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The organic spirit of Albéric Bichot

Proud of his 47 certifications, this Burgundian producer advocates a “change of mindset” regarding the use of pesticides.

His christian name may be unusual, but he himself tends not to put himself above the parapet. Albéric Bichot shows all the signs of disarming modesty: softly spoken, attentive, simply dressed and gently smiling. Surrounded by a group of grape pickers and sat at the end of the table, he shows no signs of being the boss. He calls them his colleagues and they, in return, speak of “our estates”. He explains “there are no gurus or worker hierarchy”.

Does he take on too much? He is after all one of the four largest traditional wine merchants in Burgundy: since 1996, he has been head of the house of Albert Bichot in Beaune, a family business that goes back six generations. He manages 105 hectares of vineyard and six domaines which extend from the north to the south of the region, taking in Chablis, Moulin-à-Vent, Côte-de-Nuits and Côte-de-Beaune.

He also buys in grapes from 70 partner growers across a further 350 hectares: grapes that will end up as Albert Bichot wine. No less than 137 different wines in fact, reflecting the veritable mosaic that is the Burgundy vineyard. The smallest production is of the magnificent Richebourg Grand Cru - barely 300 bottles, the fruit of a parcel of just 0.06 ha of vines. The largest is the fine Chablis that comes from Domaine Long-Depaquit (40 hectares), producing an average of 180,000 bottles a year. He employs 172 people and runs a business that turns over €60 million. What's more, he is the dominant buyer at the historic Hospices de Beaune wine auction, spending €2.8 million in 2019.

“A honeypot for big money”

He is therefore a man of stature, living in an elegant house in Pommard. However, before taking you to look at his vines, he shows you his prestigious neighbours in Morey-Saint-Denis where a steep track divides two vineyards. On the one side, Clos de Tart which belongs to François Pinault, on the other Clos des Lambrays which belongs to Bernard Arnault - two minute vineyards that these two business moguls each bought for a fortune. “This area is a honeypot for big money.”

Albéric Bichot is worried about the investors who are driving land values. “When I hear that there is a vineyard for sale, it is often very expensive and too late. I would be foolish to saddle the business with debt simply for the sake of a couple of rows of vines; I prefer to buy the grapes I need”. He has a saying “In Bourgogne, values are in decline but value is on the up”.

One of his values is to take an active interest in his neighbours. “We live here in vineyards packed tightly side by side. We cannot just shut ourselves up in our château: we must coexist with our neighbours, respect the community. Especially because this is an oasis where we have full employment - we need to remind ourselves how lucky we are.”

It has to be said that Albéric Bichot is keen to support the region as much as his own estates. For example he is patron of no less than six festivals and events, one of which is “Livres en Vignes” (Books amongst the Vines) at the Clos Vougeot. Does he feel Burgundian? “Of course! I have travelled widely, but I have my roots here.....”. In fact in 1983, he undertook his first expedition to the far north of Canada, accompanied by Nicolas Vanier. He also went as far as Adélie Land in Antarctica (Adélie is the christian name of his daughter), has shining eyes when he talks about the writer Jack London, spent a day in 1989 in Polynesia with Paul-Emile Victor, his childhood hero, and met Jean-Louis Etienne before his second expedition to Canada's far north in 1997.

“My convictions are a result of my travels”. Key is that wine harms neither nature nor those who live in the vines. He explains “We must never forget that wine is a luxury product, not a necessity. We can get by without luxuries, especially if they are harmful. It is totally reasonable that society expects grape growers to be accountable for the pesticides they use. In the vineyard we need a change of mindset.”

This is precisely what he is practising. His 36 hectares of vineyard in Côte-de-Nuits, Côte-de-Beaune and Côte Chalonnaise have had organic certification with Ecocert since 2014. The 65 hectares of Domaine Long-Depaquit in Chablis were certified Haute Valeur Environnementale (HVE) - Level 3, the highest level - in 2019. He is currently undertaking some major trials on organics there in 9 hectares of Premier and Grand Cru vineyards to understand better the nature of the soils in this coolest part of Burgundy. Furthermore, 30 hectares of the grapes that he buys in are also organically farmed, and this figure will continue to increase. As he reasons with his neighbours “If their land is treated with chemicals, we should at least talk about it!”

With wines from 47 different appellations certified as organic, Albert Bichot probably offers the largest variety of organic wines in Burgundy. But the certification has only been mentioned on the wine labels since 2018. “What point is there in making a song and dance about being organic only to revert to conventional viticulture two years later when there is a difficult year?” 2019, for instance, was chaotic climatically and the harvest was half that of 2018. But such ups and downs will not make him change course. “We are totally committed to this, we have reviewed all our processes and we have trained our workers accordingly” explains Christophe Chauvel, vineyard manager, who adds “I have seen estates that go organic for short-term commercial advantage and end up giving up on it. Whereas here, you cannot imagine how excited I am about it.”

