

PRE- REVOLUTIONARY VIN JAUNE AND THE DAWN OF A NEW RENAISSANCE

Wink Lorch relates the fascinating story of a 1774 *vin jaune*, which illustrates its abiding appeal across four centuries and the current resurgence of interest in one of France's most long-lived and remarkable wines

There is an air of mystery about any very old wine, but Pierre Chevrier is a man determined to unlock the secrets of one particular bottle that he plans to share with friends—a wine he categorizes as mythical. The 1774 wine (left) from the Jura in eastern France is quite probably the oldest drinkable French wine, and it begs the question, Could today's equivalent wines stay the course for more than two centuries?

Named for the mountains that divide this small eastern French region from Switzerland, the Jura became definitively part of France in 1668, during the reign of Louis XIV. At that point in history, its attractiveness was twofold: its border position, and its rich resources of extensive woodlands and salt mines.

The Jura vineyards lie on the foothills on the western side of the Jura mountains, the Revermont ("back of the mountain"), and in those days stretched from north of Dôle to the southern extremities of the *departement* toward Bourg-en-Bresse. Apart from being drunk in the area of production, the wines were sold to the people living in the mountains on both the Jura and the Swiss sides of the border, as well as to those on the Bresse plain, whose local populations were not able to grow vines successfully themselves. The reputation of the region's top wines, however, also spread far beyond the local environs. There are stories of French kings and other European royalty, as well as writers and great chefs, extolling both the wines' virtues and their longevity.

By the end of the 1870s, there were around 20,000ha (50,000 acres) of vineyards, but phylloxera reduced the Jura vineyard area by 60 percent, compared to 27 percent on average across France as a whole.¹ A further decline in fortune was caused by the two world wars. Since the late 1980s, the area under vine has stabilized at just below 2,000ha (5,000 acres)—one tenth of its 19th-century peak.

The story of the origins of *vin jaune* and its methods of production are murky and anecdotal. Until the early-19th century, wines from Savagnin grapes, known then as *Naturé*, often picked after the first frosts to allow the sugars to concentrate, were known either as *vin de gelée* or *vin de garde*. It is said that the abbesses of Château-Chalon were the first to discover that wine in ullaged (incompletely filled) barrels that had been forgotten for several years could actually turn out to be very good. This could just as easily have happened first, however, in the cellars of Arbois.

Arbois 1774: a 238-year history

The Percée du Vin Jaune weekend wine festival, held in a different Jura town or village each February to celebrate the release of the latest vintage of *vin jaune*, has gone from strength to strength in its 16 years of existence, helping promote the fame and image of both *vins jaunes* and the rest of the wines of Jura. Each year, the Percée features an auction of old bottles.

It was at the festival last year, in Arbois, that Geneva-based Chevrier—a professional trader of old wines, host of memorable wine dinners, and lover of ancient wines—purchased the 1774 Arbois, said to be of *vin jaune* style, made by wine grower Anatoile Vercel. For the privilege, he handed over €57,000 (before auction costs), fighting off the well-known Paris-based collector François Audouze and, earlier in the bidding, a Briton and a Singaporean.

The price paid, easily a record for the Jura, was one of the highest ever for a bottle of unfortified wine. There is every reason to believe the wine will be drinkable, and this, together with the details of its provenance, explain why the price climbed so high. Interviewed immediately afterward, Chevrier, who had purchased the wine together with a group of friends, confirmed that they would be drinking the bottle at a dinner he planned to stage in three or four years' time. Commenting on the purchase, Chevrier said that it was not for trading or investment but rather for appreciation by wine lovers aware of its history as "part of the heritage of Arbois, the Jura, France, and Europe."

At the end of the 18th century, Arbois was, if not exactly wealthy, a thriving wine town. The 1774 wine produced by Anatoile Vercel (1725–86) had survived with other bottles from the same lot, passed down through the family and stored in three different locations in Arbois. The Vercel family must have been relatively wealthy, in that they had a decent-sized house and chose to bottle this particular wine, something that was still uncommon at the time, when most wines were drawn directly from the barrel or sold in barrel for transport.

