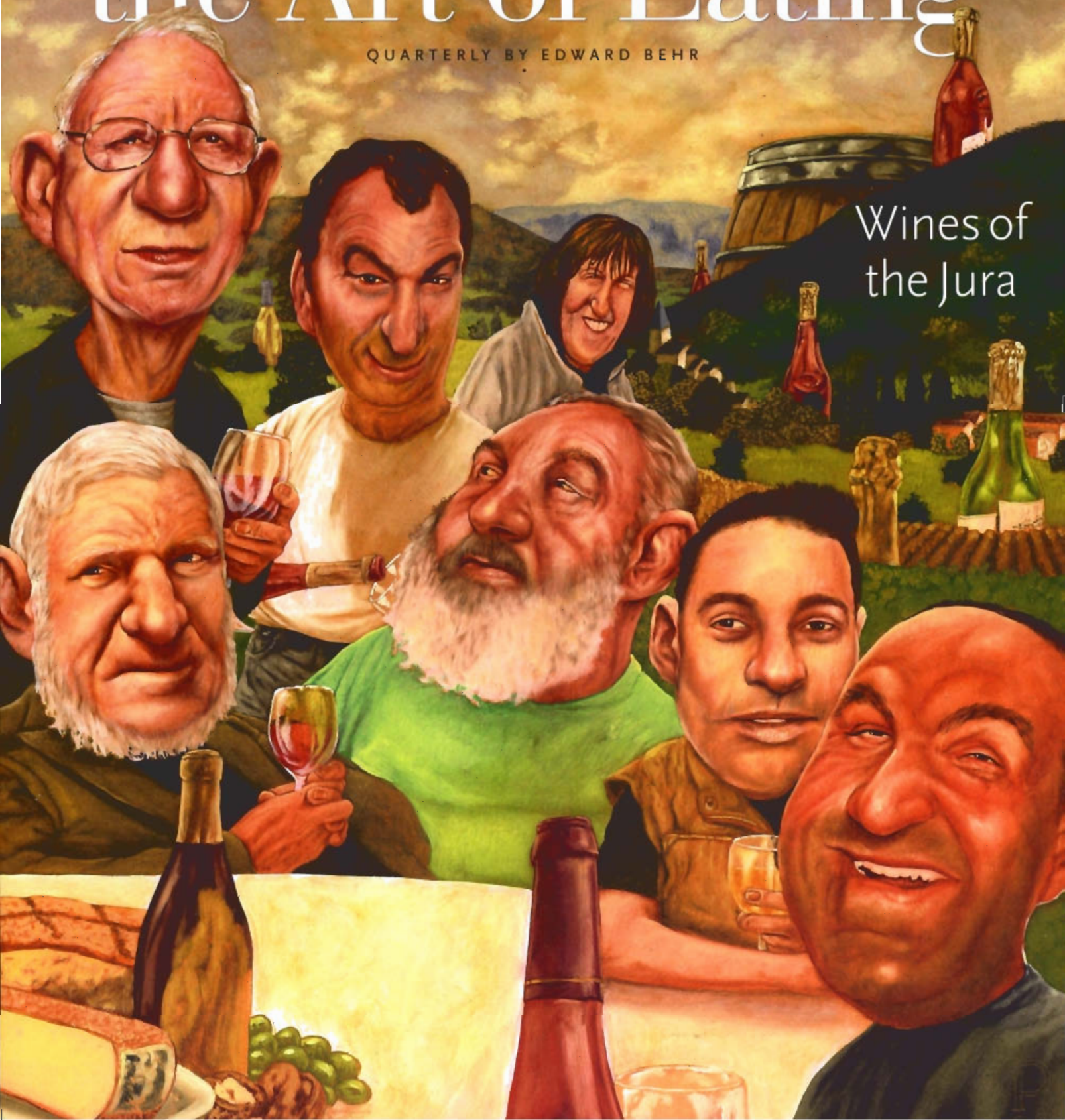


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QUARTERLY BY EDWARD BEHR

Wines of
the Jura



Like many small-scale Jura *vignerons*, Puffeney continues the old practice of sealing his *vin jaune* with hard wax. In fact, all his bottles of every kind for the US are waxed, something that can be done well only by hand. “You can do 100 bottles an hour if the wax is hot,” he said. Compared with covering by a metal capsule, the wax seal increases a cork’s longevity.

