

## Chapoutier the Quotemaster

24 May 2011 by Jancis Robinson/FT but this is longer

See my tasting notes on [\*Chapoutier's 2010 Sélections Parcelles\*](#)

Michel Chapoutier has been in sole charge of one of the three famous wine producers based at the foot of the hill of Hermitage since the late 1990s when his brother Marc mysteriously faded from view in the wine world to leave the much noisier Michel to speak, generally loudly, for their investments in Australia, Roussillon and now Alsace as well as in the Rhône valley. As usual, this quixotic early adopter of biodynamics gave the first sniff of his latest collection of individual vineyard bottlings, the so-called *Sélections Parcelles*, to the British wine trade and press earlier this month. He is seen here in full flow in an upper room at the Westbury Hotel in London's West End.

Only a few thousand bottles of each of these wines are filled and British merchants are just starting to offer them, at between £130 and £1,000 per six-bottle case in bond.

He began by declaring, in his strangely soaring lilt, 'What can I say? Winemakers are always liars. We said 2009 was amazing but 2010 is so good, we're just trying not to say it in the same way. I'm happy Bordeaux has prepared the way because 2010 in the Rhône was really surprising. We all knew 2009 would be a vintage to produce powerful, sunny wines - like 2000, 1990 and 1995. But 2010 was cooler, with rain at good times. It has less power than 2009, more room for terroir expression. We were more and more surprised when we racked the young wine. These are very mineral wines. You have to make an effort to discover them, but behind this there is complexity and they carry perfectly the terroir. If 2009 expressed the grape, 2010 expresses the soil.' (I omit his comparison of 2010s to a Doric column because I didn't understand a word of it.)

As we tasted the Condrieu made on the Coteau de Chéry vineyard acquired from his old schoolmate Jean-Yves Multier and now sufficiently renovated to be cited on a Chapoutier label for the first time in 2010, he told us that they were about to plant the particularly steep slope they also now own between the Coteau de Chéry and the world-famous micro-appellation Château Grillet, which has just been acquired by François Pinault, owner of, inter alia, Ch Latour. This dry, stony slope of granite and schist will apparently have to be terraced, which will be costly but may prove worth doing for a new Condrieu with real personality.

We discussed the question of whether planting rights, supposedly tightly controlled in the new, austere EU wine regime, would be granted for this slope. 'As a member of INAO [the governing body of the appellations contrôlées]', Chapoutier declared stoutly, 'I defend our right to grant more planting rights. In Champagne, for example, planting rights have often been granted simply because of mayoral or family power rather than because of the quality of the terroir.'

He also told us about the genesis of his L'Ermite bottling of Hermitage, from vines around the famous little chapel on top of the hill of Hermitage that gives its name to Paul Jaboulet Aîné's top Hermitage La Chapelle bottling, even though the Jaboulets, who own the modest building, don't have any vines close to the chapel itself. Michel Chapoutier claims he suggested to Philippe Jaboulet in the early 1990s (long before the Frey family took over Paul Jaboulet Aîné) that he might like to swap some of the Jaboulet vines in the highly regarded Méal vineyard for some of Chapoutier's vines in L'Ermite. 'Philippe Jaboulet refused because he said our Ermite vines were too young!' Chapoutier squeaked incredulously. Thus was born the magnificent Chapoutier L'Ermite bottling of Hermitage in riposte.

This led to a story involving the scion of the other major name in Hermitage, Jean-Louis Chave. Chapoutier had been talking about how exclusively ambient rather than selected yeasts are used for his wines and firmly maintains their superiority. As evidence of this he told the story of how, in the heatwave summer of 2003, Jean-Louis Chave had gone off on honeymoon with his American wife believing the vines would look after themselves. He had to come haring back when potential alcohols threatened to reach 17% in some plots - but all was well in the end because of the superpowers of wild yeasts.

Chapoutier's final declamation while we were still tasting the whites - and he was much more loquacious than when tasting reds, when he had his self-appointed reward of a glass of Bollinger in prospect - was: '105% of nurserymen are thieves. 100% of barrel makers are thieves. As for barrel toast - you can never trust a barrel maker. Why you want toast anyway? You don't want spices. People are tired of oaky taste. We have reduced our new barrel proportion to 20%.'

I realised that Michel Chapoutier has ousted Randall Grahm of Bonny Doon in California as Rent-a-Wine-Quote when he

came out with 'fruit is to the wine what the disc is to the music'. (Grahm has in any case transferred his affections to the world of Twitter, where he has 370,000 followers.) Chapoutier continued, as we raced across southern France from his Roussillon red to the southern Rhône, 'I'm a big fan of 2010 Châteauneufs - they're more expressive and more mineral [than the 2009s]. The physiological maturity came early in 2010 so you can find very good wines at 13.5% with lower yields even than in 1961 - the lowest yields ever.' He rotated his right wrist dramatically, rolled his eyes, and thrust out his chin: 'I prepare you for price increases!'

He claimed to have discussed this question of excessively low yields with the most famous woman in Burgundy, the biodynamics pioneer Lalou Bize-Leroy of Domaine Leroy. 'Maybe this is an explanation for her wines being difficult to understand', he mused, before shaking himself back to matters more pressing. 'When I am thirsty, the tasting is always much quicker. I have to have champagne as a reward at the end because Mentzendorff don't pay me', he said, setting a world record for a tasting for four red Hermitages. 'Rubbish!' yelled the young lady from Mentzendorff at the back.

Chapoutier, a pioneer of putting Braille on wine labels, is clearly rather proud of his new 'lightweight' bottle. Weighing 650g it is heavy by, say, Tesco standards but, he claims, 'light for the importance of the wine'. Chapoutier's motto, by the way, is *Fac et Spera*, 'do and hope'.

#### **Top Chapoutier 2010s**

L'Ermitage Ermitage Rouge  
L'Ermitage Ermitage Blanc  
Le Méal Ermitage Rouge  
Le Pavillon Ermitage Rouge  
Les Greffieux Ermitage Rouge

#### **Best buys**

Barbe Rac Châteauneuf-du-Pape Rouge  
Coteau de Chéry Condrieu  
Les Granits St-Joseph Rouge and Blanc

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