



France, Jura: Domaine Macle - The Star of Château Chalon reviewed by Luis Gutiérrez

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During my visit to the region, I asked Laurent Macle about the possibility of tasting some back vintages of his Château Chalon and his Côtes du Jura, the only two wines traditionally produced at this excellent domaine in the Jura. He came up with a selection of years ending in nine and three, as the current vintages are 2009 for the Château Chalon and 2013 for the Côtes du Jura. As I don't like to mix both current and old releases in the same article, I thought it would be a great excuse, as well as an opportunity, to write a small separate article to tell you a little bit more than what I can write in the short producer profile that accompanies the tasting notes. Furthermore, the visit and the wines were excellent, so all the more reason to put pen to paper...

Château Chalon is a tiny village (154 inhabitants in the 2013 census), one of the most beautiful and most visited in France. The Macles have been cultivating grapes in the village for five generations, and their domaine dates from 1850. "It was my father, Jean Macle, who originally expanded and developed the estate," Laurent told me. Jean also served as mayor of the village for some 25 years, so he was a well-known, respected figure in the community who fought for Château Chalon and mentored many of its producers. The name of his wife (Laurent's mother) is Elyane, and that's why the sign outside their 17th century house and cellar still reads E. & J. Macle. "He increased the vineyards to 12 hectares. But I couldn't keep working organically in more than ten hectares, so I downsized our vineyards to that—seven hectares of Chardonnay and three hectares of Savagnin." This is because, in 2010, he started his conversion to organic farming, and he got the vineyards certified by 2015.

Château Chalon

If the whole of the Jura is very small, around 2,000 hectares of vineyards in total, the Château Chalon appellation is really tiny. It comprises just 50 hectares; the sole grape allowed is Savagnin, and the wine can only be produced in Vin Jaune style. This yellow wine is produced by

aging it in barrels that are not topped up and in which the wine develops a thin layer of Saccharomyces yeasts that form what is called a veil, similar but a lot thinner than the flor characteristic of the Fino and Manzanilla wines from Jerez.

As I said, the veil in Jura is much thinner, and that's how they like it there; according to Laurent, if it grows too thick, the wine has too many aromas and flavors from the yeast and then lacks finesse. In fact, H  l  ne Berthet-Bondet, a neighbor and fellow wine producer in Ch  teau Chalon, told me that if the veil grows thick and fluffy in a barrel, like what is done in Jerez, they discard that particular barrel. But the veil being so thin—and broken and discontinuous/patchy during certain periods of the year—also means the wine can be overly exposed to oxygen and become (too) oxidized, sometimes volatile and even turn into vinegar.

So, the production of Vin Jaune is a risky business. And as I was told by Julien Mareschal, a young grower in the village of Pupillin, "If you want to make Vin Jaune, you always have to produce another veil wine, as more often than not, you'll need to select and discard some barrels that might not have the full Vin Jaune character." We in Spain are spoiled, because flor-aged wines from Jerez are so readily available and so cheap that we do not realize how rare and how scarce Vin Jaune really is.

As they do not want to disturb the veil and break it using a pipette, the way to draw wine from a sous voile cask is through a small tap on the side of the barrel that is called a guillette and is made from a ram's horn rather than wood or metal, more like a plug or a dowel. You remove the guillette, then a thin stream of clean wine comes out from under the veil. It's rare to taste like that in Jura, but Laurent Macle seemed to be in a very good mood, so we tasted some wine from barrel like that.

The appellation, created in 1936, has some strict requirements about yields and quality. In some years, there is no Ch  teau Chalon production at all, and it's all declassified because of issues with the weather and the vineyards, like in 1974, 1980, 1984 and 2001. In other difficult years, only part of the vineyards are allowed to produce wine to be bottled under the name Ch  teau Chalon, such as in 1993, when only 14 of the 50 hectares were granted the appellation of origin.

The rest of the vineyard soils within the limits of the village that are planted with other grape varieties (mostly Chardonnay) belong to the generic appellation C  tes du Jura, not Ch  teau Chalon. There are only five producers with cellars in the Ch  teau Chalon village itself. But a few more produce wine from the appellation, some in neighboring villages, as they either own vineyards or buy grapes from grape growers, most notably the Fruiti  re Vinicole de Voiteur—informally known as the Ch  teau Chalon cooperative—as they are the largest landowners, with 13 hectares.

One of Château Chalon's claims to fame was that Curnonsky—pen name used by Frenchman Maurice-Edmond Sailland—who was one of the most celebrated gastronomy writers of the early 20th century, declared in the 1930s that the best white wines in the world (all French, of course!) were Château d'Yquem, Montrachet, Coulée-de-Serrant, Château Grillet and Château Chalon.

The Macles

I first wrote about the Jura in early 2010, and I already wondered if Domaine Macle was the greatest winery in Jura. When it comes to consistency, quality of the terroir and traditional flower-aged wines, they surely are.

