

## Le Rocher des Violettes, Montlouis



For a young man from the north of France, Xavier Weisskopf has a remarkably precocious track record in the world of wine. He went to school in Chablis, where his passion for the vine took root and led to the wine school in Beaune. After earning a degree in viticulture and enology, he went to work for the dynamic, hard-driving Louis Barruol at Château de Saint Cosme in Gigondas. He quickly became Louis' *chef du cave*, and made four vintages there.

In January 2005, Xavier bought 22 acres of vines in Montlouis and an enormous, raw 15th century stone cellar—originally a quarry—dug deep into the Loire's chalk limestone bank in Amboise. The vines are scattered about in various parcels and were planted at different times, but the majority were put into the ground before WWII. There's Chenin, followed by small amounts of Cabernet Franc, Chardonnay, Grolleau for rosé, and Malbec (Cot). Xavier makes AC Montlouis, Touraine in three colors, and a *pétillant originel*.

Montlouis faces Vouvray across the broad Loire. These are Touraine's two great white wine appellations, and both have plateaus where most of the vineyards grow high above the river. Montlouis has somewhat more sand and less clay in its soils and its wines, very generally, can consequently be softer rather than so pointedly precise. Vouvray's advantage in clay tends to favor late harvest *moelleux* too, but again, this is very general.

The other thing about Montlouis is that it is roughly one-fifth the size of its illustrious neighbor, and until the AC laws created "Montlouis" in 1939 its wines were sold as Vouvray. Ever since, Montlouis has been overshadowed, but these days this underdog AC has become a hotbed for Touraine's leading young Turks (in part because of less expensive vineyards). Enter Xavier.

He's a tall, handsome young man who knows exactly what he wants to do and how to go about it. He left the Rhône in favor of the Loire because of his love of Chenin. Louis Barruol joined him at the end of November 2005 to pick icy botrytised Chenin, and ended up cursing the fate that gave him no grapes in Gigondas capable of hanging for so long. Xavier plows his rows and doesn't use chemical or synthetic products (going completely organic beginning in the spring of 2009). He prunes his younger vines severely for low yields of 30-35 hectolitres per hectare (the old vines give about 25 hl/ha), and harvests by hand. He favors wood barrels over steel tanks for the exchange of oxygen the former vessels permit, and he's very careful to preserve fruit without letting oak intrude. He's very much of a young *vigneron* to watch.

## The Wines

- *Montlouis Sec Cuvée La Touche Mitaine*: This wine comes from a four hectare parcel (10 acres) named Touch of the Mitten because it's cold up there during pruning season. This is Xavier's youngest parcel of Chenin (30+ years old) growing in limestone flint soil. Depending on the year, one-third is raised in tank and two-thirds in three-year-old barrels, or it's raised entirely in older barrels (fatter years like '06 and '09 underwent the former, while '07 and '08 saw no steel during ageing). Elevage lasts six months with regular lees stirring, after which the wine is bottled to preserve fruit and elegance. Those who think all Chenin sec is lean and mean should try this version.
- *Montlouis Cuvée La Négrette*: This is the pre-WWII old-vine cuvée, brought up in 600-liter demi-muid barrels for 18 to 20 months with regular *bâtonnage*. About 30% of those barrels are new, the rest old. The grapes come from two parcels—one of which is named Négrette—that grow in the same soil and total two hectares (5 acres). The wine needs aeration in its youth to show its stuff and is best decanted. It is dry, richly layered and textured, and terrifically mineral.
- *Montlouis Cuvée Les Borderies*: This is Xavier's demi-sec from a one hectare (2.5 acres) parcel named Les Borderies where most of the vines date from 1922 (the average age is 80). The wine is raised for six months in older demi-muids barrels.
- *Montlouis Moelleux*: A late harvest wine coming from a 0.80 hectare parcel (2 acres) planted in the 1950s. The yields are especially low at around 20 hl/ha, and the ageing takes place in older barrels for roughly six months.
- *Pétillant Originel*: Some would call this *pétillant naturel* or *méthode ancestrale*, which is loosely the same thing: a sparkling wine made in bottle with its native yeast and without any dosage (most Champagnes and Crémants are given designer yeast for their secondary fermentation and are bottled with a sweet dosage). Indeed, *Originel* is made without any additions or modern interventions of any kind. It is absolutely natural, a requirement enshrined by its makers and, as of 2007, by law—for *Pétillant Originel* is now a legal class of wine in France (*pétillant naturel* and *méthode ancestrale* are not codified). Xavier joined three other Montlouis growers and took the legal dictates one step further by drawing up a quality charter mandating low yields, greater ripeness than normally attained for sparkling wine, and a minimum of nine months on the lees before disgorgement. Currently, they are the only four producers in Montlouis making *Originel*. Rocher des Violettes's is made from old-vine Chenin growing in AC Touraine, and it sees 28 months on its lees before disgorgement.
- *Touraine Rouge*: Remember, Xavier made four vintages at Saint Cosme (2000-2004) and he knows how to make red wine! This comes from one hectare of vines that were planted in 1980 and is raised in older barrels for roughly 12 months.
- *Touraine Rouge Cot Vieilles Vignes*: This comes from two parcels of Malbec (locally called Cot, and the 't' is silent) totaling 1.40 hectares (3.5 acres). The vines are all very old, with the oldest section having been planted in 1891! The wine is made via whole-cluster fermentation and élevage goes for around six months in older barrels. This wine is deep dark and dense, yet surprisingly elegant. Not for the shy of heart.

In addition, Xavier makes small amounts of Touraine Sauvignon Blanc, Touraine Rosé, and VdP Chardonnay.

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