

Curzilles, a terroir, a fine wine

10/02/2019 by [Ellen Wallace](#) — [Leave a Comment](#)

Vertical tasting of 7 vintages, Cave La Colombe

It's probably safe to say almost no one beyond a handful of wine industry professionals really masters the appellation and naming system for Swiss wines. This is in any event changing soon, so don't be surprised if I say I drank a really good wine called Curzilles for several vintages before I realized this is the name of a *lieu-dit* (cadastral designation) in canton Vaud. I've driven by it for years and had noticed grapes growing; we once adopted a kitten from a house across the road. If this were Burgundy, there would be a sign. But this is humble, self-effacing Switzerland so vineyards are just vineyards, until you know what you're looking at.



Curzilles, 7 vintages of this white blend from La Colombe in Féchy, by Raymond Paccot.

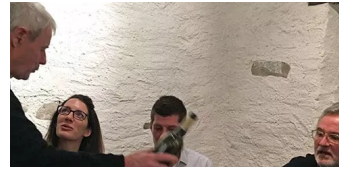
The wine I drank, and will happily continue to drink is Curzilles by Raymond Paccot at La Colombe winery in Féchy village. It is a white blend whose two most important grapes are Chasselas and Pinot Gris. Doral and Riesling are also part of the mix and in the first year Savagnin was included.

The winery invited anyone interested to join in a cozy evening with a small group for a vertical tasting of 7 vintages. We were given one instruction at the outset: “You’re here to taste terroir, to see how the wine evolves.”

Paccot’s wines are remarkable for the hand of the winemaker – not because he is heavy-handed, quite the opposite. His wines are consistently very good, interesting, with precision (even complex blends have a tight weave) as a hallmark, and terroir is clearly at the heart of them. So how does one forget about this well-known Swiss winemaking



Raymond Paccot and
guests, Curzilles vertical
tasting January 2019



Seeking terroir and its
impact on the evolution
of Curzilles wines, 7
vintages

Let me first take you through the wines we shared, and then we can come back to the terroir, the lieu-dit itself, and how rules and regulations and research may all play a role in our understanding of terroir.

The wines, according to Ellen

My *very* rough and brief initial notes on these 7 vintages run something like this, with * indicating I thought it was a winner. I had just driven from the St Joseph wine region in France where I had been tasting Syrah wines for 2 days, so a change of gears was in order.

After a refreshing little hello glass from Violaine Paccot, who explains that daughter Laura – newly taking on responsibility for the vineyards – is home tending a sick baby, I sit down to focus on Curzilles, served in order of youngest to oldest.

of linden blossom with ?? fresh bread?
hint of petrol?

- 2014, caramel, butter on the nose, surprising because I associate this with oaked wines and no wood is used; second bottle only slightly better
- 2013 hmmm, unsure if I like it (later note: coming back to it, I appreciate it more)
- 2012 dry and crisp, hints of mineral, somewhere between a young wine and one that is moving into its third phase [first is on the fruit, second has notes of the winemaking process and maturing, while third is notes linked to ageing]
- 2011* woohoo! we've turned a page here – pear, floral and maybe white peaches, more complex nose and very loooooong finish
- 2010* gold colour – a wow! nose, definitely tertiary aromas starting to appear – honey, toast, but woven through with citrus, almonds, linden flowers. The mouth is remarkably fresh for an 10-year-old wine.

The wines according to Paccot and others

reflecting, listening, commenting, arguing a bit. I've met a couple of these people previously, ardent wine amateurs, plus Dennis Lapuyade, who is the other serious Swiss wine writer in English. Noé Christinat is also at my table, a young winemaker from Ollon who as a student at Changins was a member of the third-place team in a very high-level international dégustation competition held by EHL (Lausanne's hotel school). He spent some of his student training time working at the Paccot family winery, so his questions and remarks are focusing and informed.

