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THE POUR

Surprises From the Jura, Jagged in a Velvet-Smooth Universe

By ERIC ASIMOV

MOLAMBOZ, France

TOWNS don't come much tinier than this quiet hamlet, population 86, northwest of Arbois in the heart of the Jura wine region. You can pass the church, the graveyard and a few farmhouses in about the time it takes one of the dozing dogs to roll over. And yet, within sniffing distance of this thriving metropolis is an even-smaller suburb, Petit-Molamboz, which indeed does justice to its diminutive name.

The Jura defies many expectations, nowhere more so than in its wines. The leading whites have a nutty, sherry-like aroma that many people regard as hopelessly oxidized, but they are actually tangy, complex, pure and delicious. The best reds barely have enough color to be called red. They are delicate and graceful, yet with an earthy intensity that can stand up to the smelliest of cheeses. Almost singularly among wine regions, the reds are usually served before the whites in the Jura because they are lighter in texture.

The region's most profound wine, vin jaune, or yellow wine, is hard to find in the United States. It is traditionally sold in squat clavelin, 62-centiliter bottles, a size that is not sanctioned by the American government, a pity since the saline, mineral force of this wine is extraordinary.

Even in France, the wines of the Jura are little-known, but they are as distinctive as any in the world. The Jura is a bucolic green bowl between Burgundy and Switzerland, where the patchwork of vineyards and hayfields is occasionally interrupted by a village of tile-roofed houses or a herd of cows. Roads came fairly late to the region; canals never did. So the Jura evolved, like the marsupials of Australia, in relative isolation, which permitted the planting of grapes like savagnin, ploussard and trousseau that are grown almost nowhere else, made into wines with techniques that in most places would be regarded as downright peculiar.

The wines are surely not for everyone. Even lovers of vin jaune sometimes describe its flavor as "rancid walnut," yet this wine is an unmatched partner of regional specialties like chicken with cream sauce and morels, and of course Comté, the famous cheese of the Jura. In a world of smooth, rounded, velvet-lined wines, they stand out as jagged and resolute, like many of the most interesting winemakers.

Jean-Marc Brignot, 37, grew up in Normandy and learned about winemaking working in Beaujolais and Champagne, but when it came time to make his own wine, he chose the Jura, which he had first visited on a holiday as a teenager.

“I really love this area and I love the wine,” said Mr. Brignot, a tall, dark man whose browned arms and permanent squint indicate many hours spent in the sun in his 13.5 acres of vines. After training with Pierre Overnoy, an elder statesman in the nearby town of Pupillin — “Capitale Mondiale du Ploussard,” it says in the town square — Mr. Brignot and his partner, Matilde Vergeau, purchased an ancient stone farmhouse here in Molamboz. They added a concrete floor to the barn, and electricity, and with a budget the size of Petit-Molamboz they jury-rigged a winery.

In 2004, their first vintage, they made 17 different wines in minute quantities. Last year they made 15 wines, all without sulfur dioxide, a preservative that has been used since antiquity, except by iconoclasts like Mr. Brignot, Mr. Overnoy and Emmanuel Houillon, who took over for Mr. Overnoy after he retired. At their best, the Brignot and the Overnoy wines have an unusual freshness and purity, with deep, rich, tangy mineral flavors.

“We make natural wines just with grapes,” Mr. Brignot said. “They are better for people, and they taste better, too.”

By all rights, Mr. Brignot’s wines should be completely unknown outside of the Jura. But at a conference on natural wines last year he met Arnaud Erhart, the owner of 360 restaurant in Red Hook, Brooklyn, who introduced him to Joe Dressner of Louis/Dressner Selections, an importer who brings in the Overnoy wines. Now you can find a little Brignot in the United States, though 360 seems to be the primary recipient.

While Jura wines are never easy to find, more restaurants in New York seem to be carrying them. In addition to 360, Jura wines are sold at Bette, Cookshop and Trestle on Tenth, all in Chelsea, and Balthazar in SoHo. Bottles from Jacques Puffeney, one of the best producers in Arbois, the central city in the region, turn up fairly regularly. Mr. Puffeney, formidably taciturn, bearded and portly, makes wines that have the incisive power of a hard stare combined with the grace of a smile.