I had the chance to meet Laurent Macle in 2013 at a tasting in Santander. Yes, Santander in the north of Spain, an unusual place to meet him. It was all because of Andrés Conde, sommelier and owner of Bodega Cigaleña, who is a kind of ambassador for Jura wines in Spain. Bodega Cigaleña is the place where many people from all over the country have discovered and enjoyed wines from Jura. Conde has opened a lot of doors in Jura for me.

One of the most memorable tastings organized there was a vertical of Macle. Laurent Macle was astonished that people from Spain knew of his wines, and that they even discussed old vintages with him. It was his first time delivering a tasting outside his cellar in Château Chalon. Would you believe that? The most prominent domaine from Jura and he had never done a tasting ANYWHERE. Or so he told us...

He seemed quite shy and quiet, a bit of an introvert. He has made a lot of progress since then, and he now travels to some tastings and wine fairs, at least in France. His viticulture and his wines have also developed, and I think he's still growing and on the way up—still improving and finding new ways of doing things, experimenting with a lot of stuff, not just replicating what was always done. He seemed in top form and very happy when I last visited him for the second time in his cellars in November 2017.

Laurent works in the cellar alongside his sister Christelle, who is more on the sales and administration side of the business. She was born in 1965. "So, my father started keeping some Vin Jaune from that year and we opened a bottle recently on the occasion of her birthday. We don't have a lot of old bottles. There's not a single one from the times of our great grandfather Elie, and there's only a handful of the ones produced by our grandfather Auguste, who only had 1.5 hectares of Château Chalon. Our grandfather also produced milk for Comté cheese [a polyculture very common in the region at the time]. So, it was my father who started keeping some wine, because even if the label says Vin de Garde, the previous generations didn't keep it!"

The Wines

Only two wines were traditionally produced at the domaine: the Château Chalon, which is 100% Savagnin bottled in the seventh year after the harvest and aged in barriques under a veil of yeasts, and a white Côtes du Jura. The latter, Laurent Macle says, "is more or less always the same blend, 80% Chardonnay and 20% Savagnin, and always more or less from the same vineyards, although in the older vintages, the vines were obviously younger than they are today!" Both varieties age separately under a veil of yeasts for three years; then, a tasting is done to decide which barrels don't have the character to make it to the Château Chalon, and these are declassified for the Côtes du Jura cuvée. The blend is made only one month before bottling.

But Laurent, who started working in the vineyards in 1989, after he finished his studies at the Lycée Viticole and took over vinification duties in 2004, had more ideas. He liked the ouillé wines—the ones aged without veil and without flor—made by some of his colleagues and neighbors, and he wanted to experiment and produce them too. So, he's been making some experimental ouillé wines since 2007, some never sold, with a more-or-less regular Côtes du Jura that wears a naïf label designed by his son. There are sometimes other experimental wines, such as a 100% Chardonnay sous voile.

There is also a sparkling Crémant du Jura, which has been reduced or even stopped, and a sweet Macvin, the mistelle that mixes fresh grape juice with aged wine marc or brandy. They even make a little bit of red wine for themselves.

The Vin Jaune from Château Chalon combines power with elegance like no other. In fact, it seems to combine the power of Arbois and the finesse of l'Étoile. It's not a shy wine—it has acidity and also certain bitterness. The flavors and aromas are unusual, modified by the effect of the yeasts in contact with the wine for over six years. It's bottled in the mandatory 62-centiliter bottle called a clavelin, for many, the average volume remaining from one liter of wine after the aging in barrel. Other theories talk about a Spanish bottle inherited from the times when the Jura (the whole Franche-Comté region) belonged to Spain in the 16th and 17th centuries. The truth is that clavelin could be a Spanish word.

One cold November morning...

We started talking about 2017, when they lost 30% of Chardonnay and less of the Savagnin. We tasted the 2017 Chardonnay from the vat—it was very ready and felt fine, with very good acidity, and Laurent Macle compared it with 1947. We also sampled the wine from the nursery vineyard that has 43 old varieties planted (the vigne conservatoire, as in the past, there were

many more grape varieties in Jura that almost disappeared after phylloxera). He has been vinifying this wine for a couple of years now, and it had incredible salinity and sapidity, which he thinks comes from the Enfariné variety.

Next, we tasted a 2012 Chardonnay sous voile, made in exactly the same style as a Vin Jaune, and then we proceeded to taste the bottled wines. The vertical tasting of the Côtes du Jura—starting with the current vintage of 2013 and going down in decades to 2003, 1993, 1983 and 1973—was a ride through some irregular and different years and where the 1983 outshone the others. But for Château Chalon, we were really lucky. “According to my father,” Laurent told me, “all vintages ending in nine have been great, except 1939.” We visited 2009, 1999, 1989 and 1979, and the 1989 felt really ready and firing on all cylinders, while the 2009 felt like the modern version of that 1989. I believe the 2009 is going to develop tremendously in bottle, as it shows an energy and concentration that is not common.

