

Profile: Domaine La Colombe (Féchy, La Côte, Vaud)

May 23, 2017 May 23, 2017



While Lavaux primps and preens for the camera, its sibling, La Côte, is quietly at work behind the scenes. With nearly three times the vines of Lavaux, La Côte receives only a fraction of the attention. It has no dramatic terraces to seduce camera-laden tourists and no Grand Cru AOC's to offer. Its languid vineyards flow gently and undramatically to the shores of Lake Geneva in contrast to the reckless abandon of Lavaux's. In fact, everything about La Côte is calm, understated and workmanlike—much like its wine community.

Geologically La Côte and Lavaux are two sides of the same coin. La Côte, an ancient lateral moraine, lies to the west of Lausanne upon the Molasse Basin of central Switzerland. This relatively undisturbed basin is the former bottom of the Paratethys Ocean—part of a vast ocean network that covered what is now Europe during the Oligocene Epoch. The sedimentary deposits left behind are notable for their varying amounts and types of limestone. It encompasses roughly thirty percent of the Swiss landscape between the Jura and the Alps and provides the great majority of Switzerland's plantable land.

Lavaux, located just east of Lausanne, is centered upon the rather more irregular, and later-formed, pre-alpine bedrock. This narrow band follows the contour of the Alps and is marked by numerous thrust faults and tectonic upheaval. Close to its surface and in some cases breaking through—as at Dézaley—it's all conglomerate rock, the kind known locally as *poudingue*.

And just for spice, both areas have weathered the bull-dozing effects of advancing and retreating glaciers—most notably, the nearly kilometer thick Rhone Glacier which gouged Lake Geneva from beneath its mass while sculpting La Côte’s soft contours and Lavaux’s terraced free fall. The legacy of this on-again, off-again glaciation is a confusing jumble of soils that change in profile from one parcel to the next with limestone, in one form or another, the constant among them. Fortunately, the locally dominant chasselas thrives in all of them.

La Famille Paccot

But geology is only part of the story. Great grapes from great soils are in need of a great whisperer. Raymond Paccot of Domaine La Colombe is one of the best. Together with his wife, Violaine, they have guided their small family domain to the top of the Swiss wine hierarchy. Under their stewardship vineyard holdings have more than doubled— from eight to twenty hectares—and the biodynamic methodologies they introduced eighteen years ago places them among Switzerland’s early adopters.

Their family includes daughters Chloé, Marion and, winemaker-to-be, Laura, fresh off her studies at Changins. (Laura has plans to double-down on the biodynamic commitment by introducing livestock and more biodiversity in the vineyards). Raymond’s brother, Alex, who operates the village’s cooperative distillery, produces, among other things, a small range of excellent *marcs* for the winery.

The family is ably assisted by a cadre of full-time employees. Raymond stresses full-time because it facilitates the meaningful training of specific tasks—only one gentleman has the keys to the tractor, for instance—but everyone is professional and capable of pitching-in when needed. Another advantage of veteran employees.

Raymond came late to wine. After enology studies in Zürich and an early career teaching physical education in local schools he began his wine career with stints in South Africa and at Domaine Chandon in California. His naturally curious intellect seeks out and assimilates the latest information with subsequent experimentation in mind.

He is extremely popular among his colleagues and is often seen at tastings and presentations promoting not only his wines but those of Switzerland as well. His collaboration with the **Restaurant de l’Hôtel de Ville** and each of its superstar chefs—Girardet, Rochat and Violier—is a testament to the quality of his wines and his standing in the local food and wine community.



