vines—vines that were 12 years old—and planted apple trees, pear and peach trees, but mostly apple trees. Now, however, wines are coming back in fashion.” Still, Denis could think of only four people, including himself, who concentrated solely on winemaking.

That isolation fostered a negative zeitgeist, one that encouraged complacency, which in turn sapped energy, mistrusted ambition, and bred mediocrity. In this respect, the recent arrival of so many people from outside the region is nothing less than a godsend. Most have traveled; many have studied viticulture and enology and worked with vintners from other regions and other countries. Equally important, in the increasingly fragmented wine world, most belong to one of the many associations linking like-minded vigneronns—such as La Renaissance des Appellations, La Levée de la Loire, Les

Vins du Coin—that hold tastings and salons (usually “Off”), thus creating a more open, receptive spirit, which contributes to the dynamism of the appellation as a whole. It makes me wonder whether we might consider the prevailing spirit within an appellation as part of its terroir.

So, what do these wonderful new Azays taste like? As the focus seems to be on the whites for the moment—though rosés deserve the same devotion—I’ll give a very brief summary of my reactions. First, wow! Second, they recall very high-quality Montlouis. My favorites, and there are many, are—in differing degrees—beautifully structured, sleek, elegant, fresh, pure, and pellucid. Superb expressions of Chenin Blanc.

With such an improvement in quality, I believe it’s time to rethink and rewrite the Azay appellation. You may have noticed that I’ve abbreviated the name of the AOC to Azay instead of Touraine-Azay-le-Rideau. More than mere laziness was at play here. Like the Côtes du Rhône Villages that graduated to cru status—Gigondas and Cairanne, for example—Azay-le-Rideau merits its own, stand-alone appellation.

And the new appellation should include the region’s sparkling wines as well. Not only will you find some spectacular examples below, but even in the bad old days, many of the best wines from the region were its sparklers. In the same way that Vouvray and Montlouis include effervescent wines in their appellation, so should Azay.

Remembering Robert

As preface to my description of six domaines illustrating the new Azay, I’d like to offer some reminiscences of Robert Denis. He was the heart and soul of the Azay appellation, as well as president of its growers’ *syndicat* for more than 20 years. His grandfather created the family domaine in 1887; his father took over in 1923; and Denis in 1955. He had 4ha (10 acres) of vines, but as he pointed out, with his vine density, he had the equivalent of 6ha (15 acres) of Chinon.

Denis harvested by hand, often finishing in November. He’d decant the juice for one night and then ferment the wine in old oak *demi-muids*. Fermentation usually lasted until the end of December or mid-January, and he’d let the wine clarify naturally until his first racking, sometime in February. He’d filter the wine in March before bottling it in April or May and then keep the wine in his cellar for two to four years before putting it on the market. He made roughly 20,000 bottles a year and sold the wines to restaurants like Lasserre and Morot-Gaudry in Paris and Relais & Châteaux throughout France.

At the time, I lived west of Chinon and often went to Tours. I’d frequently stop in La-Chapelle-St-Blaise, the hamlet in Cheillé where Denis lived, for an impromptu tasting and chinwag.

The tastings were usually long and never went in strict order, often jumping years and decades only to return again to the decade in which we started. Typically, we’d start with a series of rosés, usually 95 percent Grolleau and fermented like Denis’s whites. “Grolleau is the *cépage* of our terroir,” he once said. “But you must be very severe with it and prune it very hard.”

At one tasting, we started with a coppery salmon pink ’89, a lively, fairly rich wine with pungent cherry, mild oak, and bitter nut flavors. After several other rosés, we arrived at a ’76. Pure Grolleau, it had the petrol notes of some Rieslings, mild oak, herbal tea, a saline core, and a whiff of oxidation. It was still spirited but beginning its decline. And it was fun to drink.

I’d have loved to pair it with cashew and pistachio nuts or bacon-based hors d’oeuvres.

At another tasting—of about 20 wines—we started with an ’89 blanc demi-sec from barrel: a supple wine with aromas and flavors of camphor and pineapple and an appetizing bitterness. Then a ’67 demi-sec, which, Denis noted, was a middling year but proof that in Touraine you must let the wines age. It was rich, with lovely texture and structure. Clear and lucid, it tasted of citrus zests and pulp, as well as wax, mushrooms, and quinine. An ’88 was closed but extremely tart and mineral. Aeration brought out intense flavors of grapefruit and more minerals. We waited, of course, because, as was the wont in those days, producers added too much sulfur dioxide. “Enologists advised lots of stupid things,” Denis noted. “The labs made us use a lot of SO₂.” With more aeration, it reminded me of a Montlouis. A sec from the disastrous ’84 vintage had aromas of aging Chenin. It was tart, truffley, with some bell-pepper notes along with grapefruit and minerals, and had a long finish. The year was 1992, and Denis had just begun marketing the ’84.