I had been lucky enough to have tried both the 1983 Côtes du Jura and the 1989 Château Chalon on previous occasions, both superb vintages, but those bottles straight from their cellars were otherworldly. Their Château Chalon needs 10 years in bottle, but it's after 20 years when they show their true colors. The 1989 was sublime. Macle's wines belong on the best tables in the world. They are the undisputed stars of Château Chalon.

2013 Domaine Macle Côtes du Jura

2013 was a cool and unusual vintage in many places and resulted in fresher wines, which can be seen in the 2013 Côtes du Jura. All these Côtes du Jura bottlings from Macle are the same blend, 80% Chardonnay and 20% Savagnin, all from more or less the same vineyards (but from younger vines in the older vintages). The wines age separately under a veil of yeasts for three years; then Laurent Macle decides which barrels don't have the character to make it to the Château Chalon, and those are declassified for this cuvée. The blend is made only one month before bottling. This is young and tender, with good freshness and clean, focused flavors plus good acidity and length. There are two bottlings (January for the more forward barrels and June for the others), and a total of 10,500 bottles were produced. This was bottled in 2017. **(92 points)**

2009 Domaine Macle Château Chalon

The current vintage for sale of Macle's flagship wine is the 2009 Château Chalon, from a warm, ripe vintage that has produced a powerful wine with pungent flavors. 2009 has to be one of the most powerful recent vintages at Château Chalon, a year of great ripeness and superb concentration with notes of aromatic herbs (it made me think of absinthe!) and the young, twangy aromas of Jura voile. It shows these notes in a subtle way, as if the wine has the power to undergo an even longer élevage, still keeping its floral notes. In fact, when I mentioned this

to Laurent, he confessed he had kept a barrel of 2009 to see how the wine would continue to age sur voile. The palate is powerful, but the alcohol is really integrated and unnoticeable. I think this could very well be the modern version of the 1989. This is a (great) bottle of wine that can age 40+ years. Unfortunately, 2009 was also a small vintage, and only 4,000 bottles were produced (they usually produce around 8,000). It was bottled in December 2016. **(100 points)**

2003 Domaine Macle Côtes du Jura

2003 will always be remembered as one of the warmest summers in recent history. There wasn't a drop of rain between April and October; therefore, it was a very healthy vintage with very low yields. I didn't really liked many wines from that year, but the Jura has surprised me with how fresh the wines show, especially those aged under flor. The 2003 Côtes du Jura was produced with the usual blend of 80% Chardonnay and 20% Savagnin. It has incredible aromas of toasted bread, curried morels and blond tobacco, with lots of nuances and complexity developing and changing by the minute. This has over 14% alcohol and still keeps good acidity, which is going to ensure a long (and positive) evolution in bottle. **(94 points)**

1999 Domaine Macle Château Chalon

1999 was one of the greatest recent vintages for Vin Jaune, and the 1999 Château Chalon from Domaine Macle clearly shows it. It started with a faint lactic note, not aromas marked by the veil of yeasts (some vintages develop more oxidative aromas and others seem to increase the curry spectrum of aromas). In fact, this 1999 seems to have gained in youth! The incredible Benjamin Button? There are complex aromas, though, and the nose kept evolving in the glass as the wine sat there. But it seems like there is potential for aging for half a century here. **(98 points)**

1989 Domaine Macle Château Chalon

The 1989 Château Chalon was truly off the charts. The intensity and complexity of aromas was not comparable to any of the other old vintages I tasted. This was the first year Laurent started working in the vineyards (his first vinification was 2004) after he finished winemaking school in 1988. He started with two good vintages, 1989 and 1990, which both produced great wines, though perhaps 1989 is a finer year than 1990. This is all about finesse and nuance in a naturally powerful year. The palate is compact and balanced with pure flavors and unnoticeable alcohol, with notes of bitter orange peel, ginger, saffron, broth and curry that made it different and really attractive. This is an incredible Château Chalon. **(100 points)**

1983 Domaine Macle Côtes du Jura

The nose of the 1983 Côtes du Jura was a true explosion of aromas: smoke, toasted bread, tobacco and forest floor ever changing and developing in the glass, truly nuanced and elegant. It has the complexity and weight of some of the best Vin Jaunes—powerful, pungent, long,

mineral and saline. Those who think Côtes du Jura is not for aging should try to find a bottle of this. This could very well be one of the best ever vintages of Côtes du Jura chez Macle. Bravo! **(96 points)**

1979 Domaine Macle Château Chalon

Fully mature now with developed aromas of curry, the 1979 Château Chalon somehow reminded me of the 1983 Côtes du Jura, and Laurent Macle told me there were aromas that reminded him of the Cantillon beers. There was a touch of cereals, indeed, and plenty of smoked aromas, wild herbs, aniseed, bacon, a touch of petrol and wet stones. Scoring wines like this is splitting hairs because it feels like all vintages ending in nine (except 1939, according to Laurent's father) are destined to perfection. The length here is incredible, and there is a subdued minerality and lively acidity that lifts the finish up. This is fully mature now, but I don't think there is a risk of the wine fading any time soon. **(99 points)**