Raymond and Violaine Paccot

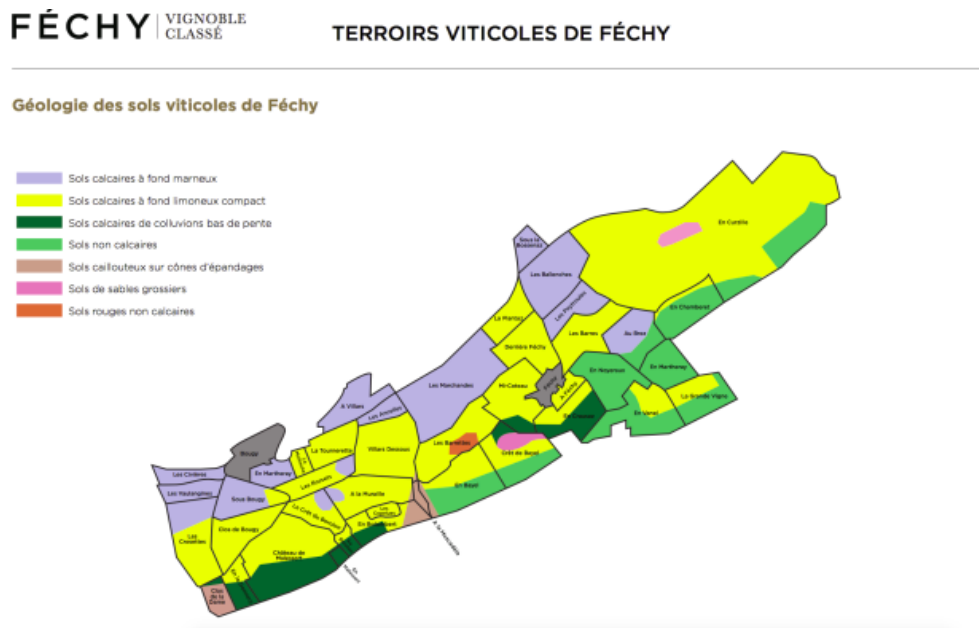


More History: In 1355 Amedeus VI, Duke of Savoy and grandfather to Amedeus VIII (whose wife, Mary of Burgundy, appears in a previous post: [Salvagnin or Servagnin: Which Is It?](#)), agreed to a complicated peace with the Count of Geneva over competing sovereign claims. The agreement known as the Treaty of Paris was negotiated with the help of a Paccot family ancestor. In gratitude for his service, Amedeus rewarded ancestor Paccot with a coat of arms that included the image of a dove (*colombe* in French), a universal symbol of peace.

The *Terroir*

The majority of the Paccot holdings are in the Féchy AOC but its outstanding **Petit Clos** parcel is in the neighboring AOC of Mont-sur-Rolle. Other nearby parcels, mostly for grapes other than chasselas, are located in the villages of Gilly, St. Livres and Aubonne.

The soils of La Côte are generally deeper than those at Lavaux with clay and limestone predominating. Sand, gravel and silt crop up periodically. A schematic of the soils found in the Féchy AOC (below) illustrates the range to be found within this section of La Côte—aka, *La Coeur de la Côte* (Heart of the Slope). As a general rule the lower down the slope one goes (closer to the lake) the deeper are the soils (green areas on the schematic).



Courtesy: fechyvins.ch

The classic calcareous marl soils (lavender) are to be found on the upper slope, including the upper half of **Brez** where La Colombe sources chasselas for one of its top single vineyard *cuvées*. **Petit Clos** (not shown here) shares the characteristics of this soil type but is even higher at 500 meters.

The compacted silt and limestone parcels (yellow) include the upper half of **Bayel** and almost all of **Curzilles**. The wines from these areas are full-bodied and slightly less delineated.

The main parcels are as follows:

Petit Clos: Single vineyard chasselas from the easternmost boundary of the Mont-sur-Rolle appellation adjacent to the vineyards of Féchy. This moderately sloping vineyard is ideally positioned for maximum exposure to the sun (due south) and the reflected light from the lake. (I kicked myself for leaving my sunglasses at home on the beautiful day I visited as the glare was blinding.) The soil is cooler here, because of the clay component, which generally means it is last to flower and last to ripen. The extra elevation translates into a modicum of extra acidity.

Bayel: Single vineyard chasselas from the 400 meter level of the slope. The soils are heavier here but still limestone-based with compacted silt. The vineyard is slightly less tilted and therefore not as bright from reflected light. It is also directed slightly to the southeast as the vineyards turn in that direction once past Mont-sur-Rolle. The soils are warmer here and usually the first to flower and ripen.

