

Chablis maker chides trend for chilled, young wine



By Marcel Michelson

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CHABLIS, France (Reuters Life!) – Daniel-Etienne Defaix still adheres to the motto of the Cistercian monks who planted the vines on the slopes of this northern Burgundy village in the Middle Ages: Wine is only good when it ages well.

Defaix's family has been making Chablis wines for centuries and he deplores the trend for drinking young, white wines at chilly temperatures, which mask the alcohol and acidity.

"It is only with time that you get a harmonious and well-balanced taste," Defaix said.

That means that the "new" wine Defaix will bring to market is from the 2001 harvest for Chablis Premier Cru Les Lys or the Chablis Premier Cru Vaillon -- his largest vineyards. Only the wine from old vines, Vieilles Vignes, is sold at a younger age.

To prove his point he served some younger wines which were not mature yet alongside some Chablis Premier Cru Vaillon 1983 and 1981, which were a treat to the palate.

"I should not have let you taste that. Now you prefer that wine above the others but I do not sell it anymore," he laughed after seeing the reaction to the older vintages.

Defaix is a hulk of a figure and a cornerstone of the Chablis community -- presiding over Saint Vincent celebrations in the town every four years and tirelessly promoting Chablis and his own wines with top restaurants, participating in tasting juries and acquiring local real estate.

In the cellar of a block of Medieval houses that had been destined to be razed to make way for a supermarket, Defaix created a tasting room and a fashionable restaurant.

He aims to restore the rest when his cash situation improves and the global economic crisis is only a bad memory.

"When I started out on my own and took over my father's firm, Chablis had its Golden Age behind it. Business went so well back then that the producers turned their backs on the average consumer," Defaix said.

THE CLOSED CAVES OF CHABLIS

"Tourists that came to the village, intrigued by the well-known Chablis name, would find the caves closed, the few restaurants not yet open and there was no place to sleep."

Defaix opened a hotel and his tasting room, run by a Canadian, is open all day.

The monks of the Pontigny abbey, one of the "daughter" abbeys of Citeaux which gave its name to their order, started planting vines and making wines almost a thousand years ago.

Chablis was a buffer zone between the Burgundy dukes and Champagne counts until the King of France named a Provost there to keep the peace.

In the 18th century, Etienne-Paul Du Jer de la Croix De Faix, took over the monks' vineyards starting with Les Lys (the Lilies) which was used to make wines for the French Kings -- the lily being prominent in their heraldic symbols.

Les Lys lies on the top of a hill overlooking the village, it has a white chalky ground because of many layers of fossilized oyster shells from Jurassic times when the ground was below sea. At the Vaillon vineyard, just a few hundred meters (yards) away, the soil is slightly reddish as it contains iron.

Mildew and phylloxera obliterated Chablis in the 1880s and the sector remained depressed until the 1950s following the 1938 award of the Appellation d'Origine Controllee seal and the Chardonnay boom of the 1970s. Chablis uses the Chardonnay grape.

Defaix (<http://www.chablisdefaix.com>) sticks to traditional methods for low grape yields, uses manure as fertilizer and uses as few chemicals as possible. He keeps the wines from various parcels of land separated in dozens of stainless steel vats -- no wood for Defaix as he says it makes no sense for white wine -- with regular turning of yeasts to influence the taste.

He has kept prices unchanged for six years, as demand has been falling since before the crisis and now, faced with a steep decline in exports, may have to keep the wine a bit longer.

There are 400 producers of Chablis and one-third supplies the collective cellar that sells mainly to retail chains.

Other producers, under financial pressure as banks are reluctant to finance vintners, have cut prices.

"You can buy a Premier Cru at the price of a common Chablis at the moment, that is ridiculous," Defaix said. A Premier Cru normally sells for 17 to 22 euros and is now on the market for 12 euros. Defaix sells Les Lys at 24 euros (\$32.43).

He grants discounts to re-sellers with small margins while keeping firm in the face of bigger chains with high margins.

"In the end, wine is a people's business. With a good product, good sense and the knowledge that you sell to people, you cannot go wrong," he said.

"That is why, whether it is my wine or the vegetables I grow for the restaurant, I always want to be the first to taste -- if it is good enough for me, it is good enough for the customer."

Defaix sells 170,000 bottles per year, half for export and half in France. That compares with 37.4 million bottles for the entire Chablis region -- a fifth of Burgundy production and 0.1 percent of world wine output. (<http://www.chablis.fr>)

The recommended drinking temperature is 12-15 degrees Celsius -- below room temperature, but not chilled.

(Reporting by Marcel Michelson, editing by Paul Casciato)

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