



THE WINES OF CHABLIS AND THE GRAND AUXERROIS

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DOMAINE DANIEL-ETIENNE DEFAIX

MILLY

Daniel Defaix is a welcoming and expansive host. He exudes so much enthusiasm that it is difficult to leave. On my first visit, I was seriously late for my next appointment, and on another occasion he treated me to a 1949 Les Lys. In the spring of 1998 it was amazingly lively, with good acidity and vivacity as well as mineral notes and underlying hints of mushrooms, *sous bois* and truffles. And it had been made by his grandfather in a cement vat.

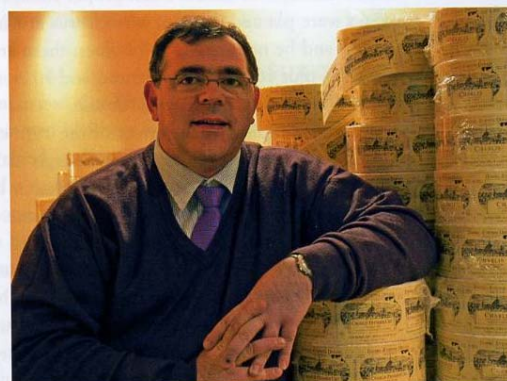
Daniel makes a very distinctive style of Chablis. He believes firmly in a long *élevage* on the lees, but in tank, not in wood. The lees are left for several months – ten for Chablis and two years for the Premiers Crus, with regular stirring, which makes for a more concentrated and developed flavour. Daniel explains that you must wait for the yeast to decompose, a process which can take several months. Enzymes are released which enhance the structure of the wine, but these are liberated only when the yeasts die. Natural yeasts reinforce the *terroir* of the wine.

For Daniel, wood is an addition: 'it transforms a wine, and can hide the truth, whereas *terroir* never lies.' Thus he prefers to sell older wines that are already mature in bottle, for you need the long *élevage* to obtain the necessary gunflint minerality.

On my most recent visit I was treated to a comparative tasting of 1998 and 1999 Les Lys, Vaillons and Côte de Léchet – the three Premiers Crus which form the mainstay of Daniel's 25 hectares. He also has 6ha of Chablis, some Grand Cru Blanchots and has recently acquired a small plot of another Grand Cru, Grenouilles. Daniel is adamant that you do not get fine wine from young vines: the average age of the vines on his estate is 40, and one of the attractions of the plot of Grenouilles was the age of its 40- to 80-year-old vines. Old vines give a certain texture – what Daniel calls *du grain* – to the wine: you simply don't get that with young vines.

Back to our comparative tasting: the Vaillons was rich and powerful, more honeyed, and almost sweet. Côte de Léchet has very poor soil – we could see the slope from Daniel's office: it is pure pebbles – and its wine was very harmonious, while Les Lys had distinctive mineral notes. The 1999 Les Lys was quite steely and youthful. Daniel suggested that the Vaillons was between Les Lys and Côte de Léchet in character. I could have happily spent the whole afternoon trying to decide which I preferred, without coming to any firm conclusions. Later in the week, the 1998 Les Lys was the perfect foil for dinner at Auxerre's best fish restaurant, La Salamandre.

As for the Grenouilles, Daniel's plot comprises just 50 *ares*, at the top of the slope. The 2002 is his first Grand Cru wine, and a quarter of it has been fermented in barrels. In the autumn of 2005 the wine was rich and rounded, or to quote Daniel: *c'est époustouflant!* He is not a man to stand still: his newest project is the renovation of a group of some of the oldest houses in Chablis, in the main street, dating back to the early Middle Ages, in the cellars of which he has created a *sympathique* restaurant, La Cuisine au Vin.



Daniel Defaix, labels at the ready for his distinctive Chablis