Brez: Single vineyard chasselas from around 450 meters elevation. Clay and limestone with more tilt than at **Bayel** but not quite as much reflected light as at **Petit Clos** due to its southeast orientation. The upper half is clay and limestone while the lower half is silt and clay without limestone. La Colombe's parcel is in the upper half. Chasselas of extreme delicacy, minerality and fragrance is the result.

Curzilles: Moderately sloped vineyard with 40 centimeters of topsoil then limestone. This is a mixed plantation with discreet parcels that are harvested together and co-fermented. The largest of all the Féchy *climats*.



Future chasselas conservatoire at Petit Clos cleared and ready for planting

Always Learning: Further proof of Raymond's dedication to chasselas and its unique expression in La Côte is the establishment of a nursery adjacent to Petit Clos on land donated by the Paccot family. It is the La Côte equivalent to the *Conservatoire Mondial du Chasselas* in the Lavaux village of Rivaz. Five of the most suitable clones will be planted on varying rootstocks (*porte-greffe*) to determine the best combination for the various soil profiles of the region.

The Wines

La Colombe boasts no fewer than five different lines of product: *Vins d'Expression* (everyday, single variety wines); *Vins Étoilés* (house-wine for the three-star **Restaurant de l'Hôtel de Ville** in Crissier and named for each of the famous chef-owners); *Vins de Terroir* (vineyard designates); *Réserves du Domaine* (oak-aged reserves); and *Hors-Série* (limited editions).

The three vineyards devoted to chasselas—**Bayel**, **Brez** and **Petit Clos**—are part of the *Vins de Terroir* series. All are fermented in stainless steel and aged on their fine lees. They may or may not see a secondary fermentation (or a partial one) depending on vintage conditions. The *fendant roux* clone is the overwhelming choice for these vineyards. Native yeasts are the rule and because the emphasis is on freshness and vineyard expression these *cuvées* are subjected to a *pied-de-cuve* to kickstart

fermentation. (An early sample from each parcel is fermented in *barrique* and the most active fermentations are added to the *cuvées* in tank.) This assures an early and rapid fermentation that facilitates precision. Each *cuvée* is a lens into the *terroir* from which it comes.

Despite the huge success and popularity of his chasselas line, Raymond expressed to me a slight restlessness: “I would like to experiment by moving beyond stainless steel fermentation. Maybe wood, maybe amphorae or even concrete eggs.” Talk about fixing something that “ain’t broke.” It’s all part of an effort by serious Vaud producers to showcase their legacy grape, chasselas, in the best possible light.

The **Curzilles** parcel to the east of the appellation is also part of the *Vins de Terroir* series. It’s planted to a mix of varieties (chasselas, riesling, doral, pinot gris and pinot noir) which are harvested together and co-fermented as a field blend. This is a different approach to the expression of *terroir*—one that places *terroir* above all else.

Raymond takes inspiration for this approach from Jean-Michel Deiss of Marcel Deiss in Alsace who, contrary to local custom, has planted a mix of varieties in each of his *crus*. His theory is that no single variety can express a great *terroir* by itself. This approach was met with raised eyebrows in Alsace but has attracted some curious types like Raymond and a loyal following.

Paccot further accentuates the **Curzilles** *terroir* by fermenting the mix of varieties in amphorae. Early results demonstrate a heightened sense of minerality and, perhaps unexpectedly, an improved texture. The **Curzilles** *cuvée* brings to my mind another field blend of historical note—Silvio Jermann’s **Vintage Tunina**.

The *Réserve du Domaine* series highlights Paccot’s use of wood and extended ageing in bottle to highlight varieties other than chasselas. The grapes for the *Réserve* line are from the oldest vines and picked later than for the standard *cuvées*. They also undergo a severe triage in the vineyard by skilled, veteran harvesters. The result is purity of fruit expression coupled with a respect for *terroir*.

With the *Hors-Série* line Raymond works with micro-lots of grapes with an emphasis on experimentation. For instance, until recently the *Amédée VI* *cuvée* was an *assemblage* before morphing into its current pure savagnin expression. This line is where the twin goals of trial and error and professional curiosity meet.

