



organic and biodynamic

A GROWING trend

The number of biodynamic and organic Champagne growers is small but getting bigger, says **Giles Fallowfield**, as the quality benefits become increasingly apparent

IT WOULD be misleading to suggest that Champagne as an appellation is widely embracing organic let alone biodynamic, methods of production. While the UK importer who claimed its new grower Robert Barbichon & Fils is one of just four biodynamic producers in the whole of Champagne was overstating their rarity, organic and biodynamic growers between them account for little more than 1% of Champagne production and not much over 400 hectares of vineyard.

It is, however, also true to say that there is a perceptible rise in interest in such methods of farming and winemaking in Champagne. The Association Interprofessionnelle des Vins de l'Agriculture Biologique de Champagne (AIVABC) lists 19 different vigneron producers who are AB (Agriculture Biologique) registered and can sell Champagne as such, plus four négociants. But revealingly, the AIVABC says that the vineyard surface farmed in accordance with its principles increased by 41% between 2009 and 2010, the fastest rate of conversion anywhere in France.

"While organic viticulture in Champagne-Ardenne progressed little before the mid-2000s, it has been experiencing a real growth momentum since 2008," says the AIVABC. By the end of 2011, the number of organic domains in the region had risen by a third from 72 to 96 while the area of vineyard certified or currently in conversion rose by 28% from

295 to close on 380 hectares. That nearly half this vineyard land is still in conversion demonstrates the current growth of interest in such methods.

President of the AIVABC, Vincent Laval, who runs George Laval in Cumières where they have been farming organically since 1971, says there are now around 100 such producers operating in the appellation and of these around three-quarters have only worked their vineyards in this way for five years or less.

This development is all the more impressive and surprising given Champagne's location at the northern limit of where grapes can consistently ripen sufficiently to make wine, an area also particularly prone to frost and disease in some years, as the difficult 2012 growing season, when yields were down by around one third on average, underlined.

WARMING UP

So why is it happening? There are a number of different influences at work which help explain this surge in interest and also several factors that naturally facilitate such a trend. Changes to the climate in Champagne is clearly one of the latter, for as the average temperature in the growing season has risen by one or two degrees, a more natural, less interventionist approach to viticulture has become a more practical option with less risk attached than in the past. The

Feature findings

- ▶ Organic and biodynamic growers between them account for little more than 1% of Champagne production and not much over 400 hectares of vineyard.
- ▶ The vineyard surface farmed in accordance with organic principles increased by 41% between 2009 and 2010, the fastest rate of conversion anywhere in France.
- ▶ Warmer temperatures lend themselves to a more natural, less interventionist approach to viticulture.
- ▶ Ninety percent of Champagne's vineyard land is owned by individual grape growers, who may be less risk averse than the multinationals.
- ▶ Because they want their wines to be judged on their own merits, many producers don't see the necessity or commercial advantage in selling under a biodynamic or organic label even if they are certified.

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Terres et Vins

The growers who are members of the Terres et Vins group are by definition a collection of like-minded producers. They all believe in a largely non-interventionist approach with few chaptalising or filtering their wines, natural yeasts are generally preferred over commercially produced strains, little or no sugar added in dosage, low amounts of sulphur used and detailed information given about their wines in terms of the blend, reserve wine, bottling and disgorgement date. They all eschew chemical fertilisers and while most of them have adopted organic farming practices 10 of the 21 are actually AIVABC-certified as organic.

The group includes some of the best known and longest established biodynamic producers like David Léclapart, Françoise Bedel and Benoît Lahaye, while Franck Pascal, Vincent Couche, Pascal Docquet and Francis Boulard are registered organic domains. Last year the number of growers involved in this influential group increased from 17 to 19 with the addition of two biodynamic organic-certified producers from the Côte des Bar region in the shape of Olivier Horiot in Les Riceys and Dominique Moreau of Marie Courtin in Pollisot.

This April, at what will be their fifth annual tastings as a group, their number has expanded again to 21 with the addition of Vincent Laval of Georges Laval, an estate that has been farmed organically since 1971. Marie Noëlle-Ledru who has vineyards in Ambonnay and Bouzy has also joined.

