

Domaine Henry Natter, Montigny



Henry and enologist Cécile Natter started their domaine in 1974 from scratch, beginning with a family hectare in Montigny. They married, planted half of that hectare on a hillside running up behind the village, and started a family. This was in Sancerre's southwestern heights, an area widely planted to vines before phylloxera. Afterward, apart from a few scattered vineyards, the viticultural reconstruction generally passed these hillsides by and the area became a breadbasket for the local grain farmers. The Natter family domaine was the first on this side of the modern appellation of Sancerre and remains the only winemaking domaine in Montigny, a terroir noted for its preponderance of *terres blanches*, or Kimmeridgian Marls. This soil gives great power to the wines, and a remarkable ability to age without oxidation. Stored properly, a top twenty-year-old Natter Sancerre retains astonishing freshness while evolving down to its elemental, mineral base. Almost no one thinks of old Sancerre, which is a shame because the good ones can amaze.

Today, Henry and Cécile farm 23 hectares (57 acres) of vines. The breakdown is 19 hectares of Sauvignon and 4 hectares of Pinot Noir for red and rosé. From the beginning in 1974, farming and winemaking practices here have been noteworthy. Organic composts and homeopathic applications have always been used in place of chemical fertilizers, and likewise herbicides have never been used (the right is reserved to use synthetic fungicides in particularly difficult years—above all, for example, during a wet year after hail damage when rot could ravage an entire crop). Fermentations are routinely made in huge old wood casks (*foudres*) with indigenous yeasts, which stands in contrast to the far more typical production of Sancerre in steel or fiberglass tanks with commercial yeasts. Sancerre, *chez Natter*, is made the way it used to be made.

Henry manages the vineyards while Cécile manages the fermentations and the upbringing of the wines. These days they're helped by daughter Mathilde and sons Auguste and Vincent. A Hmong is also full-time in their employ. He is the nephew of a married couple who had been relocated from Laos to a Hmong refugee camp near Bourges in the 1980s. This couple originally came to the domaine as vineyard workers, and they stayed on for nearly a decade before their nephew assumed their responsibilities. Many more Hmong come to help during the harvest.

The Wines

- *Sancerre blanc*: This is the domaine's horse, a wine that never fails to make the cut for Bettane & Desseauve's annual Great Guide to French Wines, France's most serious guide. The Guide notes the "perfect maturity" the Natters obtain from their grapes, and that maturity, coupled with native yeast fermentation in *foudre*, accounts for the intense aromas and rich texture of the wine. It spends a minimum of six months aging in the big casks.
- *Sancerre Cuvée François de la Grange*: This is both a vineyard selection and a cellar selection. The base for this wine always comes from an old vine parcel of 50+ years, and a culling of *foudres* takes place in the cellar. The wine that is bottled under this label undergoes a nine to twelve-month *élevage* entirely in the big casks.

As for the name, this is explained in the domaine's printed materials: *At first, François de la Grange (1554-1617), Baron of Montigny, was in the personal service of the King Henri III. He then became governor of Berry, Blois, and Gien, Knight of the Order of the Holy Spirit, and Marshal of France in 1595. His influence was of great importance in the development of the village of Montigny. It is therefore in homage to this powerful historical figure that we dedicate this cuvée; it, too, possesses a certain power and a large personality.*

- *Sancerre rosé*: 100% Pinot Noir, with nearly half aged for three months in *foudre* before bottling. Cécile did part of her winemaking training at Domaine Ott in Provence, and she knows how to make rosé! This is one of the best of the appellation.
- *Sancerre rouge*: This is 100% Pinot Noir whose alcoholic fermentation is made in tank, then the wine is racked into barrels (mostly older wood) for malo and ageing.
- *Les Secrets d'Anaëlle*: A rare and toothsome sparkling Loire rosé made from Pinot Noir, and named after Mathilde Natter's daughter.