

Article du magazine Américain Wine&Spirits dans leur guide annuel intitulé "Conversations&Tastings" d'automne 2016, écrit par Jon Bonné et évoquant le Domaine Le Fay D'Homme (Le passage est traduit en français en bas du document).

Muscadet

Meditations on Granite, Quartz, Schist and Gneiss

by Jon Bonné

When the French talk about their smaller cities, which they love to do, Nantes comes up approximately never. I suspect they don't pay much attention to Nantes and its surrounding countryside—the *pays Nantais*—because it doesn't reinforce that old, romantic, postwar view of French culture. Nantes is an industrious, functional place, postmodern in its architecture—one of the country's few tech hubs.

Nantes is also the land of Muscadet, the fresh and mineral white that has been loved for more than a century in a casual, booty-call way: a saline, taut, momentary companion for oysters and shellfish. It's drunk up and—like the city itself—quickly forgotten.

I've loved Muscadet for a long time, and not just in a frivolous way. For two decades, I've watched a handful of overachievers, including Jo Landron, Guy Bossard, the Luneau family of Luneau-Papin and Marc Ollivier of Domaine de la Pépière, make good on their efforts toward serious, meaningful Muscadet. They incorporated organic and biodynamic farming, aged the wines on their lees longer than appellation rules require, and perhaps most crucially, began installing a well-conceived system of *crus communaux* that will allow Muscadet to be called out in a manner not unlike the village system in Burgundy.

I'd become a loyalist after tasting a 2002 *Semper Excelsior*—Luneau-Papin's effort to match Burgundy at its own game, employing very low yields in the vineyards and native yeasts and long aging in the winery. The wine always finds an almost Burgundian balance between opulence and mineral focus. For at least a decade, Marc Ollivier's Clos des Briords has been my frequent stand-in for grand cru Chablis. Each year, I stock away a few magnums to enjoy years down the road. Briords led me to the conclusion that the best Muscadets have the ability to defy time better than many white Burgun-

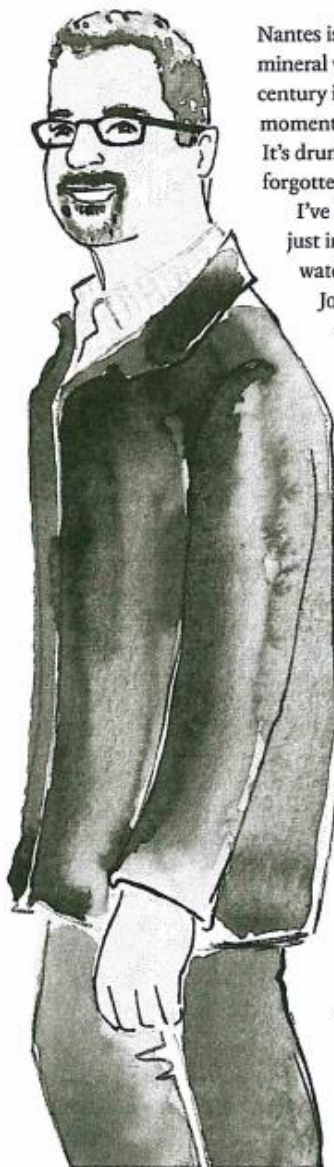
dies, even with a price tag cheaper than many bottles of supermarket rosé or chardonnay.

I finally made it to Nantes last year, during a trip to the Loire. Even if agricultural France can look a bit forlorn these days, economically battered and often chemically denuded, the *pays Nantais* is a charming place to visit—rolling, soft geography and serene riverbanks. The Atlantic Ocean, just a few dozen miles away, is quietly omnipresent, whether in the mild and slightly damp weather or the endless supply of Breton oysters available for Nantes tables. Those qualities have also encouraged the growth of the *mélon* grape since the 17th century, when the Dutch promoted its planting, in large part for distillation or cheap wine.

I knew the quality that could now be found there, and yet I was hardly prepared for the depth of the transformational changes I discovered. Muscadet's top wines have transcended their role as an insider's treat. They have become profound and meaningful, serious wines for a part of France that is at once very old and very new—a sort of white-wine mirror to Beaujolais, where a quality revolution and a growing global awareness of that revolution have propelled the wines to new heights.

Those changes are echoed in the overall transformation of Nantes, which has developed a great casual culinary scene—a regional extension of Paris bistronomy—in a city that not long ago was cobwebbed, both economically and gastronomically. The city now revels in its location at the intersection of Brittany, with its seafood bounty, and the great garden of the Loire. It seems, in fact, that the Nantais have decided to reject that French habit of dwelling in the past, and instead to orient their wine and gastronomy—the region's entire culture, really—toward the future.

In wine terms, this was taking place among a new





generation of young, ambitious winemakers who see this as one of the last unexploited outposts in France, a place for experimentation without having to wage war against the country's somewhat rusty appellation system.

