



Geared Up for **GROWTH** In

➔ Having a mechanic's eye for detail and precision to winemaking has allowed Yves Cuilleron to engineer wines of superb quality

BY KENNY LEONG PHOTOGRAPHY MARIE BIENAIMÉ

making a radical career switch in one's mid-20s for a completely foreign job might seem like a foolhardy decision, but it was one that (literally) yielded exceedingly good fruit for this stellar wine producer.

Yves Cuilleron, who turns 50 this year, owns and runs a property based in Chavanay, northern Rhone. The estate was established in 1920 by his paternal grandfather Claude, who started out selling wines in large tanks to neighbouring restaurants. But the wines were of such outstanding quality that Claude decided he needed to bottle the wines to age them properly and be sold further abroad. The first bottles to go out were from the 1947 vintage.

The property was later handed down to Cuilleron's uncle Antoine in 1960, a year before Cuilleron was born. Antoine made consistently good Condrieu, up until 1984 when he decided to sell the estate. Around that time, Cuilleron had just finished school as an engineer and mechanic and, as was the legal requirement, spent a year in conscription in Alsace, during which he met many comrades who incidentally were also wine lovers. Among them, they shared many a bottle of wine brought from all over France. Sampling the wines sparked an interest and thirst in Cuilleron, and was to pave his way for a career switch.

Despite not knowing a thing about winemaking, Cuilleron did not tarry a moment when he heard that the winery was up for sale. After leaving the army, he went to wine school at Lycée Viticole de Mâcon-Davayé, followed by a stint at some properties in the region before returning in 1987 to take over his newly purchased estate in Condrieu and Saint-Joseph. That same year, at 26 years of age, and with Antoine's assistance, Cuilleron rolled out his first vintage.

A Mechanic's Eye

Rhone boasts very old vineyards planted by the Romans some 2,000 years ago, and records from the 19th century indicate that some wines were even more expensive than those in Bordeaux, but Rhone's success was stunted by the fact that the terraced vineyards were demanding to work in;



it required a lot of manual labour, or, as Cuilleron puts it, “haute couture work.” It did not help that even fewer people tended to the vineyards when the country sank into war, so many wineries disappeared and appellations shrunk. But a new generation of winemakers was to arrive in the 1970s and 80s, reviving the region as an excellent place to produce fine wine. Plenty of land was available, which fortunately did not cost a lot of money. Cuilleron took the opportunity to expand quickly, so what began as a four hectare estate soon expanded to 50 hectares in the span of two decades.

Cuilleron began by choosing sites near to his existing vineyards, especially where he could find varying terroirs where the opportunity presented itself. In 1989 he acquired properties in Côte-Rôtie, and later in Saint-Péray and Cornas in 2006. Taking to winemaking a mechanic’s eye for detail and precision, he improved the quality of fruit and made various outstanding cuvees.



If you try to create something to please someone else, you end up having a generic, middle-of-the-road wine. I want to make a wine that I believe is what it should be.



THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW

THE WINES

Among the cuvees from the Saint-Joseph AOC is the Le Lombard. The 2010 vintage combines a wonderfully delicate and aromatic nose with lovely minerality, good acidity and freshness, elegant with appealing length and balance. With the best and oldest vines in Condrieu overlooking Chavanay, Cuilleron produces the Les Chaillots, a name that comes from the local term for ‘terraces’. The 2010 vintage displayed nuances of white peach, apricot, cream and spice. It has a mouth-filling texture with lovely minerality and freshness, youthful flavours and acid balance and a lovely, long, toasty finish.

The L’Amarybelle 2009 from the Saint-Joseph AOC showed ripe red fruit, blackcurrant, spice, and crushed pepper. Its structure is somewhat dense, firm and tight, and has a rich, long finish. Also from the Saint-Joseph AOC, Les Pierres Sèches gets its name from the dry stone walls used to strengthen the terracing. A tasting of the 2009 vintage reveals black and red fruits with crushed white pepper and perhaps just a touch of violets on the nose; it is soft, gentle and fresh on the entry with a rounded palate and very fine tannins and acid balance. It was surpassed by the Madinière 2009, named for a stream at the foot of the hill of this Côte-Rôtie AOC. The wine has a spicy, mineral nose with a touch of liquorice. Round, soft and elegant, it has a medium-full body, elegant texture, an appealing structure and a really beautiful palate with dense and tight tannins, and a long, spicy finish.