A ’90, which Denis preferred to the ’89 we’d just tasted, was tender, with litchi notes, as well as mild oak, lanolin, Scotch-bonnet peppers, and herbal tea. It was a lovely, nuanced wine with a fine future ahead of it. It, too, recalled a Montlouis.

We finished on a ’76 demi-sec, a wine simultaneously sweet but dry. It had the waxy aromas typical of old Chenins of the time and was a marvelous weave of hay, licorice, lime, and a host of herbal teas: *tilleul*, *verveine*, and chamomile.

As we lingered over the wine, Denis recalled a tasting of his ’55 with a friend in Paris, and it remains one of the most beautiful and moving descriptions of Chenin I’ve ever heard: “In an old Chenin, you often find flowering linden followed by an infusion of mint and ripe hay. When I was a boy and harvested hay, I’d put my arms around a bale and stick my nose into it. That’s the aroma I mean. Then you get pear blossoms and apple blossoms. Often the flavors blend in, but sometimes they seem compartmentalized so that you have the image of an entire countryside passing before you.” There were tears in his eyes.

The new Azay

One note on the winery reviews and tasting notes to follow: 2013 was one of the worst vintages in Loire history. You have to go back to 1984 to find an equally dismal year. 2012, too, was difficult. Any less-than-enthusiastic tasting note does not detract from my overall enthusiasm. For one thing, it should be remembered that most of the people described are newcomers—not only to Azay but to winemaking. Everywhere, progress, reflection, energy, and originality are evident. And 2014 was an excellent vintage. I can’t wait to taste the wines.

Château de la Cour au Berruyer

During the Middle Ages, the Château de la Cour au Berruyer, a fortress, was a chief guard post occupying a strategic point close to both the Indre and the Loire rivers. It dominates its village of Cheillé and its neighbor Azay-le-Rideau and takes its name from Philippe Berruyer. The château’s oldest remaining sections date from the 12th and the 13th centuries, and the property is included in the *Inventaire des Monuments Historiques*.

When purchased by Geneviève and Pierre Deprez in 2005, the château had no vines. And so, when vineyards became



available near the Château in 2010, Deprez, who had had vines in his former home in the Saumur-Champigny area, purchased them. Not being a winemaker himself, Deprez, a lawyer, hired a succession of people to do the job. In 2012 he met Nicolas Grosbois, who was sniffing around, looking to buy grapes; Deprez was seeking a new winemaker. It did not take long before they made a deal. Now Deprez owns 50 percent of the vines; Grosbois, 25 percent; and the final 25 percent is owned by three young importers who sell Grosbois’s wine in Belgium.

The domaine’s 10ha (25 acres), seven (17 acres) of which are in the Azay-le-Rideau appellation, are separated into three parts. In front of the château is the recently planted one-hectare parcel, a sun-drenched slope whose flinty clay soils are 33–5ft (1–1.5m) deep before reaching the *tuffeau* bedrock. The hillside is planted entirely to Chenin. The vines, now three years old, will be coming into production this year.

The second parcel, 6ha (15 acres), is on a ridge in the eastern portion of Cheillé. Its vines average 25 years, and its soils—including white clay and pure flint—are more suited to red varieties. The third parcel, 2ha (5 acres), is the Clos des Brancs, a southwest-facing slope in Saché with flinty soils. It is located near the former atelier of artist Alexander Calder, whose mobile demarcates the point at which a dramatic change of soils occurs: flinty clay switches to pure chalk.

Farming of these diverse holdings is organic and certified by Ecocert. Harvesting is by hand. The grapes ferment in different types of recipients—used *demi-muids*, small stainless-steel tanks, cement eggs—in one of a series of outbuildings, and they are aged for two years before being put on the market.

The number of wines and bottlings is evolving. In 2013, they made only one white Azay; in 2014, they’ve planned two: the Château de la Cour and Clos des Brancs.