The biggest leap forward came in 2011, when Muscadet producers began phasing in what will be a total of nine crus. Unlike Burgundy, each has been delineated not by political boundaries but by two decades of intensive geological study. It's possible today to consider the difference between, say, Clisson (coarser granite and mica soils, yielding a generous, fruity wine) and Monnières-Saint-Fiacre (gneiss that yields intensely spicy, structured wine). And because the cellar work in Muscadet is a study in minimalism—the wines are typically aged in inert glass-lined tanks and left almost untouched—what you get is a pure meditation on terroir: one grape (mélon de Bourgogne) made without artifice, purely reflecting its origins.

Unlike some putatively neutral grapes, like trebbiano, mélon is unusually sensitive to its environs. When well made, it exudes the sort of distinct complexity that nearly every wine region desires—one that no amount of money can buy, and no amount of winemaking can add. It's the true value of French terroir: discovering the uniqueness of growing the right grape on just the right soil. Or as Jo Landron put it to me: "*La minéralité, ce n'est pas gratuit.*" Minerality doesn't come for free; it takes work.

Landron is a good place to start for an impromptu six-bottle Muscadet tour. While he has pushed for the cru system since the 1990s, he hasn't embraced it as some have; Landron's 2014 Les Houx isn't labeled as a cru, even though it's a single-site wine (it would probably be part of the yet-to-debut La Haye-Fouassière). The vineyard's highly acidic mix of sandstone and quartz-derived sand gives it both a generosity and a quiet mineral presence, full of yellow fruit and citron.

Considering his *eminence grise* status, you might expect Jo Landron's children to continue his work. But his son Emmanuel, or Manu, parted with the family business to open his own bare-bones farmhouse cellar in the hamlet of Le Pallet. Manu and his partner Marion Pescheux are fixated on highlighting individual parcels, producing bottles like their 2014 Complemen'terre Le Moëtier G from what will also be La Haye-Fouassière. Made with full malolactic and some old oak—as a *lieu-dit* Burgundy might be—it's subtle and floral and guided by bright mineral components, yet a slightly more profound and creamy expression of a classic Muscadet.

That drive to make Muscadet with a Burgundian complexity of flavor can be found in other cellars, perhaps nowhere more so than that of the Luneau family, which takes Muscadet as seriously as, say, the Dauvissat family takes Chablis. Their cuvées like Excelsior and L d'Or have long been the region's gold standard, and I've been buying them for nearly 15 years. But I was particularly taken by their 2014 Luneau-Papin Clos des Allées, which doesn't put a cru on its label but is deserving of one: It comes from a monopole of 45-year-old vines on mica-schist soils in the village of Le Landreau. It finds that balance of fine minerality and a deep lemon-pulp fruit, and that curry-like spice that great Puligny, for instance, can exude.

And at some of the best properties, a new generation has been invited in from outside, as with Marc Ollivier's two understudies at Domaine de la Pépière, Rémi Branger and Gwenaëlle Croix, who are slowly taking over this organically farmed estate in Maisdon-sur-Sèvre. Ollivier pioneered both single-vineyard Muscadet, with his Clos des Briords, and cru bottlings, like his Clisson. And then there's the Pépière 2012 Château-Thébaud Clos des Morines, from a parcel in Château-Thébaud, a cru with its own unique type of fragmented granite. Aged for three years, it's tensile but with a remarkable sense of quince and pear flesh to it, and the spice that granite often adds.

Pépière also has a new bottling from Monnières-Saint-Fiacre, a new cru as of this year and arguably the most intensely flavored and structured of them all. But an even more profound version might come from Vincent Caillé of Domaine Le Fay d'Homme, a longtime grower whose 2010 Monnières-Saint-Fiacre is grown on gneiss and bursts with the rye-seed spice typical of that area. It spent four years aging on its lees—an apotheosis of *sur lie* (although, since this is longer than allowed by Muscadet's kooky appellation rules, it's not labeled as such). Caillé is one of Muscadet's great tinkerers; for instance, he makes an intensely tannic skin-fermented Muscadet, a new bit of evidence that mélon's anodyne reputation is undeserved.

In a similar way, I couldn't but pay attention to Alain Couillaud's 2015 Haut Planty Muscadig Breizh, its name a reminder of the region's old Breton roots. Couillaud makes more conventional wines, but this one foregoes both sulfur and filtration. Slightly cloudy and

TRADUCTION : Le domaine La Pépière présente une nouvelle bouteille issu de Monnières-Saint Fiacre, un nouveau cru de cette année et peut-être le plus intense, aromatique et structurel de tous. Mais une version encore plus riche pourrait nous venir de Vincent Caillé du Domaine Le Fay D'Homme, un habitué des long élevages avec le Monnières-Saint-Fiacre 2010 produit sur Gneiss avec ce goût relevé de graine de seigle typique de cette zone géographique. Il a fallu quatre années de vinification sur les lies, une apothéose du "sur lie". Caillé est un des grand penseurs, intellectuels du Muscadet : Pour exemple, il produit un Muscadet aux tannins de peaux fermentés intense, la preuve que la reputation anodyne du Melon de Bourgogne est immerité.

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