

Terroir Champagne:
luxury of sustainable, organic
and biodynamic cuvees



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JEAN-BAPTISTE GEOFFROY

respecting the soil to express the terroir

The Geoffroys have been growing grapes in Cumières since the 17th century, but it was Roger, Jean-Baptiste's grandfather, who first produced a small quantity of champagne in the early fifties. The majority of the grapes was still sold to the Houses till after his untimely death in the seventies, when his son René took over the reins; he decided to keep all the grapes of his 14-hectare estate to expand his brand.



René was never a fan of chemical products and proceeded with caution. He was quick to exchange the chemical fertilizers back to organic ones and remained on the look-out for a more natural way of working the vines. When Jean-Baptiste joined his father at the end of the eighties, after completing his viticulture studies in Avize, the father and son pair immediately trialled giving up herbicides in favour of working the soil in one of their vineyards. Jean-Baptiste reminisces: *"Our family has always been very proud of the Coteaux Champenois we produce. Unlike champagne, we have made them for as long as we have grown grapes. We noticed the wines had changed after we began to use herbicides; they had become less expressive of the terroir. So we trialled ploughing one of the vineyards we often used to make the Coteaux, and almost immediately the wine became more mineral, again expressing the terroir characteristics of older vintages."*

However, converting the family estate from using herbicides to working the soil everywhere did not happen overnight. *"It was one thing ploughing and managing the grass in one vineyard, and another to work this way in our 35 plots. We had to rethink and reorganise the way we worked and invest in more material and vineyard workers"*, recalls Jean-Baptiste. But the pair were determined and little by little they further eliminated herbicides, insecticides and pesticides to work in a more ecologically friendly way. Jean-Baptiste elaborates: *"Once we*

began there really was no way back. The soil is the vine's support system and it is essential to keep it in a healthy state, not only for our plants, but also for the future generations who will one day farm this land." Jean-Baptiste further felt that reinstating soil life in the vineyard allowed the grapes to fully express the uniqueness of the terroir, bringing minerality and freshness to the wines.

His desire to make wine which first and foremost expressed the terroir enticed him to visit Jean-Michel Deiss in 2003 to learn more about his field blend philosophy. The visit inspired him to trial the field blend in Champagne in the Les Houtrants vineyard.

Jean-Baptiste believes one can be in balance with nature and respect the soil without any certifications. In fact, he feels it may be better for soil compaction to apply one or two synthetic anti-botrytis treatments than to butcher the soil by compacting it with too much tractor traffic. He explains: *"Our soil is rich in clay, which tends absorb a lot of moisture and become very sticky. People here say that after the rain the soil is in love, because it clumps around any foreign object rather than stay put. If we were to treat by tractor when the soil is heavy with water, we would not only increase the compaction but also the erosion, and neither are desirable."*

In order to protect his vineyards from erosion and suck some humidity out of the soil, Jean-Baptiste is a fan of natural soil covering. Only in spring does he break up the soil to aerate it. He ploughs a few

times but stops after flowering, when he lets the natural grass grow back. In summer he hoes under the vines and cuts the grass when needed. Since a lot of his vineyards are located on steep hillsides, all treatments are applied by lightweight tracked carts (chenillards). Up till 2015 one small very steep vineyard of 20 ares was still sprayed with herbicides, but in 2016 he resorted to working it by hand to be completely herbicide-free. He uses no pesticides and works with fermented plant extracts and powders with sulphur to treat oidium.

The bulk of Jean-Baptiste's vineyards (11 hectares) are located on the south facing slopes of Cumières, where the soil is a mixture of limestone-rich clay interspersed with silt in places, and pierre meulière in others over marl or wet chalk. He has 2.5 hectares of Meunier in Fleury-la-Rivière, where the soil is sparnacien (a mixture of sand, limestone, silt, marl, silex, broken up pierre meulière and chalk) over wet chalk, and a few plots in Damery and Hautvillers.

The grapes are allowed to fully ripen before they are picked and transported to the completely gravity-fed winery in Aÿ. They are pressed using 2 traditional Coquard presses and after settling the juice is run into enamel tanks, casks or barrels of different sizes. The first fermentation occurs spontaneously and the malolactic fermentation is blocked by the cold and a little sulphur. The wines remain on their lees till bottling in late spring. They are not filtered or fined.