Anatoile's son Jean-Claude (1767–1848) was a Jura *député* (member of parliament), and when he died, the wine collection was divided between his two youngest sons, Jules and Altin, with the latter setting up in a new house in Arbois, where he created a wine cellar. Both brothers seem to have valued the now century-old 1774 wine highly. They gave a bottle to their old schoolfriend Louis Pasteur (1822–95), who was born in Dôle but brought up in Arbois. In 1867, the Arbois Viticultural Society submitted wines for judging at the Exposition Universel in Paris. The oldest wine was the 1774, for which Jules Vercel received a silver medal. As for Altin, when in 1883 one of his twin daughters, Elia (1852–1936), married Emile Grand, the menu for the wedding dinner included Arbois Jaune from 1811 (the "Comet Year") and 1774. The couple remained in Altin Vercel's home and gave birth to one son, Georges Grand (1886–1974), and it is from this line of the family that the most famous wine collection, including the 1774 wines, came.

Georges Grand was known as Commandant Grand for his service in World War I and became a historian in later life. He was fastidious in his care of the Vercel family wine collection, keeping the best bottles in a locked cupboard that he referred to as the "tabernacle." Georges Grand did not marry but insured the future of his precious wine collection by willing it to his goddaughter Marie-José, the daughter of a local wine-growing family named Dejean de Saint-Marcel. Once again, the fine Vercel collection was in good hands and was moved to the cellar of Marie-José and her husband, a local doctor, Pierre Millet (1914–2005).

Dr Pierre Millet was as fastidious as Commandant Grand, and it is thanks to him that we know so much about these precious 1774 bottles. After his wife died in 1987, he devoted himself to research into *vin jaune*. In 1992, he gathered together wine producers and friends to open and taste a bottle. Among them was biochemist Roger Gibey, now in retirement, a noted local historian on both Arbois and Pasteur.² At the end of the tasting, Gibey retained some dregs of the wine to take back to his laboratory for analysis.

Dr Millet was so inspired by the experience of sharing the wine—now more than two centuries old—that he founded a study group, the Groupe d'Etude des Vins Jaunes (no longer active, sadly). Millet was also inspired to donate a second bottle for a more formal and scientific tasting to take place in the tasting room at Château Pécauld, home to the various official Jura wine bodies. He set the condition that the wine should also be analyzed fully in comparison with other *vins jaunes* through the ages.

In 1994, the tasters, alongside Dr Millet, included two local vigneron, Pierre Overnoy and Lucien Aviet (known to this day as "Bacchus"), Jacques Levaux of the local wine laboratory, and other wine officials and experienced local tasters, including Roger Gibey. Their impressions were meticulously recorded, and a collaborative tasting note was published. According to Gibey, emotions were high, with even the most erudite and serious tasters lapsing into

Photography courtesy of Comité Interprofessionnel des Vins du Jura

emotional descriptors. The two wine growers were the most affected: Aviet said that the wine gave him goose bumps; Overnoy recalls trying hard to imagine the primitive working conditions of 220 years earlier.

The provenance of the 1774 wine is clear and its *vin jaune* style proved by both tasting and analysis.³ But records revealing how it might have been made are sparse. The vines would almost certainly have been Naturé (Savagnin), though possibly not 100 percent. The vines were probably planted during the reign of Louis XIV, pruned in the last year of the reign of Louis XV, and the grapes harvested in the reign of Louis XVI. It is not known when the wine was bottled. Some sources describe *vins de garde* being bottled after as many as 20 years in barrel; other early 19th-century texts refer to *vin jaune* spending 10–12 years in barrel. Barrel sizes might have been anything between 200 and 1,000 liters (53–264 US gallons)—any larger and the *voile* would have been unlikely to form, and the risk of losing the wine through spoilage would have been greater. Predating scientific winemaking texts—such as those by Jean-Antoine Chaptal, which appeared in the early 19th century—making of *vin jaune* at this time was not so much a mystery as both an accident of nature and a miracle.

The 1774 is not in a *clavelin* bottle but a bottle supposed to be 87cl, though Chevrier has tested one of the empty bottles and discovered it to contain only 80cl. It was hand-blown by a well-known glassworks in the village of La Vieille Loye in the heart of the large forest of Chaux in the Jura, which provided bottles for Champagne and Burgundy. Bottles were very expensive at the time, and the few purchased by the Jura wine producers would have been

lower-quality rejects (third quality). Even so, only wines deemed to be very good would have been bottled. The question of the cork is another mystery, with no documentary evidence to show whether the wine was ever recorked, though this seems likely. The bottles opened in 1992 and 1994 had corks that were shrunken but intact and compact, which would indicate that they were probably much more than 50 years old.

