Jura - the next small thing?

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See my tasting notes on selected Jura wines and also Jura delights for tips on where to eat and stay.

From Friday until the end of August, Britain's wine lovers can take advantage of a new route to some of France's best vineyards. Danube Wings will fly twice-weekly between the airstrip they cheekily describe as 'Cambridge (London)' and Dole in Franche-Comté in eastern France.

Dole is just 50 minutes by autoroute from Beaune, Burgundy's historic wine capital, but more adventurous wine enthusiasts might like to drive in the opposite direction, east into the much less well known but increasingly fashionable vineyards of the Jura. This is the region of lush farmland to which we owe the word Jurassic, Comté cheese and, until the late 19th century, vast quantities of wine, as much as was produced in Burgundy.

But the Jura vignoble was quite literally decimated by a combination of phylloxera, mildew, the first world war, and the railways which opened up the Languedoc as an alternative source of wine to city dwellers in northern France. By the 1960s, there were fewer than 1,000 hectares of vines left. Milk and other fruits were much more valuable crops than grapes and even today there are only 2,000 hectares of Jura vineyard.

Jura's wines are some of France's most distinctive, however. Chardonnay may be the region's most planted grape variety and a certain amount of light Pinot Noir is made, both of them contributing to some great-value fizz, but Jura can boast its own highly individual grape varieties. Poulsard makes vivacious, rose-scented reds. Trousseau's rather deeper reds intriguingly combine pepper and violet scents. But most exciting of all is Trousseau's progeny Savagnin Blanc, which is identical to the heady Traminer but in Jura is capable of making extremely tense, long-lived, full-bodied dry whites as well as versions that are deliberately oxidised, more or less, to make 'yellow wines'. The most extreme versions that qualify as *vin jaune* are aged for six years or more under a thin layer of surface yeasts in only partly filled casks to produce wines vaguely reminiscent of old fino sherry, but with a distinctly Jura/Savagnin orchard-like accent.

Australians are currently learning to love Savagnin Blanc. It turned out that, owing to some mislabelling in Spain, the vine cuttings being sold by Australian nurseries as the fashionable Galician variety Albariño were actually Savagnin. Perhaps they should study the current ways of Jura winemakers.

As a reaction to too many excessively flat, oxidised wines in the 1970s, Jura's winemakers flirted with a more fruity, 'international' style of Chardonnay in the last two decades of the 20th century. But this century has seen more daring experimentation with lightly oxidative – gently nutty – styles and, especially, vineyard-designated Chardonnays designed to express to the maximum the enormous variation in aspect, elevation and soil types to be found in the Jura. And there's arguably considerably more such variation in the Jura than in Burgundy, according to one of the region's most effusive exponents, Stéphane Tissot (pictured above in the vines), now running Domaine André et Mireille Tissot with his wife Bénédicte.

His catchphrase, 'la vie est belle' (life is beautiful), certainly seemed apt to me as he bounced me around the region's hills and tracks in his dusty 4 x 4. He told me how his conversion to less intervention in the winery began when he worked at Brown Brothers in Australia in the early 1990s and found himself, in a completely different environment on the other side of the world, adding exactly the same packet of yeast as his father did back home. By 2004 his 45 hectares of vines were biodynamic and are now officially certified. 'I spent five years studying wine in Beaune and learnt nothing – well, nothing I use here', he told me, sweeping a thick arm over his rippling green vines.

In his family's particularly cool cellars, tucked into a fold of limestone on the edge of the village of Montigny-les-Arsures, where, as is the way in Jura, it can take a whole year to ferment his Chardonnay and Savagnin to dryness, he has all the most fashionable wine vessels: large, old oak casks, many from Chassin of Rully, an experimental wooden fermentation vat from Stockinger of Austria, and five clay amphorae.

For Tissot, Jura wines are riding the crest of a wave – and they have certainly taken off in North America, where a group of the region's top winemakers have travelled en masse for the last four years, whipping up a whirl of enthusiasm among wine media and sommeliers there. This year, a trip to China is in prospect, apparently. And when I plaintively asked the

man in charge of generic promotion of Jura wines about the British market, so tantalisingly close now, I was told that it had already been conquered. I'm not so sure. Wines carrying the four Jura appellations of Arbois, Côtes du Jura, L'Étoile and Château-Chalon are still pretty rare in the UK in my experience, even though those of natural wine pioneer Pierre Overnoy and Gavenat can be found on some of our more adventurous wine lists.

The wines of Jacques Puffeney, the 'pope of Jura' about to make his fiftieth vintage, have admittedly been imported into the UK by Vine Trail for some time. He seemed keener on letting his wines communicate than on being very voluble himself, but he did tell me that a bottle of 1774 *vin jaune* had recently sold for a fortune at a sale in Geneva, and that he never tastes his barrels of potential *vin jaune.* He just has their contents analysed every six months in order to decide which go into the final bottling.

Much more communicative was Bavarian Ludwig Bindernagel, once a Parisian architect but now custodian of three hectares of Jura vines and a rather handsome old townhouse that he runs as Les Jardins sur Glantine guesthouse (pictured below) with his partner in the old wine town of Poligny. 'I have no merit as a winemaker', he told me disarmingly, 'I just have some good terroir.'

Certainly his Chais du Vieux Bourg wines have a beguiling combination of wildness and fruit, and one of his Chardonnays has the irresistible name 'Sous les Cerisiers' (Under the Cherry Trees - see picture far above) – so irresistible to New Yorkers, he told me incredulously, that he saw it on sale there for $120 a bottle. 'Our wines sell more easily in New York than in Paris', he admitted.

He is hugely encouraged, however, by the wind of change currently blowing through the underground cellars and verdant vineyards of Jura. Every year sees the arrival of more aspiring vignerons inspired by the potential of this gastronomically vital region – now within such easy reach of Cambridge (London).

PRODUCERS OF NOTE *with UK importers*
Berthet-Bondet
Chais du Vieux Bourg
Ganevat *Les Caves de Pyrène*
Labet *Vine Trail*
Pierre Overnoy *Les Caves de Pyrène*
Jacques Puffeney *Vine Trail*
Jean Rijckaert *Wine Direct, Bibendum*
Tissot (both A&M and B&S) *Richards Walford/Berry Bros*