He now produces 300,000 bottles of wines a year, and has firmly established the domaine as one of the beacons of the region.

“I was lucky to start young because I had many opportunities to create something by myself,” he recalls. “I had my uncle to help me in the first four or five years, but I was free to do anything I wanted.”

Cuilleron might be spearheading a movement among the producers in Northern Rhone, but he is extremely clear on where he is taking the domaine — his style reflects a sense of place while achieving fruit purity and complexity that appeals to sensibilities thirsting for something a little more approachable. “The difference between my uncle and me,” Cuilleron surmises, “is that I have more control and understanding of the process.”

1. Oak adds complexity and character to the wines.
2. Nothing is left to chance at the domaine. The production of wine is a highly controlled process.
3. The proprietor and winemaker, Yves Cuilleron.

Engineering the Wine

Cuilleron positively encourages terroir in his wines. Preferring mineral complexity over simple varietal characters, he also keeps his crop low and ferments his wines with natural yeast. His philosophy is simple — to have good wine, it starts with good grapes. In so doing, he is able to preserve the authenticity, origin and identity of the terroir, which is why he believes winemaking happens more in the vineyard than in the cellar. The techniques he employs may be traditional, yet the style of the wine is anything but. He avoids creating what he terms ‘industrial wine’, a product which he says is “a ‘perfect wine’ that’s good on every level, but always the same and therefore has no emotion.” Artisanal wine, which is what Cuilleron pursues, is wine with character that speaks of terroir and of vintage.

To do that, he begins by admitting that he tries to make a wine that appeals to him, not to the customer. “If you try to create something to please someone else, you end up having a generic, middle-of-the-road wine. I want to make a wine that I believe is what it should be.” A good wine reflects the winemaker’s skills, and the true test, Cuilleron explains, lies in how the winemaker determines the level of yield in the vineyard and what constitutes maturity in the fruit. “You can have perfect weather conditions in a year, but if you harvest too early or too late, you spoil the entire year’s vintage. You must remember that it is the grapes, not the winemaker, that give the order of when to harvest.”

Cuilleron’s vines are trained on individual stakes in a system

known as echalas, which allows maximum air ventilation and sun exposure around the vine. This also allows workers to manoeuvre around the hilly terrain with ease.

Cold wind from the north ensures a slow maturation and helps keep the acidity in the grapes, while the wind that blows from the south is warmer, which might also bring rain and botrytis. Cuilleron is fully aware that the gods don’t smile on him all the time; just this year, he was faced with a vintage that arrived three weeks early. He counteracted by delaying the maturity of the grapes through dropping less fruit during green harvesting (the process of removing immature grape bunches which are still green, typically to reduce yield and induce the vine to concentrate its energy on developing the remaining bunches). Veraison (change of colour of the grape berries) started on 14 July, which still means that the team might start actual harvest earlier than usual.

Global warming has also impacted the window for harvest, albeit on a positive note. Thirty years ago, harvest in northern Rhone would have taken place mostly in October,

and it was sometimes difficult to achieve good maturity in the grapes. These days, getting the fruit to reach the desired level of ripeness and maturity is less of an issue.

While Cuilleron insists on an all-natural approach to viticulture, his methods defy the boundaries of organic or biodynamic practices. “If you follow the conventions of organic or biodynamic viticulture, you only follow one way and it doesn’t leave you much room to make other choices. If I go organic, I only have copper and sulphur to treat the vines, which means I might have to carry out treatment more often. The idea is to have as little treatment as possible, while obtaining the highest possible quality in the fruit.” The key to achieving this, he reveals, is vines with low vigour.

In a continual effort to understand his vineyards better every year, Cuilleron vinifies his wines separately, but he confesses that he is still not satisfied with what he has achieved. But regardless of the direction he takes, it is assuring to know that they retain their own place and their own style.

Therein lies the beauty and charm. **●**