By the end of the 1870s, there were around 20,000 ha (30,000 acres) of vineyards, but phylloxera reduced the Jura vineyard area by 60 percent, compared to 27 percent on average across France as a whole. 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 20,000 ha (30,000 acres)—one tenth of its 19th-century peak.

The story of the origins of vin jaune—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.

There are stories of French kings and other European rulers whose local populations were not able to grow vines and lived in the mountains on both the Jura and the Swiss side of production, the wines were sold to the people in Dôle to the southern extremities of the mountain), and in those days stretched from north of Chalon were the first to discover that wine in ullaged or for strength in its 16 years of existence, helping to promote the fame and image of both vins jaunes and the rest of the wines of Jura. Each year, the Percée features an important 1774 bottle.

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 definitively part of France in 1668, during the reign of Louis XIV. At that point in history, its attractiveness was undoubtedly also part of France in 1668, during the reign of Louis XIV. At that point in history, its attractiveness was undoubtedly also part of France in 1668, during the reign of Louis XIV. At that point in history, its attractiveness was undoubtedly also part of France in 1668, during the reign of Louis XIV. At that point in history, its attractiveness was undoubtedly also part of France in 1668, during the reign of Louis XIV. At that point in history, its attractiveness was undoubtedly also part of France in 1668, during the reign of Louis XIV. At that point in history, its attractiveness was undoubtedly also part of France in 1668, during the reign of Louis XIV. At that point in history, its attractiveness was undoubtedly also part of France in 1668, during the reign of Louis XIV. At that point in history, its attractiveness was undoubtedly also part of France in 1668, during the reign of Louis XIV. At that point in history, its attractiveness was undoubtedly also part of France in 1668, during the reign of Louis XIV. At that point in history, its attractiveness was undoubtedly also part of France in 1668, during the reign of Louis XIV. At that point in history, its attractiveness was undoubtedly also part of France in 1668, during the reign of Louis XIV. At that point in history, its attractiveness was undoubtedly also part of France in 1668, during the reign of Louis XIV. At that point in history, its attractiveness was undoubtedly also part of France in 1668, during the reign of Louis XIV. At that point in history, its attractiveness was undoubtedly also part of France in 1668, during the reign of Louis XIV. At that point in history, its attractiveness was undoubtedly also part of France in 1668, during the reign of Louis XIV. At that point in history, its attractiveness was undoubtedly also part of France in 1668, during the reign of Louis XIV. At that point in history, its attractiveness was undoubtedly also part of France in 1668, during the reign of Louis XIV. At that point in history, its attractiveness was undoubtedly also part of France in 1668, during the reign of Louis XIV. At that point in history, its attractiveness was undoubtedly also...
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 vin jaune is clear and its vin jaune style proved by both tasting and analysis. But records revealing how it might have been made are sparse. The vines would almost certainly have been Nature (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 3,000 liters (55–825 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.

Predicting 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 8yl, though Chevrier has tested one of the empty bottles and discovered it to contain only 8yl. It was hand-blown by a well-known glassworkers in the village of La Vieille Love 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 1993 and 1999 had corks that were shrunken but intact and compact, which would indicate that they were probably much more than 70 years old.

Jacques Levaux, perhaps one of the most dispassionate who attended the 1993 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 70 years old. The collaborative tasting note from the 1993 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, 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 beewax 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 masked acidity and alcohol matched by a touch of not-unpleasant bitterness and astringency. However, the flavors of nuts and coffee 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 500,000 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 (ensendment 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, obliterating 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. Ethanal is the most important component, and there was excitement back in the 1990s about sotolon, a type of l-tone (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 vin jaunes with the 2003 vintage; the 2003s, 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 6cl clavelin direct from the producer of €245 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.
HOW VIN JAUNE IS EVAPORATED

The cavelin bottle. According to the AOC rules, vins jaunes must be bottled in the squat 62cl cavelin 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, Chassagne-Montrachet, and La Vellee Loin glassesworks in the 15th century. It is often described as a bouteille dite aplatie (an “English-style bottle”), with roughly the volume of an English pint. What seems more certain is that in 1944 the Abbot of Clavelin ordered 30 such bottles with his own emblem from the glassworks. From around this period, the use of the cavelin for vins jaunes became widespread.

The great marketing coup for the cavelin is that it is both a practical shape and a remarkable bottle design. It remains of a liter of wine after the statutory six years’ aging in cask on ullage remains of a liter of wine after the statutory six years’ aging on cask... (under yeast), and it certainly makes the most of the1.8 liter capacity.