The full list of Terres et Vins members (the first 10 names are AIVABC-certified organic): **Françoise Bedel, Francis Boulard, Vincent Couche, Marie Courtin, Pascal Docquet, Olivier Horiot, Benoît Lahaye, Georges Laval, David Léclapart, Franck Pascal, Raphael Bérèche, Aurélien Laherte, Olivier Paulet, Fabrice Pouillon, Cyril Jeunaux, Benoît Tarlant, Alexandre Chartogne, Pascal Agrapart, Jean-Baptiste Geoffroy, Marie Noëlle-Ledru and Étienne Goutorbe.**

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fragmented ownership of the Champagne vineyard also makes change more likely to happen.

When analysing developments in Champagne you should always bear in mind that 90% of the vineyard land is owned by individual grape growers, not the large groups like LVMH and Pernod-Ricard, which dominate sales. They can each decide how they manage their own

parcels of vines and may be less risk averse than the multinationals who are anxious to preserve grape supplies to maintain production levels for their brands and even looking to increase sales in a market where demand is very nearly outstripping grape supply.

So if warmer, largely drier summers and the make-up of vineyard ownership provide the right environment for change,

what factors are actually driving it? While green sustainability and environmental issues are certainly influential, the grower-producers at the forefront of change are essentially looking for methods and practices to help them produce the best wine they can from their own piece of dirt. The better, healthier, more naturally

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balanced grapes they can grow on that land, the greater their chances are of making something really good, something unique which reflects a sense of place, their own specific terroir.

As the current AIVABC membership and their tasting last October involving 11 producers (see box, page 32) shows this is a movement that is driven by small, family-run operations, most of whom are *récoltant-manipulants* (grower producers) usually farming fewer than 10 hectares and often a lot less. Now that interest in organic and biodynamic methods has swelled and more high-profile growers involved in small-scale quality production have effectively joined its ranks – officially or unofficially, certified or not – the increased availability of such wine is helping to spread the word, creating a virtuous circle and drawing in still more of Champagne's best vignerons.

The gradual growth over the past five years of the Terres et Vins group of grower producers (see box, left), where most follow organic principles and 10 of the now 21-strong group are AIVABC registered organic producers, illustrates this well.

ORGANIC PIONEERS

The surge in interest in biodynamic and organic production has focused attention back on some of the pioneers of the movement, not least because their expertise is now much sought after by producers looking for advice. The first two fully biodynamic producers I visited in the early 1990s were Jean-Pierre Fleury based in Courteron in the Côte des Bar



region to the south-east of Troyes and the late Pascal Lerclerc-Briant whose winery was in Epernay, but whose vineyards, curiously enough were, like Laval's, mainly in the top premier cru of Cumières. The Fleury wines have only recently attracted the accolades they richly deserve; a tasting last September with Jean-Pierre's eldest son Jean-Sébastien underlined their vibrancy. Impressive new wines, one made wholly from Pinot Blanc, another without using any sulphur, show the company's pioneering work continues.

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make good wine from
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Jean-Sébastien says on the biodynamic front they are no longer ploughing a lone furrow. He and his brother Benoît are now regularly in touch with other such producers nearby, "exchanging ideas and swapping information". These include Olivier Horiot in Les Riceys, Dominique Moreau in Pommard and Vincent Couche in Buxeuil, all of whom are members of the Terres et Vins group, plus Bertrand Gautherot at Vouette et Sorbée in Buxière-sur-Arce. Maxime Barbichon at Robert Barbichon in Gye-sur-Seine is another small-scale biodynamic producer in the region whose wines excite.

"There are less than 200 hectares being farmed biodynamically in the appellation currently but the trend is increasing, if slowly. There is a new generation, 25-35 year-olds, who would like to change, but if their father doesn't want to do it, they have to wait," says Jean-Sébastien. There are risks involved, especially in difficult seasons like 2012 when yields were down as a result of a combination of frost, hail, poor flowering and disease.