2017, says Paccot was “the latest harvest we’ve had, 17 October.” There’s a three week variation in harvest times, he points out. Wait, is that the variation over the years or for the grapes that go into this particular wine? The grapes are harvested together, he explains. Riesling, one of the grapes, “can be later” to mature, which complicates things.

A crucial feature of this wine is that the grapes are complanted, which means the grape varieties are not neatly separated, but grown together and harvested together, also known as field blends. This is a process widely used historically, before tanks for blending became affordable, but it’s an unusual feature

the classic wisdom is that there are three periods for ripening and all grapes fall into one of these three. Did you know that Chasselas, whose birthplace was probably canton Vaud, certainly the Lake Geneva region, is the [grape whose ripening time](#) is used as the basis to compare all other grape ripening periods in the world?

We're back to winemaking details for each vintage. The 2016, says Paccot, was not filtered, only the second year like this. Curzilles is bottled about a year after grapes are harvested. I mentally compare this to the mainstream Swiss whites and most Chasselas that are bottled in spring or summer, ready for thirsty markets. A year is a long time for a non-oaked white wine to mature, in Switzerland.



about these here) since the start in 2010.

About 10 years ago I visited Domaine Balisiers in Geneva with the [Mémoire des Vins Suisses](#) group of Swiss wine producers, their annual educational outing. The producers were keen to see the cellar's work with concrete eggs, as Balisiers was one of the earliest in the country to use these to mature wines. Raymond Paccot was in the group and he sparked some lively discussions. Little did I know I'd be seeing the concrete (!) result of those reflections now, his Curzilles collection.

Here's how they differ

We move on to 2015. High alcohol, 14-15%, and I can remember the sun that provoked it. The petrol aroma, subtle, could be from the Riesling, we hear. We might find the same in the 2017 and 2018 vintages, also "rather rich" wines. A question is raised about whether grapes were lost to the [suzukii fruit fly attacks in 2014 and 2015](#), given La Colombe's organic approach. Today the entire winery is biodynamic. "We never lost any grapes," says Paccot. "We treated frequently but in tiny quantities."

The 2014, we agree, is oxidized, sadly – the initial buttery aromas I smelled have

mineral, crunchy and he says it was a “nice year”. I am less keen on this wine, but try it again and like it better. Some of my table mates think it is very good; I won’t go that far.

In 2012 there was no Riesling in the blend and the wine was left in the eggs until June before bottling. We learn that in 2013 it was also left until June but that in 2014 it was May; sometimes the egg lets the wine breathe too much and it can’t be left as long.

The 2011 was harvested early and 2/3 of the wine was allowed MLF, or malolactic fermentation (for more on MLF, read [here](#)). This is the only vintage where the wine had a “tiny” passage in wood. It was a thinner, cooler year.

Here we are, 2010: my favourite, and the one that makes me believe this is a wine that is great very young, and great once it has aged. This was a big year, says Paccot. Acidity was high, at pH 3.6 (more on acidity in wines, [here](#)). A spicy wine with a wonderfully long finish.

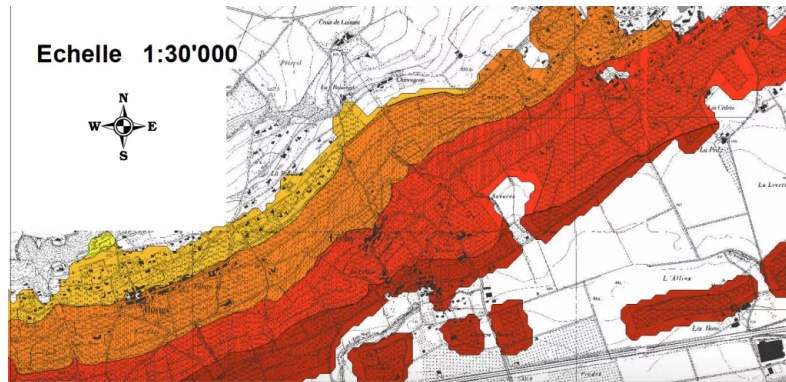
And the terroir?

