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ON WINE

A New Generation of Elegant, Well-Priced Chablis

A group of young vinters in Burgundy are experimenting with winemaking techniques to produce a new crop of distinctive, and very reasonably priced, Chablis



By LETTIE TEAGUE

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CAN A WINE be unique and yet much-imitated? The answer is yes if the wine is Chablis. Though the moniker has been applied to many an ersatz jug wine, this wine from the northernmost corner of Burgundy has also been called the purest expression of the Chardonnay grape. (Chablis attracts both cheap imitations and fulsome praise). And thanks to a perfect confluence of circumstance—climate, terroir and new winemaking talent—the region is also home to some of the most exciting wines made today.



EDD BALDRY

Much of the new talent is native, the children and grandchildren of established growers who have ventured out into the world and returned to create their own domaines. A few rising stars, such as Patrick Piuze, have come from afar. Both breeds of winemaker are employing new fermentation techniques, exploring new vineyards and hand-harvesting their grapes, and they're turning out truly distinctive wines of a particular place and style.

Chablis is an unlikely-seeming wine region. *Inhospitable* is a frequent descriptor. The winters are cold and rainy, and frost is a concern as late as April or May. And it's a long way from the more celebrated regions of Burgundy; in fact, Chablis is as close to Champagne and the Loire as it is to the Côte d'Or, which makes it a bit of a land apart.

But the cool climate promotes the development of great acidity, a key Chablis attribute. And the region's limestone-and-clay soils, Kimmeridgian and Portlandian, contribute a flinty, minerally note of seashell. (Kimmeridgian soils actually contain fossilized oysters.) The result is a wine so distinct that whenever a similar character appears in a wine, it is inevitably described as Chablis-like. I've had Chablis-like wines in Sicily and Sonoma, and places in between.

Chablis-like is also the term of choice to describe an unoaked Chardonnay, as Chablis is traditionally fermented in concrete or stainless-steel tanks rather than oak barrels. There are exceptions, of course. Some top Chablis producers, both new and established, ferment and age in oak, but whether or not their wines could be called classic Chablis is a matter of some debate.

Much mediocre Chablis has been made over the years, a veritable sea of high-acid and featureless wines, often as not from machine-harvested grapes. This last fact is one of the many processes the new generation has sought to change, harvesting even their least noble (i.e., not grand or premier cru) vineyards by hand, thereby ensuring maximum-quality grapes.

One of these new superstars, Thomas Pico of Domaine Pattes Loup, hand-harvests all of his grapes and ferments his wines in oak, concrete and stainless-steel tanks, depending on the particular wine. (His basic Chablis is fermented in concrete and steel tanks while his premier cru wines are fermented in older oak barrels.) But the style is consistent throughout: Pattes Loup wines are dense and richly textured and yet seemingly weightless in that way that only Chablis can be. Another word for this is *transparent*. In fact, transparency is key to all great Chablis, and the term is invoked almost as often as is *acidity*.

Although Mr. Pico, 33, comes from a family of grape growers, he chose to create his own all-organic domaine in 2006. Starting with a small piece of a vineyard that he'd inherited from his family, he augmented his production with grapes purchased from his father's domaine. In a very short time, Mr. Pico became a bit of a cult figure and his wines hard to find.

The wines of Patrick Piuze are somewhat more obtainable but no less prized. In fact, they seem to show up on just about every hip New York wine list, and sommeliers sing his praises—even if some find his name hard to pronounce (“Pews”).

The Canadian-born Mr. Piuze, a wine-bar owner turned vigneron, founded his winery in 2008, although he doesn't own a single vineyard. Instead he buys fruit, from basic Chablis to premier and grand crus, from a variety of high-quality vineyards.

‘This might have been the best selection of wines I’ve tasted in months.’

Mr. Piuze forged valuable connections in Chablis while working for famous producers such as Olivier Leflaive and Jean-Marc Brocard, and the diversity of his sources is reflected in the sheer number of wines he makes. In a recent email Mr. Piuze estimated he produces “up to 18 different types of Chablis in five square kilometers.” The kind of access to

great vineyards the region offers—unlike, say, the Côte d’Or, where grapes from grand-cru vines are rarely available to outside producers—is one of the attractions of Chablis to young winemakers.

Two other new producers of note are Charly Nicolle and Sébastien Dampt, both of whom were born into important Chablis families. While Mr. Dampt still works with his father, Daniel, and brother Vincent, he launched Domaine Sébastien Dampt in 2007. Mr. Nicolle just exported his own Domaine Charly Nicolle wines to the U.S. this year.