He makes a pretty poulsard (as ploussard is known outside of Pupillin), with a delicate fragrance of raspberries, strawberries and earth. He makes a spicy pinot noir, and a tangy chardonnay. Fifty percent of the grapes planted in the Jura are chardonnay, more or less, and they can be very good. But by far Mr. Puffeney’s and the region’s most distinctive wines come from the savagnin grape. His 2002 savagnin is strong and cutting, yet with a light-bodied delicacy, while his 1996 vin jaune is rich and briny with razor-sharp focus.

What makes these savagnin wines so different? When most wines are placed in barrels to age, winemakers assiduously top off the barrels, replacing whatever wine is lost to evaporation and thereby preventing oxidation. But with their best lots of savagnin, Jura winemakers permit evaporation, and as room develops in the barrel a film of beneficial yeast forms over the surface of the wine. In Jerez, where sherry is made, a similar yeast forms called flor. Here in the Jura, the yeast is called la voile, the veil, and the wines are said to be made sous-voile, under the veil.

The yeast, along with the oxygen and a forceful acidity, impart the characteristic tangy, salty, nutty flavor. The evaporation gave rise to the 62-centiliter clavelin bottles, which supposedly accommodate all that remains of a liter if it has been left in a barrel for six years.

Jura winemakers tend to bridle at the comparison with sherry. They point out that sherry is fortified, unlike their wines, and prefer to compare savagnin to furmint, the grape of the Hungarian tokay wines, or traminer, a paler-skinned version of gewürztraminer. “Furmint, chenin blanc, traminer, savagnin, we think they are all somehow cousins,” Mr. Brignot said.

Not everybody falls for this sort of wine. Kermit Lynch, a seminal American importer who brought many unusual French country wines to the United States in the 1970’s and 80’s, passed on the opportunity to bring in wines from the Jura. “That purposeful oxidation wasn’t to my taste, and I sure didn’t think it was going to be to the taste of Americans back then,” he said.

But Neal Rosenthal, another importer, is a big fan. He brings in the Puffeney wines as well as those from Nicole Dériaux of Domaine de Montbourgeau in L’Étoile, south of Arbois, who makes subtle, elegant chardonnays using the oxidative method. And Jeffrey Alpert, an American who began to import wine just a few years ago, has enthusiastically embraced the Jura, bringing in wines from Jean-François Ganevat with an unusual floral complexity.

“We don’t all eat the same food, we don’t watch the same movies every night, but we’re programmed to drink the same wine,” Mr. Alpert said. “It’s ridiculous, because there are so many great wines out there.”

Edward Behr, who publishes *The Art of Eating*, a quarterly journal, discovered the Jura wines recently while researching a piece on Comté cheese. He was so fascinated with them that he returned almost immediately to write about the wines.

“There are all these places in France that will never take off, the Jura perhaps being the extreme,” Mr. Behr said, “but they’re such good food wines.”

Not everybody in the Jura is as enthusiastic about the oxidized wines as their American fans. Jean Rijckaert, a Burgundy producer, now makes very clean, Burgundy-style chardonnay and savagnin wines that are increasingly seen in the United States.

And Stéphane Tissot in Arbois, one of the region’s most innovative winemakers, questions whether the oxidation-style chardonnays, at least, are traditional at all.

“I think it is a recent style of the last 50 years,” Mr. Tissot said. “I’m not sure that a century ago that was how chardonnay was made.”

Mr. Tissot, whose label bears his parents’ names, André and Mireille Tissot, makes an excellent, pure, slightly tannic ploussard, and a handful of dry, mineral chardonnays that are Burgundian in spirit if not exactly in flavor. But his vin jaune, with its dense, oxidized, mineral aroma, is his most glorious wine.

Any sommelier or merchant in New York who sells wines from the Jura has a story to tell about customers who had no idea what they were getting. Some were astounded by how good the wines were, while others were befuddled, thinking the wines were flawed.

Mr. Behr recalled how one winemaker explained to him what made the Jura so different.

“He said, ‘The thing about these wines is that they don’t belong to the Old World and they don’t belong to the New World, they are a world apart,’ ” Mr. Behr said. “What fascinates me is that they don’t refer to anything but themselves.”

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