My first introduction to the domaine’s wines—as well as my first inkling that something serious and seriously good was afoot in Azay—occurred at an event in Bourgueil in June 2013, when I tasted their 2011 Azay blanc. It was so crystalline, so pure. Dang if it wasn’t a ringer for a really good Montlouis. Then came the 2012 rosé, a 60/40 Grolleau/Gamay blend. It, too, was pure, as well as tart and citric, and it piqued my interest.

Most of my tastings in the summer of 2014 were of tank, barrel, or cement-egg samples from the 2013 vintage, such as a wine from the *lieu-dit* Le Haut Bagneux that fermented in a

three-year-old barrique. It was ample, complex, with flavors of mineral and citrus, and one of the best 2013s I’d tasted. Equally impressive was a blend of wines from Haut Bagneux and old vines from the domaine’s vines in Saché, which added mild oak flavors to those of citrus zests and fresh lemon and lime; and, again, a young-vines offering from Saché, drawn from an oval barrel, that was compact, saline, and lip-smacking.

Then a 2012 from bottle. Beautifully ripe, absolutely pure, well structured and harmonious, it was an elegant wine, lightly chalky and long, with attractive citrus flavors and fine intracellular weight—every molecule in the wine was filled to the rim. These are not anonymous wines.

In February 2015 I tasted through another round of tank and barrel samples. First, a rosé from the *lieu-dit* Les Mésardières in Cheillé. Pellucid, revivifying, it was focused, citric, and ever so slightly tannic. Then a 2013 Azay blanc that fermented in a mix of two-year-old and new barrels of 300-liter capacity with indigenous yeasts and had gone through partial malolactic. The wine’s beautiful robe glistened with green reflections—the sign of a great white, an old vigneron once told me. Floral and blossomy, it was crystalline and airborne, with light notes of honey and intense flavors of lemon zests and minerals, both of which melded into a finish that seemed to last forever.

There was also a sparkling wine, a Chenin/Chardonnay blend from 2013, which was a bit unusual in that at least some of its grapes came from the neighboring commune of Rigny-Ussé, which is not within the Azay zone. The blend had been sanctioned by the AOC due to extensive hail damage in Azay’s vineyards that year. But the quality of the grapes may warrant a rethinking of the appellation’s delimitations. The wine tasted of pear, lemon zest, and apple compote, and it was light as air.

Nicolas Paget

In addition to Azay-le-Rideau’s newcomers, the generation now taking the reins of existing domaines is reason for great optimism. Nicolas Paget, who just turned 40, is a stellar example.

Paget, who represents the fifth generation of Paget, took over the family domaine in Rivarennes in 2008 after having studied at the Lycées Viticoles of both Amboise and Montreuil Bellay and having worked in St-Emilion and Coteaux du Layon. “But that’s not where I learned the most,” he told me. “I learned rigor from my father.”

Paget began working with his father in 2002, and as he recalls, dramatic changes started in 2003. That’s when they

Photography courtesy of Château de la Cour au Berruyer

Above: Nicolas Grosbois, partner and winemaker at Château de la Cour au Berruyer.

moved and rebuilt cellars, giving them the space that would allow more room for barrels, which in turn would permit them to age the wines longer.

They eliminated fertilizers, began planting grasses between the rows, tilling the soils, and, since 2011, converting to organic farming. As Paget puts it, “There’s more sincerity in our farming now.”

Paget currently has a total of 18ha (44 acres) of vines—in both Azay-le-Rideau and Chinon. He works with his wife and three vineyard employees, among whom is his “right-hand man” Thierry Chaput, who had a vineyard (farmed organically) in Montlouis.

The vineyards in Azay-le-Rideau are located on two islets: the first on an eastern slope in Cheillé, near Château de la Cour; the second in the western stretches of Cheillé, near Paget’s cellars. The soils, generally deep, are a mix of alluvial clay and sand with sharp stones called *cornuelles*.

In addition to Azay AOC, Paget makes Chinon, sparkling wine, and several Touraines, as well as an off-dry Grolleau rosé not permitted within the AOC’s regulations for Touraine-Azay-de-Rideau, and some delectable Cots.