The commune of Féchy “is home to 177 hectares of vineyards, of which 70 have been listed in the inventory of landscapes and natural sites of national importance since 1971,” according to the commune’s web site. Féchy has its own Grand Cru, and in addition, it is a “Vignoble classé”, or listed vineyard.

“ “The indication “Féchy Vignoble Classé” is reserved for wines bearing the Grand Cru label from the Féchy production area as well as the indication of the cadastral designation and made from grapes harvested within the Féchy production area.”

Féchy wines web site

There are regulations covering the use of these on a label – and one of them is that only Chasselas qualifies. A blend like Curzilles, no matter how good it is, won’t have either of these on its label.



Curzilles in orange, to the left of the town of Aubonne; Féchy is below and to the right of the legend, in a red band (source: cantonal “climate” study 2002-03 of all vineyards.

Specifically, Curzilles is the slope on the right as you leave the town of Aubonne heading downhill towards Féchy. Soil studies done in the past two decades show that Curzilles has a small patch of rough, sandy soil (good for creamier wine texture) but it is mostly calcareous soil with compact limestone base, where roots spread easily. The study done for Féchy notes that “This type of soil gives wines a flinty mineral character and a powdery texture in the mouth.”

Two small sections at the edges of the lieu-dit have non-calcareous soil where roots do not spread easily: “This type of soil gives wines a certain mineral character, tighter and more concentrated. Certain plots grow complex and elegant Chasselas.”

In other words, it’s a great place for

some cases replaced, starting in 2002 and finishing in 2010 – starting about the time the canton began its studies to understand which soils and locations were best matched with which grapes. The Paccots increased their Pinot Gris here and, most importantly, complanted their various whites so they share the same soil, are picked at the same time, and fermented together. It is a blend only in the sense that there is more than one grape variety in the wine.

La Colombe's Curzilles, all the vintages we tasted, are clearly marked by the limestone soil. The winery describes these wines as full-bodied and fresh, and the tasting backed that up. We found, pretty much without fail, aromas of pear, almond, fresh bread (or baker's yeast) and citrus fruits. In mouth, there is always a noticeable and pleasing texture.

I was intrigued to read, on the Féchy wines web site, that



White blend 2009 from La Colombe in Féchy, Vaud, by Raymond Paccot

“ Pebbles rolled by glaciers are interesting for their mineral diversity that gives wines varied and original “mouth touches”. Indeed, many pebbles come from schist and granite massifs in the Alps, but also from the calcareous hills of the Jura. Furthermore, these moraines came to accumulate on the marine and lake tertiary molasse, which is calcareous. This geological mixture of the Alpine arc is only found in one other vineyard, that of Savoie.

in Féchy; perhaps he felt right at home with the soil, and for a man who grows grapes, that is no small thing.

He would have been astonished to take this bird's eye [flight over the Féchy cadastral areas](#), which make it easier for those of us who buy wines with these names to know where the grapes are grown. Be sure to check it out, and move your cursor!

Also read:

- Dennis Lapuyade published his report and more in-depth notes on the Curzilles vertical tasting on his English language site, [Artisanswiss](#).
- [Terre Nature](#) carried a long interview (Fr) in 2017 with the Bourguignons, who have done studies on a large number of Swiss wine climates and soils, including those of Féchy.
- I tasted another Curzilles, a Chasselas single grape wine from the Rossier family in Lavigny, last week – their last bottle, I believe – and was enchanted to find again notes of linden blossom and almonds, a clear freshness in mouth and a minerality that isn't always found with La Côte region Chasselas wines.

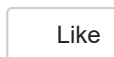


Curzilles from the Rossier family, a classic made in tank Chasselas, served with a saucisse de Vaud, terroir times 2!

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