"But my father has always put aside a certain proportion of our production each year to cover such eventualities and we still do that," he says.

Lerclerc-Briant never really achieved the recognition he deserved in his lifetime. However the splitting up and sale of the holdings he built up – the largest single biodynamic estate in Champagne – has had the interesting consequence of transforming Louis Roederer into the most significant organic and biodynamic grape grower in the appellation. Thanks to purchasing half the Leclerc-Briant vineyards they now have 55 hectares out of their total 230ha holding run on organic (15ha) or biodynamic (40ha) lines. Of the remaining Leclerc-Briant 15 hectares, 13 were sold to Lanson-BCC, with BCC CEO Bruno Paillard keeping two for himself so Lanson and Paillard can be expected to produce "biodynamic Champagne" at

Bulles Bio en Champagne

Eleven producers whose Champagnes are all certified viticulture biologique showed their wines together under the AIVABC umbrella in Reims last October. They included David Léclapart, Françoise Bedel and Jean-Pierre Fleury, a trio who graced what was billed as “the first ever UK biodynamic tasting”, which took place alongside the London Wine Trade Fair in May 2006.

They were joined by Terre et Vins members Franck Pascal who is based in Baslieux-sous-Chatillon, Francis Boulard from Cauroy-les-Hermonville and Vincent Laval. Hervé Jestin was there representing Leclerc-Briant plus Bertrand Gautherot of Vouette et Sorbée which is based in the Côte des Bar village of Buxières-sur-Arce. The largest producer was Bruno Michel who cultivates 12 hectares of vineyard in and around Pierry, just to the west of Epernay while the remaining two small growers, farming 3.5 and 3.1ha respectively, were Thierry de Marne of Demarne-Frison from Ville-sur-Arce and Christophe Lefèvre from Bonneil-sur-Marne.

The range of styles on show was impressive and outside what most consumers, not exposed to such individual and characterful wines, would expect from Champagne. It demonstrated the vinous excitement to be found among such a group of organic growers.

some point in the future, as confirmed by Lanson boss Philippe Baijot.

Apparently there is no such intention at Roederer. This is despite the very positive results Roederer head winemaker Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon has had in the systematic trials conducted over the past decade in their Aÿ and Avize grands crus vineyards. In these trials they have cultivated one press equivalent blocks of organic and biodynamically grown grapes alongside more conventional production. And Lécaillon reveals they

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consistently get better quality fruit and juice from their organic and biodynamically farmed vines. Lécaillon says he wants this “better” material for the regular Roederer range, not a specifically biodynamically produced and marketed Champagne. But what is the betting they have already made some as an experiment to see if better fruit equals better wine?

Biodynamically certified Champagne will continue to be sold under the Leclerc-Briant brand, despite a lack of vineyards, with the ubiquitous Hervé Jestin, appointed as interim manager by the new American owners. Since his departure as head winemaker at Duval-Leroy in 2006, Jestin has become increasingly involved in organic and biodynamic production with a number of consulting projects, joint ventures with other producers and his own wines. “It’s simply easier to make good wine from organic grapes,” he

explains. At Château d’Avize he is working with the Russian Titov family, who also own the Abrau-Durso sparkling wine brand and where there are ambitious plans to release a top flight blanc de blancs Champagne in three or four years’ time from the nearby vineyards which are in their third year of conversion to biodynamic production.

SMALL TIME

Organically produced and labelled Champagne is not entirely the preserve of grower-producers; large négociants are also showing an interest in organic production and two at least – Duval Leroy and Canard-Duchêne – are already making organically certified cuvées. But organic and certainly biodynamic production is more likely to remain the domain of small négociants like Benoît Marguet.

