

The view from Chablis Grand Cru 'Clos'  
onto Grand Cru 'Valmur'. 100%  
Chardonnay grown on a two-hundred-  
million-year-old seabed

# WINES FROM THE ANCIENT OCEAN

At its best Chablis is a French classic with a place  
among the world's finest wines. Dan Keeling meets  
its new wave of winemakers

Photos by Juan Trujillo Andrades

**A** northern Burgundy outpost on the border with Champagne, Chablis is better known for steely Chardonnay than as a beacon of gender equality – something that is not lost on the next generation of winemakers in the town. “Bad luck for the men – they had a lot of daughters,” chuckles Isabelle Raveneau amidst wafts of salty citrus aromas emanating from glasses of Chablis Grand Cru ‘Valmur’ in her family’s well-appointed cellars. Now at the helm of Domaine François Raveneau – which along with Domaine René et Vincent Dauvissat is long established as the most sought-after of the town’s multitude of producers – 33-year-old Isabelle is one of a number of young women including Eleni Vocoret, Alice de Moor, Eve Grossot and Nathalie Oudin who are continuing a tradition

that was until recently the exclusive bastion of men. “If my grandfather François were still alive I’m not sure I’d even be allowed in here,” she continues, inspecting the green-tinged wine against the cellar’s diffuse artificial light. “My aunt wanted to work at the domaine but he told her that it was no place for a woman. I know many other domaines where they still don’t want to hire women in the vineyards because they think they can’t do the job.”

Macho attitudes may still exist in rural France, but there’s no doubting the fine quality and relative value still offered by Burgundy’s most northerly vineyards. Located one-and-a-half hour’s drive south-east of Paris, close to the town of Auxerre, the land around Chablis is vast and open, rolling in wide oscillating waves like the sea that

once covered the region two hundred million years ago. Of all white wines, Chablis is the one *Noble Rot* returns to most often, not just for another hit of briny, stony deliciousness, but as a continual source of contemplation and wonder. Science would have us believe that Chardonnay doesn’t take on flavour compounds from the ancient fossilised oyster beds on which it grows, but could it be coincidental that Chablis tastes so oceanic? A classic match for shellfish and seafood (think complementary aromas of citrus and seaweed) great bottles can evolve for decades, developing intricate layers of honey, dairy and mushroom characteristics that perfectly complement earthy cheeses such as Brie de Meaux. A glorious 1949 Domaine Long-Depaquit ‘La Moutonne’ recently proved how Grand Cru Chablis’ acid structure makes it an ideal candidate for long ageing, whilst the chalky Kimmeridgian clay soils – also shared with Sancerre and parts of Champagne – help explain why it sometimes tastes a little like a still version of a world-class bubbly (try 2002 Dom Perignon as a sparkling ringer for top Raveneau). Some may dismiss Chablis as an overrated brand name lacking the excitement and integrity of the many newly (re)discovered vineyard regions around the world, but they’re missing the point. Top-level Chablis is a French classic whose next chapter is being written by a compelling new generation.

“When I moved to Chablis in 2010 I wasn’t a big fan of Chardonnay,” Eleni Vocoret shouts over the sounds of French hip hop group Nique Ta Mere (Fuck Your Mother) whilst husband Édouard drives us to their vineyards. “After about a week we were invited to dinner and a friend gave me a glass of 2005 Dauvissat Chablis Grand Cru ‘Clos’ without telling me what it was. As soon as I tried it I said, “I want to make wine like this!”



(Above and left) Chalky Kimmeridgian clay marl soils make up the best Chablis vineyards

Having been gifted 5ha of vines from Édouard’s family domaine – Vocoret et Fils – by his father Patrice at the end of 2012, the couple’s accomplished Chablis belies the fact their eponymous estate – Domaine Eleni et Édouard Vocoret – is barely four vintages old.



(Left) Isabelle Raveneau, Domaine Raveneau cellars



“My dad has never told us what to do – he said here’s your vines, you make the wine the way you want,” explains Édouard, 30. With his grandfather lending the use of a small garage in which to make their first vintages and Patrice, as well as local legend Vincent Dauvissat (for whom Eleni, 31, works part-time), on hand to give invaluable advice, the couple’s use of natural yeast and traditional techniques like ploughing has the aims of expressing *terroir*.

“I trained with Daniel Barraud in Vergisson [Maconnais] and fell in love with how he made wine – that’s when I chose to work a different way to how my family had been working,” explains Édouard of the time before he meet his half-Greek, half-German wife whilst travelling in New Zealand. “Most

Chablis is only made in steel tanks, but that’s not what we’re looking for,” continues Eleni as the Audi ascends a hill on the outskirts of town. “We want the stoniness, saltiness and acidity, but using old oak barrels helps smooth the wines out.” Whilst there’s some disagreement over which type of *élevage* is the most traditional (even though Cistercian monks made wine in oak here centuries ago), the use of old barrels versus steel tanks is a stylistic division between vigneronns in the town. Later in the day *Noble Rot* meets fellow new-generation winemaker (Eleni’s friend and former employer) Nathalie Oudin. “I make wines 100% in tank because that’s my taste – I love Chablis that’s pure, clean and straight,” she opines over a glass of her crystalline 2010 Chablis 1er Cru ‘Vaucoupin’,

(Above) Édouard and Eleni Vocoret, ‘Bas Chapelot’ vineyard, Chablis. (Right) with Dan Keeling in their cellar (Far right) Nathalie Oudin, Chichée