Jacques Levaux, perhaps one of the most dispassionate who attended the 1994 tasting, recalled that the nose on the wine was so extraordinary that the palate was somewhat disappointing afterward. He did say, though, that if he had tasted the wine blind, he might have suggested it was around 50 years old. The collaborative tasting note from the 1994 tasting seems almost impossible for a wine that was 220 years old. It reads as follows.

Appearance: Superb deep color of an amber-tinted old gold. Bright and clear, with some floating sediment.

Nose: Very intense and rich, both refined and delicate, and typical of a *vin jaune*. The aromas come in waves, initially with plenty of walnuts, spices such as curry [in French, this usually means ginger, cumin, and fenugreek], cinnamon, and vanilla, plus dried apricots, figs, and raisins, as well as some beeswax and wood. It then develops roasted coffee notes, with caramel, honey, and gingerbread. The empty glass retained a smell of old eau-de-vie.

Palate: Structured and powerful, the marked acidity and alcohol matched by a touch of not-unpleasant bitterness and astringency. However, the flavors of nuts and curry were obvious, too, with some notes of oranges and roasted coffee.

Finish: The aftertaste was fine and surprising in length, even though slightly maderized.

Vin jaune today

Today, around 400,000 *clavelins* are produced each year, which represents just over 3 percent of the total output of the Jura wine region. *Vin jaune* still has an air of mystery about it, even with the laboratory carefully monitoring the development of each barrel.

Practiced for around 20 years, the most controversial change over the years is the addition of cultured yeasts to promote the forming of the *voile* (*ensemencement* in French), which today is used by at least a third of the producers, though few admit to it. In a recent blind tasting conducted with *La Revue du Vin de France*, no difference was found between *vins jaunes* made using natural yeasts and those where cultured had been used—though no one knows if they will age equally well. Local sommelier and consultant Christophe Menozzi claims that, after ten years in bottle, those made with cultured yeasts can taste somewhat heavier, whereas these days, elegance, along with complexity of flavor, is what most connoisseurs look for in *vin jaune*. Stéphane Tissot, a biodynamic producer from Arbois, uses only natural yeast and believes that if cultured yeasts are employed for fermentation, then inevitably much of the ambient yeast population will be killed, obliging *ensemencement* to promote the *voile*.

A typical *vin jaune* today will be mid-yellow to pale gold, with a distinct nose that can vary from walnuts (especially Arbois), through peat (Château-Chalon) and spices, including curry and fenugreek, to concentrated fruit

characters. The palate is shockingly dry and high in acidity at first, with 13.5–15% ABV and flavors as on the nose. Some are very rich, but the best have an understated elegance and refinement. Most have tremendous length. The famous *goût du jaune*, which refers to the flavors of *vin jaune*, has only been understood to a certain extent. Ethanol is the most important component, and there was excitement back in the 1990s about sotolon, a type of lactone (present in high quantities in fenugreek) that develops in *vin jaune* after about three years in barrel and much more once the wine is in bottle. Now, however, it is understood that this is just one more component creating the *goût du jaune*.

There are only a few variables in the approaches to making *vin jaune*, and most producers follow standard practices. Pierre Overnoy, and his successor Emmanuel Houillon, make their sulfur-free *vin jaune* only in very good years and, unusually, age it in barrel for more than ten years. The ever-experimental Stéphane Tissot launched two terroir-specific *vins jaunes* with the 2003 vintage; the 2004s, tasted last year, are remarkably different from each other and appear to have different aging potential, too.