Because *vin jaune* is expensive to make and Puffeney started with limited means, his first vintage for it was 1973. The alcohol, which starts at 13 or 13½ percent, rises another degree in the *cave*. Not only can the wine head off in the direction of vinegar or ethyl acetate, he said, but the acidity can be too high or the wine can simply fail to develop fully. If there are eight casks of *vin jaune*, he said, five will be good, one bad, and two in the middle. Still, *vin jaune* is the wine Puffeney most likes making. “It’s more complicated,” he explained. Not that there is a lot to do, but that what takes place within the wine is more complex, and at the end the wine “requires more careful tasting and judgment.”

Puffeney’s 1986 *vin jaune* named L’Éclipse remained in the cask for 12½ years — eight to 12 years was standard in the 19th century. Along with the 1996, Puffeney’s ’86 became one of his two best. It had a very long aftertaste and was nutty with rancio; he agreed with that word. Puffeney called his 1995 *vin jaune* “more rustic and acidic,” saying it required another ten years of aging. That and the ’96 struck me as less refined, less sharp and focused than some, though their rancio taste is perhaps stronger. I liked the marked flavor of the 1996, currently in the US. Puffeney’s wines offer distinct pleasure, an appealing, unmediated directness, like that of the man himself.

5. The probing Stéphane Tissot in Arbois

Stéphane Tissot, in his mid-30s, robust, with close-cut hair, is a fast talker who engages readily with visitors. He’s almost frenetic with energy, just slightly heavier than you expect for a man who is quick to jump up to fetch another bottle to taste or to lead the way to an attic where grapes are drying on straw for *vin de paille*. He has special talent in the cellar, and he clearly enjoys tasting his own wines, something that isn’t apparent with every winemaker. The Domaine André et Mireille Tissot in Montigny-les-Arsures, named for his parents, has 35 hectares in vines; beginning about 15 years ago it was gradually placed in Stéphane’s hands.

More than any other Jura producer I’ve met, he pushes and tests. Just 20 percent of the production is in his parents’ style and bears their old label. The rest of the wines belong to Stéphane’s “new generation.” With pride and filial piety, their labels state both the name of the domain and “*vinifié par Stéphane Tissot*.” He switched first to organic techniques and then to biodynamics. “I’m completely convinced,” he said. He relies wholly on indigenous yeasts — “ever since biodynamics. I came to it through vinification.” Organic methods reduced yields and prices necessarily went up, but the wines became “15 percent more expressive.”

Tissot asserts that the practice of giving nearly all Jura white wines a degree of *sous-voile* taste is an invention of the last few decades, a view I heard from a few others. It makes some economic sense that the taste of *vin jaune*, associated with quality, would be intentionally echoed in lesser wines, by blending in a portion of *sous-voile* wine. Still, the wines I take to be examples of the old topped-up white style don’t have the clean, fresh fruit flavors one expects from other regions. In the Jura, where the question of topping up or not looms large, wines are often distinguished as “*ouillé*” or “*non-ouillé*.” The verb *ouiller* means “to top up a barrel” (literally, “to fill to the eye,” from *oeil*, “eye,” referring to the bunghole). Now in the Jura, there do exist some wholly modern *ouillé* Chardonnays without any memory of the oxidized taste, and there will be more in the future.

