

Making Chassagne more like Riesling

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It may be surprising but there are not all that many wine producers in the most traditional villages of Bordeaux and Burgundy who are absolutely besotted by the wines of the world. Although many – make that most! – of them are making better wine than their parents did, the majority tend to concentrate their tasting experiences on the wines of their own vineyards and those of their neighbours. Foreign wines, by which I mean those made outside their native region, are an occasional curiosity rather than a passion.

Pierre-Yves Colin of Chassagne-Montrachet is a notable exception to that rule. The son of the revered Marc Colin of St-Aubin, whose white Burgundies have been highly admired, freely admits, "This is my main passion. I taste everything. Austin wine, Oregon, Bordeaux, it's what I do – especially on Sundays." This would not be such a strange admission for a wine lover living in London or New York, but for a producer of white Burgundy based in one of Burgundy's most famous wine villages it's almost heretical to admit. "I love Riesling. Riesling is the model for me. Trimbach's Clos Ste Hune 1920 from Alsace in particular." In his time the 30-year-old has worked at VDF Blass in Austria, Chalk Hill in California, Penfolds in the Rhine Valley, St Chinian in Languedoc and Leclercq in Sarrebourg.

I feel sure that all of his ex-colleagues will remember him. Nose-balling with intense eyes, a healthy outdoor man, well-stitched features and dramatically dark eyebrows which are in constant motion, he is clearly deeply devoted to his new wine business Pierre-Yves Colin-Money. He made wine at the family Domaine Marc Colin from 2001 but began to seem under the family yoke, increasingly wanting to do things his own way, "with a larger vintage, not Blassed. Working inside a family it's more difficult to take risks. On your own, the grapes are a bit more open." Eventually, after the 2005 vintage, his father carefully carved the Domaine Marc Colin vineyards into four equal parts and had Pierre-Yves, his two brothers and one sister pick them out of a hat. Pierre-Yves' six hectares (15 acres) providing the foundation for him to go off on his own.

Back in 2001 he had already started to buy in some grapes to play with on his own account at weekends but from the 2006 vintage he has concentrated exclusively on his Pierre-Yves Colin-Money label, his wife Caroline being a member of the admirable Money clan, the daughter of another Chassagne-Montrachet producer, Jean-Marc Money. She still works at his domaine as well as with her husband's Burgundian names are notoriously complicated but this one is certainly auspicious.

Like many of Burgundy's more ambitious younger wine producers, he has eschewed the traditional route of verifying only the grapes he grows himself. This is not Domaine Pierre-Yves Colin-Money, instead he continues to buy in grapes in addition to the produce of his own six hectares carved out of the old Domaine Marc Colin – his siblings' shares remaining part of the family domaine. "I'm more than happy with the vineyards I got," he says. "But I also buy in about 30% of production." He doesn't show on the label which are his grapes and which wines are made from bought-in grapes. "I want to make wines as good from bought-in grapes as from my own vineyards. And some of my bought-in grapes are better than my own. I know everyone in Chassagne-Montrachet. I want to work for the next 20 years. So I can't afford to make a mistake. Every winter I sell off some vines I'm not happy with, both from my domaine and from bought-in grapes."

This remarkable producer is not particularly well known in France but his domain, pure whites are rapidly forging a reputation in both the UK and US thanks to the respective efforts of importers A&B Vinovest and Michael Skurnik. I caught up with him at his anonymous, surprisingly modern-looking house in a backstreet near the church in Chassagne. At least my brief glance inside suggested an unusual lack of interior walls for a Burgundian village house, but I had to wait for 20 minutes while he talked to his bank manager on the phone. He must need a sympathetic banker to pursue quality quite as single-mindedly as he does. The wines are not cheap – nearly £200 a dozen in bond for one of his unusually refined Premier Cru Cru d'Aubin whites (he also makes about seven barrels of red St-Aubin and a Sarmeny Rouge from century-old vines but intense whites are his thing) but he clearly cuts no corners. "My models are Lafite, Cote de Ory and Pichot. I make small quantities of wine – just two barrels of Muscadet-Pommes, for example, so therefore my prices are quite high," he admits. "But you pay high prices for my grapes."

I wondered whether he ever showed the growers who supplied the grapes the wines he had fashioned from them? "No," he frowned. "It would be a bit like taking a child away from their parents and then showing them how nice the child looked with a new haircut."

He must need access to good chunks of cash at vintage time for his vineyard as well as the way up to Grand Cru level with particularly complex bottlings of small quantities of grapes from Corton-Charlemagne, Echezeaux-Montrachet and Chevalerie-Montrachet vineyards, the aristocrats of the white Burgundy hierarchy. He also has to shell out for oak, mostly from François Pinon, not just the traditional 228 litre size but often the bigger 300-litre capacity which he feels makes the wine better conditioned for a longer life. "I no longer sit on the lees but I leave the wine on the lees longer so that the wood impregnates better." These increasingly fashionable larger barrels allow him to mature half as much volume again as the traditional jacked-but with only 15% more wood surface. "I don't want endless, hard, or characterless oysters," he told me quietly.

By the time we were well through a tasting of 15 of his 2006 whites (the Bourgogne Blanc having been named, despite P-Y's best efforts, by a moulted cock over lunch in the village's innovative restaurant Le Chassagne. Over a bowl of risotto with molluscs and scallops, easy to eat with one hand while testing wine and taking notes, I asked him about his studies. "Those eyes were bit again, "I got a qualification," he allowed, breathing out through his mouth. "But I think it's more important that I'm in love with wine. We're lucky in Burgundy because we can't fake anything. We have the vine varieties, the weather, the terroir – it's all here. And it's great to be small and working only for me. I have only one employee. I count myself as the second."

I wondered how he got on with his family now that he had effectively turned his back on them professionally, not to mention demolished their vineyard holdings by a quarter. Another storm cloud gathered on his brow and the baby in the room next door cried even louder. "I'm a bit sad sentimentally," he admitted. "I get on very well with my father but with my brothers... emotionally it's a bit difficult. But it will pass."

See tasting notes on Colin-Money's 2006s [here](#).

See more notes on Colin-Money's techniques and observations on recent vintages, see [links](#) on Monday.