Mr. Dampt, who has a good working relationship with his father, nevertheless had his own stylistic vision to fulfill, from marketing to winemaking techniques. For example, he said he had recently purchased a concrete egg-shaped tank for fermenting his wines (and proudly attached a picture of it to his email).

According to Mr. Dampt, the young producers are particularly open to new methods because many have worked abroad. “The new generation has seen many different things in the world” he said, adding that its members bring their ideas to Chablis vineyards.

One member of this new generation of Chablis producers has actually been around for a very long time. California-based wine importer Kermit Lynch has been visiting Chablis for decades but only recently teamed up with a local winemaker (the esteemed Jean Collet) to produce wines under the name Domaine Costal. The first Domaine Costal Chablis, Les Truffières, was produced in 2005, and several years later the partners added a premier-cru wine from the Les Vaillons vineyards. The latter just arrived in the U.S. market last year.

The wines produced by this talented group can be hard to find. I had to canvas quite a few stores to acquire a reasonable selection of examples. But that's the only shortcoming I found; this might have been the best selection of wines I've tasted in months.

There wasn't a single wine—well, maybe one—that wasn't very good, from the textured wines of Pattes Loup (the 2012 Pattes Loup Vent d'Ange) to the precise and thrillingly mineral Patrick Piuze bottlings (the 2013 Patrick Piuze Terroir de Courgis and the 2012 Les Minots). And Kermit Lynch and Jean Collet's 2012 Domaine Costal Premier Cru Vaillons is a wine of tremendous purity and elegance that costs only \$35 a bottle. (A premier cru wine from the Côte d'Or can cost hundreds of dollars.)

The basic 2013 Chablis from Domaine Sébastien Dampt and 2012 Domaine Charly Nicolle were lively and crisp and a joy to drink. And at \$26 and \$25, they were very well priced. I was particularly impressed with the 2012 Charly Nicolle Mont de Milieu Premier Cru Chablis, although I suspect it will be even better in a year or two. (A good Chablis can age nicely for years and a great grand cru can last decades, depending on vintage and producer.) And it costs just \$45 a bottle.

This new generation of producers are not only turning out high-quality wines of distinction but doing so at prices that most drinkers can afford—as long as they don't mind the work of seeking them out.

Oenofile: Five Fabulous Chablis From a New Cast of Winemakers

2013 Patrick Piuze Terroir de Courgis Chablis, \$27

The indefatigable Patrick Piuze turns out a truly astonishing array of high-quality wines from a variety of sources throughout the region. The Terroir de Courgis (a town in Chablis) is an old-vine, bone-dry wine of remarkable purity and precision.

2012 Domaine Charly Nicolle Mont de Milieu Premier Cru Chablis, \$45



From left: 2013 Patrick Piuze Terroir de Courgis Chablis; 2012 Domaine Charly Nicolle Mont de Milieu Premier Cru Chablis; 2013 Sébastien Dampt Chablis; 2012 Domaine Pattes Loup Vent d'Ange Chablis; 2012 Domaine Costal Premier Cru Vaillons F. *MARTIN RAMIN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL (5)*

Mont de Milieu is considered one of the finest premier-cru vineyards in Chablis, and the young Charly Nicolle gives full expression to its racy but elegant profile. Although this well-balanced, aromatic wine is drinking beautifully now, it will be even better in a year or two.

2013 Sébastien Dampt Chablis, \$26

Young rising star Sébastien Dampt started his domaine with several acres in Chablis AOC (the “basic” Chablis appellation) and now owns several acres in premier-cru vineyards. This bottle is a delightful example of an entry-level Chablis, crisp and clean with a lovely citrus note and a bright, cleansing acidity.

2012 Domaine Pattes Loup Vent d'Ange Chablis, \$42

Marked by beguiling aromas of jasmine and white flowers, this is a rich and concentrated yet beautifully balanced wine from the young superstar Thomas Pico. It is made from an old-vine Courgis vineyard and aged in concrete and stainless steel vats. Mr. Pico is one of a growing number of organic producers in Chablis.

2012 Domaine Costal Premier Cru Vaillons, \$35

California-based wine importer Kermit Lynch made a wise choice in a winemaking partner when he teamed up with the great Jean Collet. There have only been a few vintages of this beautifully balanced, thrillingly mineral wine imported into the U.S., sadly in rather small amounts. Worth searching out.

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