It’s Tissot’s success with his modern Chardonnays that gives him the most satisfaction. His aims aren’t humble. He says plainly that his preferred point of comparison is the best white Burgundy. He ferments this Chardonnay in small oak barrels, 30 to 40 percent of them bought new each year, which, he acknowledged, is “a lot.” He isn’t after vanilla or any other flavors from the new oak, he said. Rather, it “gives a better oxidation because the pores of the wood are all open.” New wood can easily dominate a wine, but in Tissot’s case, the wood is in balance. Each of his four modern Chardonnays has its own character; they are clean, fruit-and-mineral tasting, variously emphasizing minerals, spice, and sweet fruit.

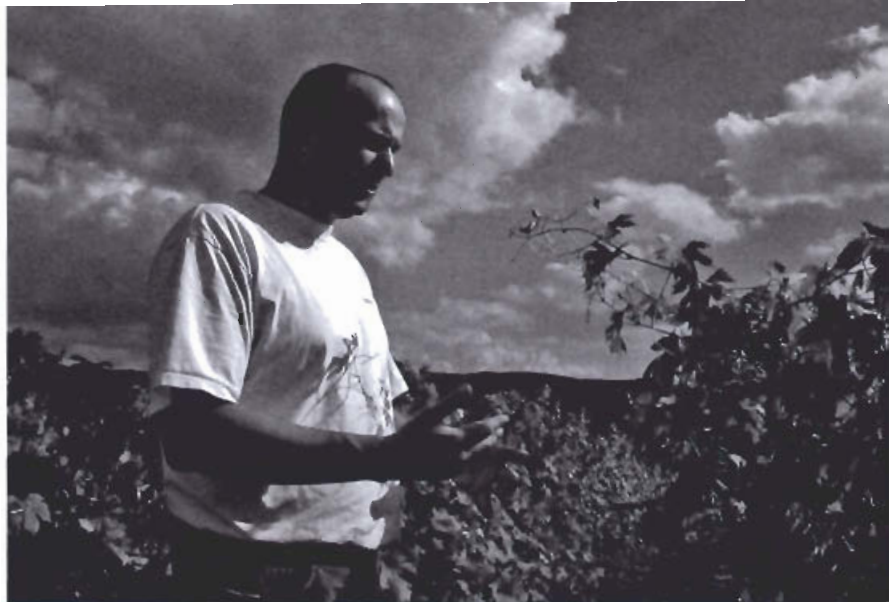
His well-made reds from Trousseau, Poulsard, and Pinot Noir combine refreshment and fruit in a way that makes me think immediately of the table. The 2003 Trousseau stands apart, showing that in a year with exceptional heat the Jura, too, can produce

powerful, concentrated fruit. An example of Tissot's careful cellar approach is his Pinot Noir, a blend of one wine made with the usual small doses of sulfur and another, somewhat experimental wine made entirely without sulfur.

Tissot makes one Savagnin wine that is the farthest thing from *vin jaune*. It's strictly protected from air inside stainless-steel tanks. "It's to show the varietal side of the variety, which disappears with aging in wood, even topped up," he said. Inevitably, the wine asks: What exactly is the Jura taste in Savagnin? Does it come from the grapes and *terroir* or only from the layer of yeast? The wine, named Traminer, is light and clean with moderate acidity; Tissot speaks of its fruit and minerality. I want to like it, but it seems to me somewhat conventional and characterless, at least in the context of Jura whites. On the other hand, Tissot's traditional Savagnin is excellent. The 2001 tastes attractively of coffee and caramel.

I thought at first that Tissot might give too little attention to *vin jaune*, because so much of his interest lies elsewhere. At one point he suggested that the *sous-voile* taste hides the taste of *terroir* and the rest of a wine, adding: "One can find very good *sous-voile* wines in Spain for two euros a liter." Yet in blind tasting in the US, his Arbois *vin jaune*, from clay soils, placed not far below the best Château-Chalon. *Vin jaune* is aged in a dry cellar, Tissot explained, where the water in the wine evaporates faster than the alcohol. In a moist cellar, the alcohol would evaporate faster, as occurs with Cognac. Tissot's *vin jaune* gains 1 to 1½ degrees of alcohol, reaching 15 percent or more.