Paget harvests his Chenin by successive passes through the vineyard. He makes two cuvées of Azay blanc: Melodie and Opus. The first corresponds to young vines (planted by Paget, using *sélection massale*) growing on the limestone soils just above the cellars. The grapes ferment (wild yeasts only) in stainless-steel tanks, and Paget stirs the lees as the wine ages. The 2013, with 2 grams of residual sugar, was lightly chaptalized and went through malolactic fermentation. It was a suave, textured wine, clean, pure, and citric, with a saline streak, a pronounced mineral backdrop, and a long finish. It recalled Montlouis.

Opus is a late-harvest wine, a selection of the best grapes from the same vines as Melodie. The grapes ferment slowly in barriques, at times as long as six months. Paget stirs the lees.

The wine goes through malolactic “if it so desires.” The 2012 had 8 grams of residual sugar. An impressive wine, it displayed distinct flavors of tangerine, passion fruit, peach, apple compote, herbal tea, and minerals. It was pure, crystalline, fresh, and textured, with attractive salinity and a very long finish. Not only did it exemplify the new Azay, it seemed to reveal a cru.

Paget makes three types of sparkling wine: a pure Chenin, a pure Grolleau, and a Pet/Nat. The first two were a bit reduced when tasted in August 2014, but I look forward to subjecting them to one of my “slow tastings,” and the Pet/Nat will be included in a future article.

Paget’s Azay rosé, called Arpege, is nearly pure Grolleau with, perhaps, a small proportion of Gamay. The vines grow on an east-facing slope with cold clay-rich soils in Cheillé, and yields limited to 50–55hl/ha. In 2013, the wine was lightly chaptalized and went through partial malolactic fermentation. Limpid and fresh with flavors of citrus zests and an appetizing bitterness, it was, as Paget noted, a *vin d’été* to be drunk *sous la tonnelle* (in a perfect shady spot).

I’m also going to mention here Paget’s 2013 Grolleau Gourmandise. Because it has between 6 and 8 grams of residual sugar, it cannot qualify for the Azay appellation—which is ridiculous, particularly when the AOC whites are both dry and demi-sec. In any event, this wine—from 50-plus-year-old vines on sand, flinty clay soils—offers intriguing aromas of strawberry, peach, citrus zests, tangerine, and more. It’s pure, fresh, and lip-smacking. Yes, the acidity is abundant, but it’s tamed by the fruit and the residual sugar. It’s mouth-filling and satisfying and original without being either bizarre or ideological. I’d love to try it with delicately exotic cuisine.

Château de l’Aulée

Driving from Tours to Chinon on the *route départementale* 751, the first Azay-le-Rideau vineyards you’re likely to see are those of the Château de l’Aulée, stretching across a broad, flat

plain to your left. Set farther back is a cunning little château looking for all the world like a dainty *petit four*.

When I first visited the domaine in 1990, it was owned by Madame Lallier-Deutz of the Champagne Deutz family, a chilly, formal *grande dame* who maintained a distance from the other producers in the appellation. After Lallier-Deutz came Jean-Louis Crespin, an entirely different character. Ebullient and touched by genius, Crespin had been making brilliant Chinons (Vin des Humanistes) on a small property in the commune of Tavant, and there he should have stayed. What possessed him to take on the large—38ha (94-acre)—Château de l’Aulée, I’ll never know, though perhaps an act of such reckless folly was irresistible to him. It did not take long before he went bankrupt.

Arnaud and Marielle Henrion purchased the property when it was in judicial liquidation in 2004. A former pharmacist who worked in marketing, Arnaud Henrion, who comes from St-Avertin in Touraine, is now Azay-le-Rideau’s mayor. Marielle, who is from a village south of Marne, studied enology at the University of Reims and worked at Bollinger for three and a half years, then Bricourt and Pommery.

They were looking for a project together and had decided to buy a vineyard. Land in Champagne was too expensive, so they focused on Touraine, where they immediately found l’Aulée, with its 31.5ha (78 acres) of vines in production, as well as 7ha (17 acres) of young vines. Although they knew nothing of the appellation at the time, they purchased l’Aulée, Henrion recalls, principally for sparkling wines but also because it would allow them to have a complete range of whites and reds. And they also had the right to plant more vines, which they have done, including 3ha (7.5 acres) of Chenin and one of Grolleau.

l’Aulée’s vines are planted on a mix of soils, primarily red clay and varying degrees of sand, as well as flinty clay, with limestone quite far beneath. They recently signed a contract with the mayor’s office for 3ha on a hillside with full southern exposure that had been slated for construction of vacation rentals. It’s likely that this plot will prove to be the domaine’s finest vineyard site.