He started to embrace biodynamic practices on his family estate in and around Ambonnay in 2009 and the resulting base wines, tasted in barrel in early 2010, were impressively rich and expressive. Marguet began to work, alongside Hervé Jestin, with some top organic and biodynamic growers three years earlier in 2006 and each year since has bought Chardonnay from David Léclapart (biodynamically certified from Trépail), organic Pinot Meunier from Vincent Laval in Cumières and Tauxières Pinot Noir (certified biodynamic from 2007) produced by Benoît Lahaye. “The aim,” says Marguet, “is to make an exceptional, very complex, elegant Champagne from these three fine producers and vineyards all rated premier cru. The first 2006 vintage was



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put on sale at the end of last year under the name 'Sapience' with an ex-cellars price of around the €100 mark a bottle."

While he has become an ardent believer in the biodynamic philosophy and methods, Marguet has adopted this approach for two main reasons: "A desire to create better and finer Champagnes, while at the same time stopping the use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides, a practice which is ruining the potential of our great terroir."

Whether they advertise the fact or not, many of the best grower-producers have embraced organic and/or biodynamic methods to some degree over the past few years and recognise the importance of farming with respect for nature in the search for healthy soils, uncontaminated by chemical fertilisers and pesticides. However, because they want their wines to be judged on their own merits they don't see the necessity or commercial advantage in selling under a biodynamic or organic label even if they are certified.

Pierre Larmandier, of Larmandier-Bernier in Vertus, takes exactly this approach. Although he is AIVABC-registered organic he wants his wines to be judged on their taste, not on his viticultural methods or winemaking, though how he farms and vinifies is clearly part of the story and having tasted his wines over two decades, has clearly added another element of clarity and freshness.

You may think some 400ha of organic farmed vines is not that massive in an appellation where there are 33,580ha* of vineyard in active production (out of 34,292ha* planted in 2012) but that would be to underestimate the influence and profile of the producers who have adopted these methods. (*Provisional figures.) db

The CIVC's environmental targets

The CIVC has identified four key areas in which improvements to environmental protection and carbon cuts can be made. A recent report laid out the region's aims and its progress. By *Rupert Millar*

1. PESTICIDES

Objective: to reduce the use of pesticides in favour of organic alternatives.

"A variety of actions have already led to significant reductions in the use of pesticides (a 35% drop in volume over the past 10 years or so) and safer methods of use. Today, half of all products used in the Champagne vineyards are organically approved. The same period has seen a three-fold increase in the percentage of organic plantings, though these still represent no more than 0.5% of the total area under vine.

The Grenelle de l'Environnement action plan aims for a 50% reduction in the use of pesticides by 2018 – the Champagne industry is well prepared to meet that challenge."

2. TERROIR, BIODIVERSITY, LANDSCAPES

Objective: preservation and adding value

"Several initiatives have been taken by the industry to protect and add value to this heritage: the drawing-up of guidance maps; water-resources development; studies of soil subsidence; ban on the use of urban compost and treated effluent; monitoring of fertilizers coming onto the market; the extension of grassing-over between and around vine rows; the replanting of hedgerows; research into the soil's organic activity; the promotion of the 'reasoned' feeding of soil and vine."

3. WATER, VITICULTURAL EFFLUENT, WASTE

Accountably managed since the 1980s

"The project picked up speed in 2001 thanks to the signing of a five-year framework agreement between the Champagne industry and the water authority. Over the past decade, more than €40 million has been spent on de-pollution facilities.

Currently, 75% of industrial waste is recycled/processed. However, there is still margin for improvement, especially in terms of the packaging of oenological and hygiene products, for which there is currently no official system at regional level. Agricultural waste is processed by spreading. Some of the wood supports and all of the vines we pull up are burned in the open air. Research is currently examining their potential as a source of energy."

4. THE ENERGY/CLIMATE CHALLENGE

Objective: to reduce our carbon emissions by 25% by 2020

"We now know that a 25% reduction in those emissions by 2020 is perfectly feasible. And that is the objective of our Climate Plan, an action plan launched by the industry in 2006. The ultimate aim is the national target: to reduce emissions by a factor of four by 2050 (equivalent to a 75% reduction).

There are numerous areas for action here: the eco-design or eco-refurbishment of buildings; new energy-saving viticultural and winemaking processes; the reduction of inputs and packaging; savings in the transportation of goods and people; accountable purchasing of goods and services."

