Ch de Hureau, Saumur Champigny

13 Mar 2006 by JR

find these wines

I visited the Loire Valley for the first time in years recently and was most impressed by the speed of change there. Underripeness, herbaceousness and over-sulphuring are becoming things of the past. As I shall write in detail in **fine wine news** this Saturday, oak is used more and more to fashion thrilling dry whites from the pale-skinned grape of the Middle Loire, Chenin Blanc. But some of the most exciting reds I found made from the dark-skinned grape of the Middle Loire, one of my favourites Cabernet Franc, were made without any oak influence at all. These wines are a style – all refreshment yet vibrant and welcoming - that has become all too rare as so many producers elsewhere chase super-ripeness and therefore alcohol.

Perhaps the most exciting array of reds that I had the pleasure of tasting were the Saumur-Champignys made by Philippe Vatan at Ch de Hureau. While many of the 2004 dry whites are pretty austere at the moment, his 2004s reds looked lovely – and of course the 2005s in cask looked extremely promising, as did almost all the 2005s of all styles I tasted on that brief visit, even if fermentations were exceptionally slow and late. The 2003s, made in the heatwave vintage, were also very toothsome. Vatan reports that his vines suffered more water stress in 2004 than in 2003.

He is not a fan of exceptionally high levels of ripeness. “Cabernet Franc needs ripe tannins but I’m trying to make very good wines at less than 14 per cent alcohol”, he says. “With my **Lisagathe 2003**, I wrote 14 per cent on a wine label for the first time ever. I thought everyone would go running away but it was fine.” I’m not surprised; this is a lovely refreshing wine, more so than the **Fevettes 2003**.

Vatan uses no press wine (which presumably accounts for the soft texture) and some micro-oxygenation, not routinely, and the results here certainly seem impressive. He also uses machine harvesting on about a fifth of his 17.5 ha of Cabernet Franc and claims not to see much difference in results between picking by hand and machine – provided the vineyard is cleaned up in advance and any rotten berries, for example, removed.

I can honestly recommend any 2003 or 2004 Ch de Hureau Saumur Champigny. The straight **Ch de Hureau 2004**, a blend of 15 widely dispersed parcels, mainly clay-limestone on the local tufa, is full and sumptuous and essence of Cabernet Franc. There are tannins there but the overall impression is already soft and approachable.

Ch de Hureau, Fevettes 2004, grown on relatively sandy soil was not yet bottled when I tasted it last month but is more intense on the nose than the regular bottling and tasted pretty ready to gulp to me.

The **Ch de Hureau, Lisagathe 2004**, from vineyards with quite a lot of clay producing heavier tannins, is a real star – super-gulpable but cracklingly sumptuous with a hint of liquorice but no easy sweetness. Bone dry and very appetising on the finish. This is the most intense cuvée of red he produces and the longest living.

Vatan reckons his **Ch de Hureau, Fevettes 2003** will be better in a couple of year’s time. I found it faded a little on the finish when I tasted it. There was great richness, sufficient acidity but not quite as much vivacity as in his other reds.

Ch de Hureau, Lisagathe 2003, as I have said, is a great drink now but is sufficiently concentrated to convince me that it has a good five-plus years ahead too. The magnum of **Ch de Hureau, Lisagathe 1997,** made in another low-acid year that apparently resembles 2003 analytically, smelt like a fully mature (very good) right bank bordeaux with real meat and charm but only medium blody. Not big but beautifully balanced. Very long and still with some notes of blueish purple.

I haven't a current note on any of the **2002s** but this vintage was exceptional in the Middle Loire.

These wines are reasonably easy to find in the UK, the US, France, Belgium and, especially, Bermuda. And they are delightfully inexpensive. The regular 2003 (which most unfortunately I have not tasted) costs a mere 9 euros in Belgium, £13.99 in the US and well under £10 from Great Western Wine.

find these wines