The Henrions built new cellars in 2008, adding 100-liter stainless-steel tanks to the old barrels previously owned by Crespin. Marielle is in charge of the cellar. Henrion’s viticulturist is Sebastien Haerty of Chinon’s Domaine Francis Haerty in Savigny-en-Veron. The Henrions have also purchased that property.

In a good year, l’Aulée produces 250,000 bottles of wine, of which 200,000 are sparkling. It breaks down as follows: In the Chinon AOC, two reds, one white, one rosé; in Azay-le-Rideau, generally two dry whites, though occasionally an off-dry, *tendre*; in effervescent, five Crémants and three Touraine mousseux.

For reasons that will become clear, I’ll start by discussing l’Aulée’s sparkling wines, of which I’ve tasted only three due to the unavailability of other cuvées, notably the top bottling, 1856.

The Touraine Méthode Traditionelle Intense, mostly Chenin with 20 percent Chardonnay, is machine-harvested (65hl/ha), ferments in stainless-steel tanks, goes through partial or complete malolactic, and spends 18 months *sur lattes* before being bottled with a *dosage* of 10g/l. Bright, neat, and well composed, with lively citrus flavors, this sparkler is a

Left: Nicolas Paget, with his Azay (Grolleau) rosé and one of his well-tended vines.

veritable benchmark. And at less than €5, it’s a steal, too.

Henrion’s Crémants are hand-harvested (as the law dictates), pressed more lightly than the *mousseux*, spend more time *sur lattes*, and may go through partial or complete malolactic before bottling. Reserve wine may or may not be added for the final wine.

The Crémant de Loire Brut L is a blend of 85 percent Chenin Blanc and 15 percent Cabernet Franc grown on sand and clay soils. It spends two years *sur lattes* before being disgorged with a *dosage* of about 8g/l. The most recent release was a vigorous, toothsome wine with strong mineral and apple-sauce flavors. It would pair nicely with savory-sweet dishes such as a Waldorf salad or with anything crustacean.

The Crémant Brut Zéro, pure Chenin, spends a minimum of 24 months *sur lattes*. Vivid acidity, citrus, minerals, and salt characterize the current release. Very dry and rather elegant, the Crémant rivals a good-quality, all-purpose Champagne, one to serve either as an apéritif or as the accompaniment to an entire meal. Pure pleasure—and mighty tasty with smoked sablefish on organic rye with a mild aioli.

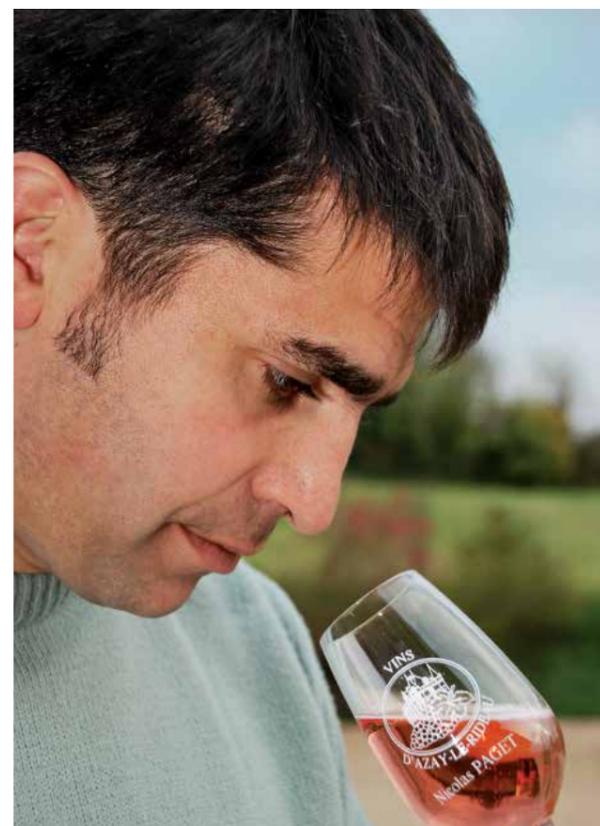
Among the still wines, the basic Azay blanc bottling, Le Château, comes from soils of deep clay mixed with flint from three parcels—those around the château, as well as those near the forest of Villandry. The grapes are hand-harvested at 40hl/ha and ferment and age in stainless-steel tanks for roughly ten months with some stirring of the lees.