Jura producers have expanded their traditional practice of making wonderful, sweet *vin de paille*, "straw wine," hardly found elsewhere in France, except a little in Burgundy. Tissot picks the bunches of grapes — 60 percent white, 40 percent red — early enough to be fully sound and retain a generous complement of acidity. They are laid in boxes of straw (elsewhere they may be bung up or placed on racks). Early the following year, after partial drying has con-



centrated the sugar, the grapes are pressed. Other *vin de paille* reaches at least 14½ percent alcohol, the minimum necessary to qualify for the name. But at Tissot, 100 kilos of grapes give just 15 liters of juice. The yeast struggle to ferment the concentrated, sugary liquid for a year or more, until they give up at just 8 percent alcohol. Thus Tissot's version can't be sold as *vin de paille*. He names it Spirale and labels it "*Passerillé à l'ancienne*" ("Half-dried in the old-fashioned way"). To ensure no fresh fermentation starts in the bottle, the wine is preserved by a filtration that takes yeast but not bacteria.

Spirale is dense with fruit; the 2002 tasted to me strongly of apricot (on another occasion, the 2003 tasted deliciously of melted butter). It's wonderfully clean, fresh, thick-textured wine, whose acidity prevents it from being heavy. From there Tissot offered a taste of the even more concentrated 2000 PMG (short for "*pour ma gueule*" — "for my mouth"), then an ice wine named Mélodie, then a really extreme take on *vin de paille* named Audace (first vintage, 2004) made from grapes dried for six and a half months, pressed, and then the skins macerated in the juice for five weeks, giving intense flavors that for me recalled cooked plums.

We drove in Tissot's workaday SUV to see some of his vineyards. The clay soils, sticky from rain, were obviously different in color, from gray-brown to more orange-brown from calcium. We ended at a vineyard for which Tissot has high hopes, a slope around a tower of uncertain date, facing due south and provid-



Château le Pin, landmark in the Côtes du Jura, south of Château-Chalon.

ing a superb view of Arbois. During a period of 50 years when Jura wines were largely in decline, the vines of this location, Le Clos de la Tour de Curon, were gradually abandoned, until only a tenth of a hectare remained. But Tissot tasted a 1959 Chardonnay from the spot. That may sound hopelessly old, but he described it as “a very great wine in its complexity, in the way it held up over time, and in its material. It was one of the greatest Chardonnays I’ve tasted from any region, and I mean that objectively.” In 2001, he bought the land and replanted Chardonnay. As we were leaving, he said, “The old say it’s the best *terroir* in Arbois.”

We returned late to the *cave*, and Tissot asked if I

had a little more time. He was working on an experimental sweet wine from semi-dried all-red grapes. The dense, dark sample he took from a demijohn turned out to be the press wine, yet to be added back to the rest. It was rich in fruit, and sugar smoothed the tannic harshness.

“I’m 35 years old,” he e-mailed me not long ago in answer to questions, “and I’ve been vinifying since the 1990 vintage, and already been down a lot of paths. At first I was looking for quality, but I was one of the many who mocked things like organics. But life moves forward . . . If all goes well, I still have another 15 to 20 vinifications to do ‘by myself’ and there is no lack of projects.” There’s more to learn about Chardonnay,

especially from the new vines around the tower; he thinks he can go farther with his reds; he will bottle separate *vins jaunes* from different *terroirs*; he will vinify some Savagnin as if the grapes were red, meaning the skins will macerate in the juice for two weeks. That's been done by some Italians, and he did it in 1992 and 2000. "It gave oxidized, tannic, and very original Savagnins." He has plans, too, for his sparkling wine. He likes to say, "*La vie est belle.*"