

## French silliness over AOC

10 Oct 2011 by Jancis Robinson

There is quite a kerfuffle online at the moment about the Anjou biodynamic, natural winemaker Olivier Cousin of Domaine Cousin-Leduc (pictured, with friend) and his potentially ruinous battle with the French authorities, which surely makes them look pretty petty and silly.

Since 2005, like a subset of the French natural wine movement, he has sold all his wine as Vin de Table, preferring not to play the game of obeying the local appellation rules. According to wine writer Sylvie Augereau of [Glougeule.fr](http://Glougeule.fr), Cousin is especially proud of his family's Angevin roots in his native village, and was particularly infuriated when in 2003 Anjou wine producers were allowed to acidify as well as chaptalise. He decided to exit the AOC system in order to distance himself from appellation contrôlée wines, which he regards as 'industrial'.

But he has now started to tease and thoroughly irritate the authorities by putting Anjou on the label of one of his wines and by playing up the initials of Anjou Olivier Cousin in his packaging - to the extent that he may be accused of fraud and bringing the entire AOC system into disrepute. If found guilty he risks a fine of nearly €40,000 and/or two years in jail.

Of perhaps wider significance is that after many years of legal tussling, he has just lost the case in which he argued that he should not be required to pay for membership of the local generic wine organisation because he did not believe in its aims and methods. (There have been similar cases concerning membership of generic or producer organisations in Germany and Austria with one pending in Bordeaux, and I suspect we will see several more.) And as a result, Cousin's bank account has apparently been frozen, which seems extremely heavy-handed.

I must say that the only Cousin-Leduc wine for which I have notes was quite a bit too natural for my taste, but I can see that this is a man entirely motivated by respect for what he has inherited and for his region. There is clearly no intent to defraud whatsoever - although he must be a real thorn in the side of the local bureaucrats.

There is now a petition in support of Cousin [here](#) with nearly 350 messages of support when I last looked, from as far afield as the US (helped by [Alice Feiring's blog](#)) and the UK (helped by attention from [Jim Budd](#) and [Jamie Goode](#)).

Here, incidentally, is what his UK importer Les Caves de Pyrène writes about him and his Cousin-Leduc wines in their wine list:

*These wines, to quote Alice Through The Looking Glass, are as 'large as life and twice as natural'. We first made the acquaintance of the Chardonnay one lunch time in a small bistro-à-vins in Paris. We'd spent the previous evening destroying one of the finer lists in the city in search of a wine - any wine - that would jolt us upright and beat a taradiddle on the tastebuds. Everything seemed hollow and confected as if someone had sucked the corks out of the bottles and drawn out the very souls of the individual wines themselves. Then this Chardonnay, a vin de table, almost trembling with volatility, reeking of bruised apples and honey, so alive that the flor seemed to be at war in the wine.*

*Nature red in tooth and claw, the skin of the grape, the air, the climate, the mulched soil, the binding of biological flavours through a purer form of chemistry, herein a wine that wore its guts for garters.*

*Situated in Martigné-Briand south of Angers the domaine extends over 12 ha planted to Gamay, Chardonnay, Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Grolleau and Chenin. The Angevin climate, tempered and regulated by the Atlantic and the Loire river, the preservation of regional organic, natural elements such as micro-flor, the selection of grape varieties and traditional methods of viticulture and vinification is what gives these wines their powerful identity.*

*Cousin's wines are of the nowt-taken-out-and-nowt-added-to-them brigade. 'Les traitements contre les maladies ou la pourriture risquent d'anéantir toute flore lévurienne naturelle et de laisser des résidus qui se retrouveront dans le vin. Une lutte raisonnée, voir biologique, est plus respectueuse du milieu.' Pierre Casamayor (L'Ecole de la dégustation) - this is the credo of Olivier Cousin.*

*This credo produces wines from organically grown grapes, it is a philosophy derived from a paramount desire for quality and the fruit of real conviction rather than a statement of fashion. These wines are free of enzymes, artificial yeasts or*

added sulphur.

*Grolleau (or Gros Lot), a variety now virtually only encountered in Rosé d'Anjou, is properly the subject of withering scorn from all manner of wine journalists. Its name is derived from an old French word 'grolle' meaning the raven, a bird with plumage as black as the grapes of this vine. According to my research this grape truly has croaked along with similar anachronisms such as Aramon, Alicante Bouschet etc. And yet from such ugly corbies something gentle and rather fine can occasionally emerge.*

*Cousin's version is still a vin de copain, but it does have the benefit of being from sixty-year-old vines and undergoing carbonic maceration. Flavours of violets and sweet red fruits allied to soft tannins and fresh acidity make this a friend to the ice bucket. The exotic label will have you asking: 'Who's the daddy longlegs?' Le Cousin, naturellement.*