The 2012, tasted in February 2015, had broad citrus aromas. On the palate, it was quite steely and tart, like biting into a lemon. It was also crystalline and pure, with a real sense of place. There was much to admire, but you have to like acidity. That said, the quality of this acidity is quite refined. The 2011, tasted in spring 2014, was sleek and aerodynamic. It certainly made me think of Montlouis. The 2010 was lightly oxidized but not without a pleasant stream of freshness. Its flavors included beeswax, ginger, and marginally overripe apples. Not a simple wine.

The grapes for the Vieilles Vignes bottling are 45 years old and grow on the flatlands in front of the château and bordering the D751. Hand-harvested at 30hl/ha, they undergo skin contact in the press before fermenting and aging in oak barrels with stirring of the lees. The 2012, tasted in February 2015, had a textbook (in the best sense) Chenin nose. On the palate were flavors of fresh and preserved lemon, ginger, and light quince. Textured and crystalline, it was saline and mineral and bordered on elegant. I was surprised, however, that, when tasted on the second day, the wine seemed on the decline. (I habitually taste wines over a period of days and it is rare that a good Loire wine fades on day two.)

Like the 2012, the 2011, tasted in spring 2014, had a discreet, classic Chenin nose with a mild note of oak. Quite racy, it, too could hold its own against a very good Montlouis. The 2008 had the clanging acidity characteristic of that vintage. It was quite saline, with bright lemon flavors. A real wake-up call.

Now here’s the rub: Henrion’s 2013 Azay blancs, tasted in February 2015 disappointed. First, I can’t help but wonder why she didn’t in the circumstances make one cuvée instead of two. Of the two, I preferred Le Château. True, it had a watery middle, and the strong citric flavors made me think of a pastille that has been dissolved in water, but it was also mineral and saline, very clean and very pure. The Vieilles Vignes, on the other hand, lacked the elegance of Le Château. Thicker and duller than that



Photography courtesy of Nicolas Paget

wine, it was also a bit raw and sour.

I sincerely believe there's truth to the old canard that there are no bad vintages, only bad vintners, though I'd qualify that by saying that the descriptive "bad" by no means applies to Henrion, who has obviously mastered the craft of making excellent sparkling wines. My sense is, however, that she has not fully acquired the skill-set, not to mention the mind-set, required to make top-notch still wines, good vintage or bad. So, there is progress to be made here. But Henrion is intelligent, as well as ambitious. I expect she'll develop the techniques and reflexes necessary to make her still wines as admirable as her sparkling wines. And when that time comes, watch out!

Marie Thibault

Thibault, 38, comes from Couture, a small village in the flatlands separating Anjou Noir from Anjou Blanc. Initially a student of agriculture and biology, Thibault switched to viticulture and enology in Montpellier when she realized that agricultural school was directing her toward GMOs. After working in South Africa, in the Valais, and with François Chidaine in Montlouis, she began teaching in Saumur, got married, had children, and managed to find a tiny plot of vines in Dampierre, just outside of town. In 2009, her then husband (they have since separated) found work in Langeais, across the Loire from Azay-le-Rideau. And in 2010, the president of the local wine *syndicat*, Pascal Pibaleau, took her to visit vigneron who might sell her some land. A producer in the village of Lignières sold her 3ha (7.5 acres), which was all she could manage alone. She immediately began the conversion to organic farming and, in 2014, received certification. She will eventually have 5.5ha (13.5 acres) and will move her cellars—now in Langeais—to Lignières.

Thibault makes six different wines, only one of them in the Azay-le-Rideau appellation. It is called Premier Nez. Its grapes grow on a southwest-facing slope with soils mixing sand, large pebbles, and flint. Harvest is by hand, and the wine ferments in used *demi-muids*, ages in barrel for 18 months, and is given a medicinal dose of sulfur dioxide at bottling.

When we met in August 2014, Thibault served me the 2011 because the 2012 would not be bottled until the following month and she did not produce any in 2013. The first time I tasted this wine (June 2013), it was simultaneously mellow and lively. To its credit, it was site-specific. Hardly grandiose but nice drinking. On second tasting, last August, the wine had a light thread of CO₂ and was quite pure, with abundant acidity, untamed by malolactic. Ripe and characterful, it offered flavors of citrus and pear drops, as well as Granny Smith apples, and a long finish of all of the above. It seemed well within a new style of Azay.