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Eleni Vocoret

a wine with the coiled energy of a featherweight prize-fighter. With such impressive juice it’s easy to see Oudin’s point of view even if *Noble Rot*’s own preference is for the more rounded style of Vocoret Jnr, Raveneau and Dauvissat *et al.*

The car stops at the edge of ‘Bas Chapelot’, a village-level vineyard under Premier Cru ‘Chapelot’ where the Vocorets own the majority of their vines, and we climb out into the seemingly ubiquitous whiff of wood smoke that pervades Burgundy in the autumn. Surveying the two adjacent vineyards, the lower-lying ‘Bas Chapelot’ has light red leaves indicating where frost has been, whilst the higher, less affected Premier Cru has bright green. Historically Chablis has been renowned for its susceptibility to hail and frost, with crops from the appellation’s

steepest slopes destroyed some two or three years before the introduction of smudge pots and sprinklers in the late 1960s. Although frost isn’t so much of a problem early or late in the year, if it strikes in April or May when the vines are budding it can be devastating – something the Vocorets were fortunate to avoid in 2016, unlike some of their colleagues.

“We never thought it could be as bad as this. We thought it would be impossible to have frost and hail on the same vineyard,” shrugs Alice de Moor about the year that she and her husband Olivier lost 95% of their crop. “We think the weather has changed a lot. A friend’s grandfather started writing the date of the harvest on his winery wall at the beginning of the 20th century. From 1900 to 1980 the date was nearly the same, but after that it started getting earlier and earlier.



(This page) de Moor winery, Courgis

(Right) Alice de Moor



We have vineyards in three different villages so we thought if we had a problem in one village it would be okay in the other two. But in 2016 every village was destroyed.” As well as the town of Chablis – which the seven Grand Crus overlook from a south-west facing hillside – Chablis AOC contains a constellation of small satellite villages including Fyé, Fleys, Milly, Chichée and

Courgis, where the de Moors’ winery is based in Olivier’s grandmother’s old house. Highly respected on the natural wine circuit, the couple both studied oenology in Dijon before starting out by planting vines on a relative’s field – something that was much easier to do in 1989 when there weren’t as many governmental restrictions controlling the development of land. “Olivier used to work

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**Alice de Moor**



for a big local domaine and saw that although they produced good grapes, in the cellar they manipulated them so much the wine wasn't as good as it could be," explains Alice amid the gloom of their icy cellar. "When I studied oenology I realised that the best way to make good wine is to grow good grapes. For us it's better to own a small domaine and to be able to decide everything ourselves." With only one employee, the de Moor's work hard maintaining superb quality from their soon-to-be 9.7ha of vines (they're adding a new section of Chablis Premier Cru with a loan from the bank). We taste the couple's range of vibrant 2015 wines (their chalky Chablis 'L'Humeur du Temps' and old vines Bourgogne Aligoté 'Plantation 1902' being particular standouts), before Alice elaborates on the pragmatic strategy that they, and other badly affected local growers, adopted to mitigate the losses of this *annus horribilis*. With the exception of just 5% of their barrels which contain the only Chardonnay and Aligoté they were able to salvage from their own vineyards, the rest are full of wines made from Clairette, Viognier, Roussanne, Bourboulenc and Grenache Blanc grapes,



bought in from as far south as Tavel, Ardèche and Tournons. "Thomas Pico [an acclaimed young Chablis vigneron] went to Limoux to buy Chardonnay, and Domaine de la Cadette bought in Gamay from Beaujolais – we bought grapes from Eric Pfifferling and Domaine Gramenon in the Southern Rhône," she explains. "They're great friends. When we

first discovered Gramenon 15 years ago it was a revelation – it felt like we'd known them since we were children." Such solidarity between kindred spirits in the face of disaster is gratifying to hear, and glancing around the cellar at the various full odd-shape barrels and tanks it's intriguing to imagine what kind of wines these southern-grown, Chablis-vinified

abnormalities might become. Perhaps a salty sea-breeze Viognier, or the most oyster-shell imbued Chateaufort-du-Pape Blanc style blend you've ever drunk? Like changing attitudes toward gender and the emerging generation of enlightened young winemakers in the town, sometimes even the most conservative places can be surprising.

(Above) 2014 Eleni et Édouard Vocoret Chablis 'Bas Chapelot'

(Right) Frost affected vines in 'Bas Chapelot' vineyard



(Above) Vincent Dauvissat, Domaine Dauvissat cellars

### **NOBLE ROT'S CHABLIS TOP TEN**

1. 2000 François Raveneau Chablis Grand Cru 'Clos'
2. 2007 René et Vincent Dauvissat Chablis Grand Cru 'Preuses'
3. 1949 Long-Depaquit Chablis Grand Cru 'La Moutonne'
4. 2014 Eleni et Édouard Vocoret Chablis 1er Cru 'Butteaux'
5. 2015 Alice et Olivier de Moor Chablis 'L'Humeur du Temps'
6. 2002 Laurent Tribut Chablis 1er Cru 'Beuroy'
7. 2008 Louis Michel Chablis Grand Cru 'Clos'
8. 2010 Oudin Chablis 1er Cru 'Vaucoupins'
9. 2014 Pattes Loup Chablis 1er Cru 'Beauregard'
10. 2014 Patrick Piuze Chablis 'Terroir de Chablis'