Spreading yellow fever

Vin jaune is not an easy wine to sell, with a price per 62cl *clavelin* direct from the producer of €25 or more. It is, however, a calling card for the region, and more than 80 percent of Jura producers make some each year. The Percée du Vin Jaune draws up to 50,000 visitors and is a huge publicity machine for the region. The auction of old vintages always brings extra media attention, and with the



The parade at the most recent Percée du Vin Jaune, in the village of Ruffey-sur-Seille on February 4, 2012, when thousands of visitors braved the cold weather

Photography by (left) Wink Lorch; (right) Serge Reverchon, courtesy of Ambassadeurs des Vins Jaunes



Producers with a ceremonial tap, symbolizing the Percée (literally “opening” or “piercing”), which celebrates the release of the most recent vintage of *vin jaune*

HOW VIN JAUNE IS MADE

Vin jaune is made from 100 percent Savagnin, in the appellations of Arbois, Côtes du Jura, Etoile, and Château-Chalon, the latter AOC being reserved for *vin jaune* only. Savagnin is generally grown on soils of blue or gray marl. It is fairly late-picked, though only rarely are the berries affected by noble rot. Ideally, the must should be about 13% ABV (chaptalized when need be), and pH needs to be low (3.0–3.1) to withstand the aging.

The wine is traditionally made, with temperature-controlled (but not too cool) fermentation in tank and malolactic fermentation in due course.

At some point—usually during the year following the vintage but occasionally in the spring 18 months after the harvest—the Savagnin wine is transferred into 228-liter (60-US-gallon) Burgundy oak barrels, averaging anything from five to 50 years old. These are not entirely filled, with the equivalent of about 8–10 liters of ullage. After a time, which varies greatly, a layer of yeast, the *voile* (veil), appears on the surface of the wine, similar to Sherry's *flor*. The best-quality *voile* is gray and quite thin, indicating a living and active yeast mixture. Once the *voile* has formed, it effectively protects the wine from further oxidation and helps promote the aromas and flavors associated with *vin jaune*.

The conditions in which the barrels are stored—which may be at ground level, underground, or even in an attic—are crucial to the eventual quality of the wine. There are huge variables—indeed, many growers believe that the complexity of *vin*



the AOC requires *vins jaunes* to remain in barrel. The earliest release allowed is at the start of the seventh year after harvest—so, at the time of writing, 2005 is the most recent available vintage. Today, the AOC laws insist on approval tests for all *vin jaune* just before bottling; and in Château-Chalon, the laws are even stricter, some vintages being rejected outright as unsuitable even before the grapes have been picked.

The *clavelin* bottle

According to the AOC rules, *vins jaunes* must be bottled in the squat 62cl *clavelin* bottle (left), one of

the few non-standard bottle sizes allowed in EU law. A bottle of this shape is said to have been commissioned by growers in Château-Chalon from La Vieille Loye glassworks in the 18th century. It is often described as a *bouteille dites anglaise* (an “English-style bottle”), with roughly the volume of an English pint. What seems more certain is that in 1914 the Abbot of Clavelin ordered 30 such bottles with his own emblem from the glassworks. From around this period, the use of the *clavelin* for *vins jaunes* became widespread.

The great marketing coup for the *clavelin* is that 62cl is said to be what remains of a liter of wine after the statutory six years' aging in cask on ullage *sous voile* (under yeast), and it certainly makes the explanation of that size easier. The downside is that US regulations do not allow the importation of this size of bottle into the country, though there are some circuitous routes in. Some 37.5cl bottles of similar shape have been produced, even though this is not, strictly speaking, permitted under the AOC rules.

jaune is achieved partly by stocking the barrels in several different locations, all with different conditions. All agree that aerated cellars, with wide temperature variations, are vital, and most prefer dry conditions, where the water content of the wine in the ullaged barrels evaporates slowly, concentrating other substances, including alcohol.

A technician from the official Jura wine laboratory visits most *vin jaune* producers twice a year to test every barrel of Savagnin destined for *vin jaune*, insuring that the level of acetic acid is not too high and that, for the first few years, the ethanal level is rising. Ethanal is vital for *vin jaune* and is the most important component for its distinctive oxidative taste. Depending on the lab reports, the producer then decides which barrels should be withdrawn from *vin jaune* aging, and as long as they are not spoiled, they are used for oxidative Savagnin white wine or Chardonnay/Savagnin blends.

No racking or any other handling takes place during the minimum six years that

record-breaking price received for the 1774 wine last year, it was exceptional. The founder of the Percée, wine producer Bernard Badoz, interviewed after the sale, commented, “Behind this bottle is a whole story, and people buy stories. After 15 years of the Percée, this sale gives recognition to the Jura wine region—a signal that it's joining the big boys.”