Le Sot de L'Ange

Twenty-nine-year-old Quentin Bourse is sui generis. And, I suspect, he'd have it no other way. The best of his wines taste as if they were made on another planet. You might not want to cellar them, but you will want to taste them in a wine bar. Let's say they add yet another fascinating nuance to the possible expressions of wine.

Bourse, a lifelong autodidact, fell in love with wine in 2008. Prior to that he had sold fruit in Les Halles in Tours and worked in the automotive industry and in computers, but once the wine bug bit, Bourse got himself hired by various Loire winemakers: Sebastien David in St Nicolas de Bourgueil, Emile Heredia in

the Vendomois, Domaine Sauvète in Touraine. He went to work for Domaine Huet in Vouvray with the idea of joining that team and studied at the Lycée Viticole d'Amboise.

Concurrently (or not), Bourse created a society in 2010 to sell wine by subscription, and he considered establishing his own domaine in Montlouis. About this time, he was contacted by his friend Pascal Pibaleau, a producer in, and the president of, the growers' *syndicat* of Azay-le-Rideau. Pibaleau wanted to retire and asked if Bourse would be interested in taking over his 12ha (30 acres) of vines.

"Azay was a *coup de coeur*," he told me, adding, "I asked myself, 'Why am I searching in Montlouis when I have all I want in Azay?' I'm in love with Chenin, and Pascal's were the wines I served at my wedding." In fact, Bourse named his new domaine after his wife Angelique: Le Sot de l'Ange translates roughly as Ange's fool, which I also like to translate as Ange's drunkard. (Yes, the double entendres are many in Bourse's names.)

Bourse has completed the conversion begun by Pibaleau to biodynamics. His first vintage was 2013. Winemaking is more or less non-interventionist, starting with indigenous yeasts. There are two cuvées of Azay blanc and two of Azay rosé, both pure Grolleau, which Bourse insists on calling Grolleau de Cinq Mars la Pile, maintaining that it is different from all other grapes going by the name Grolleau. (I have found no support for this hypothesis, though Grolleau is widely believed to have originated in the whistle-stop town of Cinq Mars la Pile just west of Tours and across the Loire from Azay-le-Rideau.) Bourse also makes a varying number of Vins de France, Pet/Nats, and other wines, as well as grape juice.

I caught up with Bourse at La Levée de la Loire in early February 2015. The wines tasted below were all taken from tank or barrel. First came the 2014 Azay-le-Rideau rosé Sot Tise. The wine is made from a selection of Grolleau from a parcel with sand and flint soils called Les Grands Perrés. Tart, more like a white than a rosé, it was a wild wine, rather feral. Next, the 2014 Azay-le-Rideau rosé La Couture, also pure Grolleau, 30 percent of which was aged in new barriques. The wine, with 3 grams of residual sugar, was somewhat tamer than the previous and offered pleasant red-fruit flavors, the combination of which balanced the tartness.

One of my favorites in Bourse's lineup was next: the 2014 Azay-le-Rideau blanc Sec Symbole, from a parcel above the train station. Called La Soujonnrière, its soils are composed of flinty clay. The wine's intensity took me by surprise. A "Bling!" sort of attack, like being tased but in the nicest sense. And I enjoyed the mix of lemon-lime and mineral flavors, the texture and the purity of the wine. A really nice and decidedly singular discovery to make in a wine bar. The 2014 Azay-le-Rideau blanc Aziaum (apparently Azay in Roman), from flint and alluvial soils, was harvested at 23hl/ha and vinified in amphorae. Its attack was suave, softened by a touch of residual sugar. Then came a punch of citrus and a hot finish.

Red is Dead is Bourse's entry into the Pet/Nat zone. Made from Gamay de Chaudenay (part of the Teinturier—or dyer—clan of red-fleshed Gamays) from flinty clay soils, it tasted like neither a red nor a rosé. It was wine as extraterrestrial: a nuclear ginger ale with a squirt of lime. Next, a blend of Gamay and Grolleau, a Vin de France from 2014, with amusing (yes) flavors of cherry pit and cashew. A bottle with "Cabernet Franc en Barrique" in Tolkien lettering was a 2014 blend of 85%



Cabernet Franc and 15% Cot. Too bad the Cab was unripe. The wine was too herbaceous to enjoy (unless you were a craban). Finally, the 2014 Aziaum red, 70% Cot and 30% Cabernet Franc, was too hard and too young to judge, though I'd very much like to taste it as it settles down, since I truly love Loire Cots. And because of the quirky, fantastical aspects of a number of his wines, I'll be following Bourse with a great deal of interest.

