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### **Didier Dagueneau - Decanter interview**

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*Oliver Styles*



**He's not interested in making friends, just the best Sauvignon Blanc around. Didier Dagueneau tells Oliver Styles where it's at...**

'You idiot' are Didier Dagueneau's first words to me. 'Why didn't you tell me you spoke French?' It's a friendly jibe (I think) and unlike any producer in Bordeaux or Burgundy, he immediately addresses me with the informal tu. I'm about to explain that the reason I didn't speak up was for the benefit of the Anglophones in our group, but he's already gone back to telling them about the large 500l demi-muid barrels he started using in 1989, and remains wedded to, to ensure a more reserved oak influence.

'Seguin Moreau had no one who knew how to make them,' he says. 'But then some old-timers piped up and said, "yes, we remember making those", so they started making these demi-muid barrels specially for me.'

We stand in his winery – a small but pristine, well-arranged and modern affair. Above its entrance, the famed bras d'honneur (the highly offensive Latin gesture where the bicep of a crooked arm swings into the palm of the other hand in a dismissive manner) welcomes visitors and defies the winemakers of the surrounding region. Quotes such as 'No need to conquer if everything is for sale' and Che Guevara's 'Be a realist, demand the impossible' adorn the white walls of the winery in indelible pen.

Dagueneau owns several plots of land scattered around the hilltop village of St Andelin in Pouilly Fumé. The Buisson Renard covers 1.5ha (hectares) and the 3ha La Folie

vineyard – hidden on a slope between two small forests – provides the Sauvignon Blanc for, among others, both the Pur Sang (Thoroughbred) and Asteroïde cuvées. The latter is made from 18 rows of ungrafted vines and produces only 200 litres a year. It is priced accordingly, at €460 a bottle.

The bois de St Andelin vineyard provides the grapes for the Silex cuvée. Further up the road is the tiny Clos du Calvaire, the only walled vineyard in the region, and no bigger than a small rounders pitch. Dagueneau also recently planted a similarly minute vineyard on the Les Monts Damnés in Sancerre, and produces Les Jardins de Babylone Jurançon with friend Guy Pautrat.

No-one is indifferent to Dagueneau. Winemakers in Pouilly and Sancerre don't talk about him much, but one of Sancerre's leading winemakers, Alphonse Mellot, spilt a rare bean, telling me that Dagueneau 'pushes terroir to the limit'. It wasn't said without a degree of disgust, but it's a diagnosis the man himself agrees with. When I told Decanter tasting director Christelle Guibert (who met him on her winemaking studies) that I'm going to meet him, her reaction – raised eyebrows and a sharp intake of breath – precedes a warning: 'He'll either like you – and then you're okay – or not.'

I mug up as best I can beforehand on the 'wild man of Pouilly'; the 'best producer of the appellation'; the 'enfant terrible'. In the words of renowned Bordeaux consultant Denis Dubourdieu, 'Dagueneau is one of the great winemakers of our generation.'

Looking like a cross between Vercingetorix and a Hells Angel, he has an undeniable presence, only partly forged through his reputation. The rest is, without a doubt, personality. He is willing to talk, but, unfortunately, half of what he tells me is punctuated with 'You don't write this...' He then launches into a tirade against the authorities for being too inflexible on permitted grape varieties in the face of global warming, or divulges a titbit about the lax vineyard practices of his neighbours. I spot a cigare (small barrel) with see-through sides, and ask him if it's for tourists. 'It's an aquarium,' he retorts, trumping me on the dodgy humour stakes.

'No, it's a school barrel,' he explains. 'It's to show the new workers how to do the bâtonnage and wash the barrels. They say, "it's all the same"; "no", I say. And I show them how I want it done.'

So how did he learn about bâtonnage? Who showed him? He developed his own method, he says. Unlike many counterparts in the area, he didn't take over from his father. He started sidecar racing, until two crashes in quick succession forced him to return home and rethink. He went into wine because it was under his nose, the same answer he gives when I ask him why he chose Sauvignon Blanc to work with – 'you don't even ask yourself the question,' he says. 'I had a few scores to settle with the family, so I decided to make wine, to make better wine than them. That was my first motivation. So I decided to make the best Sauvignon Blanc in the world. Not at all

pretentious for someone who's been making wine for two years.'

I ask him what motivates him now. 'Les gonzesses,' (French slang for, literally, 'chicks') he answers, and again, I'm left waiting for an explanation. He tells me there's so much pressure to perform, he can't let anyone down, not least himself.

It's a question of pride: 'The idea that if you stood back from it, it had to look good,' he explains. 'They used to spend a whole afternoon aligning 10 barrels, to make sure it looked good, to make sure it was well aligned, perfect. My grandfather was like that. It's not going to affect the quality of the wine but it's still a quest for quality in your work. If you carry that out in everything you do, that'll make the difference – not the top-quality presses, or the latest tractor. All the parameters, at every stage, every day, should be at the maximum.'

He is prone to the odd error. Last vintage, he ordered his usual quota of new oak barrels, but the harvest was smaller than anticipated and he started putting the wine into barrels before he realised how little wine he would end up with. It's going to be an oakly one. He also admits he went through a period of 'peace and love – no sulphur' during the 1990s, which, given the poor ageing of the wines, he regrets.

But to understand these slip-ups is to understand the man. Not only do the non-sulphur wine tests show his willingness and desire to experiment, but as Jacqueline Friedrich writes in her book *A Wine and Food Guide to the Loire*: 'His winemaking is not systematic.' Dagueneau went biodynamic for a while. Now, some of the less logical and failing biodynamic practices have been chucked out for practical reasons, and the horse he used to till his Clos du Calvaire vineyard is in semi-retirement.

He is also totally open about chaptalisation (the adding of sugar). He has done it, he says, because the wines would have been unbalanced had he not. He makes the point that 'if France bans chaptalisation, it should also ban the addition of tartaric acid' – a jibe indirectly aimed at winemakers in the south of France. 'And what would you have left? Water.'

When he gets onto subjects like this, you can understand why his tongue has brought him more enemies than friends. And it's true, he is as driven and intractable as his reputation suggests. Over lunch, I ask him if his son Louis Benjamin will carry on the family business. 'I would have liked him to work with me but he wants to set up on his own,' he says. 'So I said "I'll help you, I'll do as much as I can for you, but don't think that you can buy or rent 2ha from me, or use my equipment, or make your wine in my cellar, and then sell it to my clients. I'll lend you the stuff you need, and you can make your first vintage in my cellar, but after that, you're going to have to buy my equipment because that's setting out on your own.'

So, does one need to be an egoist to be a winemaker? 'Egoist, no; generous, yes; intransigent, yes; but not egoist,' he says, which is one answer I was not expecting. But the one word that sums him up entirely is there: intransigent. And any future plans? 'Minister of agriculture, that's really tempting,' he says.

### **Didier Dagueneau at a glance**

**Born:** 1956 in St Andelain, Nièvre, Burgundy

**Family:** Four children, divorced, lives with partner Suzanne

**Interests:** Sled dog racing

**Surface area under vine:** 12ha

**Dream vineyard:** 'A small domaine in Limoux'

**He says:** 'We fully play the hand of the vintage. We prune and debud by the same amount year on year'

**They say:** 'Due to a titanic level of work in the vineyard, his pure-bred Sauvignon Blancs act like a terroir sponge' Michel Bettane, Le Grand Guide des Vins de France