Top chefs and sommeliers help spread the word about *vin jaune*, because it is much prized in cooking. Although the quintessential matches remain either a simple plate of mature Comté and walnuts, or the local *poulet de bresse aux morilles et vin jaune* (Bresse chicken with morel mushrooms, finished with *vin jaune*), chefs regularly create new dishes with *vin jaune*. Good local restaurants have impressive lists of *vins jaunes* and usually decant any relatively young wines (those under ten years in bottle) before serving, though ideally they would be opened as much as a day in advance to allow the wine to develop.

The ideal serving temperature is relatively warm for a white wine—around 57–61°F (14–16°C).

Despite the fact that *vin jaune* exports to the United States are almost impossible, due to the *clavelin* bottle, there is a growing interest in the Jura wine region among keen importers worldwide, especially in the USA. Part of the interest is the fact that a higher proportion of the vineyards in the region are organic by comparison with the rest of France, and the region has more than its fair share of “natural” wine producers. As a small and obscure region, with unusual grape varieties and oxidative methods, it is bound to intrigue adventurous wine lovers once they discover it. With growing publicity, the legendary aging potential of *vin jaune* and the value for money of the old wines are sure to win it more followers.

Pierre Chevrier explains it succinctly: “Bordeaux does not make me dream anymore. Jura does.” Having been a

taster and collector of fine and rare old wines for more than 36 years, he only really started getting to know the Jura, close to his Geneva home, as recently as 12 years ago and began attending the Percée du Vin Jaune regularly, getting to know the growers and buying at the auction. “Every wine made in the Jura is really individual and reflects each vigneron. Some go the oxidative route; others, the fruity route—there is no one way to make the wines.”

Chevrier is one of those fine-wine collectors who believes wines should be drunk, describing himself as a *chasseur-consommateur* (a hunter who consumes his kill). In his book,⁴ he had already written about the Vercel Arbois 1774 before discovering at the 2010 Percée that it was likely that a bottle would be offered at the auction the following year. After “winning” the bidding—which he did by phone, holed up in a nearby hotel—he found out that Audouze, another collector who drinks what he buys, was the one who had taken him to such a high price; when they met shortly afterward, they embraced, both seemingly relieved that it was each other, and not a speculator, they had been competing against.

Now all Chevrier has to worry about is the planning of a dinner, or more likely a very long lunch, where the star will be the 1774 wine. He plans for around a dozen real Jura wine lovers to attend, preferring to avoid celebrity guests and those who are very wealthy but ignorant. All the wines will be from Jura, with several *vins jaunes* to be served after some reds and whites earlier in the meal. He particularly likes to position each ancient wine in its historical context, with musical, literary, or artistic references, so that when it comes to the star bottle(s) of any event, the participants can imagine what it was like to live during those times.

Despite tasting numerous very old wines, including 1811 Yquem, Chevrier remains reverent: “You have to realize, when you have an ancient and mythical wine in front of you, that you will never, ever get this chance again. One must never forget that wine is a living organism. One day, the wine will die, becoming a liquid corpse, and that will be the end of it, in all senses.”

Chevrier's tips for buying old Jura wine are simply to study the best vintages and to follow and buy regularly from the best producers. Old bottles can still be found from various producers and are usually very good, but they are disappearing. If you are planning to spend a lot of money, it is vital that you examine the bottle, because the quality of glass varied with each one. Chevrier believes that his bottle of 1774 may have been the very best remaining.

The two best ways of buying old *vins jaunes* are either at the annual Percée auction (the next will be on February 3, 2013, in Voiteur, below Château-Chalon) or direct from a producer. Domaine Bourdy in Arlay has the largest collection of old wines available for sale. Younger *vins jaunes* can be purchased direct or from distributors; some wines can be enjoyed right away, while others benefit from a decade in bottle. Unlike other wines, however, if you do forget a *vin*

jaune in your cellar, it is clear that for future generations it might be one of your more enjoyable legacies.

Notes

1. Sylvaine Boulanger, *Le Vignoble du Jura* (Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux; 2004).
2. Roger Gibey, *Pasteur et le Vin Jaune* (Pasteur-Patrimoine Arboisien; 2002).
3. *L'Arbois Jaune de 1774 Dix Ans Après: Etudes Historique, Chimique et Microbiologique* (Groupe d'Etude du Vin Jaune; 2002).
4. Pierre Chevrier, *Le Vin d'Hier, Vins Historique et d'Exception* (Editions Slatkine; 2009).

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