Château de la Roche

This handsome, historic property near the forest of Chinon has seen many owners. In the 1990s, Bernard Gentil, the very image of the tweedy gentleman farmer, ran the domaine, which, at the time, had 4ha (10 acres) of vines—from which he made very pleasant Azays—and 18ha (44 acres) of fruit trees, from which he made, among other things, excellent eau de vie de poire.

Louis-Jean Sylvos, 69, a retired public-relations professional, took over the domaine in 2001. He chose Azay-le-Rideau because it was an easy commute to and from Paris, where he had been based. An autodidact, Sylvos follows the conferences of soil guru Claude Bourguignon because, he says, he finds him "amusing." Sylvos has increased the vine acreage by 2ha (5 acres) and converted the vineyards to biodynamic farming. He produces 10,000 to 12,000 bottles of wine a year, 60 percent for export.

Soils are a mix of sand and clay, topped with a significant proportion of small siliceous stones. Sylvos says he keeps yields for the Azays low—around 24hl/ha—by strict pruning and cluster-thinning—and the grapes are harvested by hand. He relies on indigenous yeasts, and he ferments the wine in newish barrels, then lightly filters them before bottling. Sylvos also produces a small amount of red Touraines, as well as sparkling wine.

The names of Sylvos's bottlings change every year, so it's hard to keep track. The 2012 Azay blanc, dubbed Cuvée Sophie, fermented in four-year-old barrels of 220-liter capacity. The wine went through partial malolactic. Tasted in February 2015, it was moderately long but dominated by oak. The same wine tasted in November 2014 was more expressive: meaty, ripe, and mineral, with flavors of hard candy, as well as slate and steel. Could the dramatic difference between the two be explained, at least in part, by the fact that the wine was served way, way too cold in February?

The 2010 Azay demi-sec with 16 or 17 grams of residual

Above: Château de l'Aulée, now being revitalized by Arnaud and Marielle Henrion.

sugar spent 16 to 18 months in oak. Tasted in February 2015, it was vibrant, though a bit heavy-handed, and tasted of creamed corn. In November 2014, it was strong and intense, rather like a bull in a china shop. Not elegant but a presence.

There was another 2010 Azay that Sylvos called "my Savagnin" because an accident in the cellars resulted in its being quite oxidized. He loves it and presents it with pride. I found it very oxidized indeed and thought it was falling apart. At the February 2015 tasting, they were calling what I'm assuming was the same wine Cuvée Justine and said it represented half the cellar. It was oxidized, tart, and dry, and okay if you like those flavors. A tank sample of the 2014 Azay rosé, pure Grolleau, was full of CO₂—which they would do well to leave—and had an appetizing bitter core.

Curiously, I have found early vintages more appealing. A 2009 Azay Jeunes Vignes displayed lots of fresh, fragrant fruit offset by abundant acidity. It was textured and vigorous. A 2006 Azay Cuvée Pauline, with 14% ABV and 6 grams of residual sugar, was nicely structured and quite pure, with alluring flavors of peach and apricot, all nicely seasoned with oak. Whatever direction Sylvos chooses for the future, it's probably safe to say that his wines will remain idiosyncratic and, to their credit, not run-of-the-mill.

La Ferme du Plateau

The latest addition to the New Azay movement is Adrien Baloche, who recently took over 7ha (17 acres) of vines—two of them (5 acres) in the Azay appellation—from Dimitri Camain, a vintner in the commune of Rivarennnes. Baloche harvested his first vintage in 2014, but the wines will be sold as Vins de France since he hasn't yet done all the paperwork necessary to comply with appellation rules. Basically, he's doing everything from scratch—from converting, to organic farming, to looking for a better cellar (in which he can age wines in barrel or, why not, in amphora). Originally from Normandy, Baloche was familiar with the routines of making cider and enjoyed baking bread, but now he's turning his delight in creating things to wine, working with comrades like Marie Thibault and taking adult courses in viticulture and enology. Anne Schellenberg, his partner, is raising a herd of 25 goats, which graze in a field that was once devoted to cereal crops but that the couple are converting to pasture land. By next year she hopes to be making goat cheese and to add sheep to her fold. I shall follow developments here, as elsewhere in Azay, with great gustatory interest. ■