Other wines not reviewed are uniformly of good quality and value. On any trip to Switzerland one is very likely to come across the wines of Domaine La Colombe in restaurants and shops. I heartily recommend you give them a try.

Tasting

All wines were tasted with Raymond and Violaine Paccot in the cellars of La Colombe.

Chasselas, Bayel 2016, Féchy, La Côte, Vaud (tank sample): Pale straw in color. Super fresh and vital with a hint of carbon dioxide. Nice herbal and greengage crunch. Lovely balance and length. Clean, fresh and detailed. Crisp, lip-smacking finish.

Chasselas, Brez 2016, Féchy, La Côte, Vaud: Pale straw in color. Fresh, light and delicate aroma of white flower blossoms. Also, just picked herbs, lemon and juicy pear with crystalline minerality. Fresh and bright with everything one looks for in fine chasselas. (25% more yield than 2015; no malolactic).

Chasselas, Bayel 2015, Féchy, La Côte, Vaud: Straw colored. Potent nose of herbs, lemon zest, and Granny Smith apple. Rich and textured on the palate. Some malolactic creaminess but always bright and fresh. **Bayel**, from deeper soils, tends to be slightly fleshier than its Féchy stablemate **Brez** and is usually the first to ripen.

Chasselas, Petit Clos 2015, Mont-sur-Rolle, La Côte, Vaud: Straw colored. Piercing nose of honey, lemon, white blossoms and green herbs—mostly fresh tarragon and *réglisse*. Palate is linear and incisive with a citrus zestiness. Savory flavors with miso and umami salinity. Sleek, medium-bodied and refreshing. An excellent chasselas.



Curzilles 2014, Féchy, La Côte, Vaud (pinot gris, chasselas, doral, riesling, pinot noir): Straw/gold in color. Fascinating nose of lime, mint and malt with cream and sweet spices. Flavors of sweet spices, *turrón* (almond nougat) and cream. Gelato textured with a bit of waxiness (no doubt attributable to amphora fermentation). Finishes with a bit of minerality. A really captivating wine with many facets and a promising future.

La Colombe Grise, Réserve 2015, Vaud (pinot gris): Straw colored. Serious pinot gris nose with pear, apple, fennel and wet stone. Lush but surprisingly dry with apple-like crispness and flavors of wet stone and walnut oil. A large-framed pinot gris that still needs filling out. This one has huge potential for development. Half stainless steel, half oak-aged.

Chardonnay, Hors-Série 2014, Vaud: Straw colored. Lovely creamy cashew nose with a bit of ripe pear. Not complex but focused. Palate is creamy but not noticeably oaky or lactic. Clean, middle-weight and textured. This bottle demonstrates the virtue of holding back a reserve wine in bottle allowing it to come together. Not the most exciting chardonnay in the world but it is delicious and a marvel of polished elegance. I like it very much.

Amédée, Hors-Série 2014, Vaud (savagnin): Straw/gold in color. Mostly minerally with a slight reductive element. Very savory with curry spice notes, lemon, lime and toasted almond. Structured with significant acids. Austere but not severe. This is one for the ages that will reward patience.

La Colombe Noire, Réserve 2014, La Côte, Vaud (pinot noir): Dark garnet in color. Aromas of raspberry, tobacco and herbs are on offer. Nose is broad rather than precise. Flavors include raspberry and berry bush with green elements and earth. This is big-bodied, very concentrated and of great depth. Finishes sweet with a little chalkiness. Not Burgundian but makes a persuasive case for the potential of pinot noir in La Côte.

La Colombe Rouge, Réserve 2014, Vaud (syrah, gamaret, pinot noir, gamay): Dark garnet in color. This has a warm, broad nose of dark cherries, chocolate and herbs. A bit merlot-like. The palate is saturated and still very youthful. Mostly soft, pillowy fruit with some red beet, rhubarb and dark cherry. There are some green, leafy elements as well that serve to add freshness. Finishes with slightly chalky tannins.