

{ cover story }

THE NOBILITY OF

Chablis

AT RÉGNARD, BARON PATRICK
DE LADoucETTE CARRIES THE
TORCH FOR WORLD-CLASS
CHARDONNAY

*Baron Patrick de Ladoucette owns
164-year-old Chablis house Régnard.*

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On May 1, 2024, a hailstorm of historic proportions swept through Chablis. At the time, it was estimated that as much as one-sixth of the northern Bourgogne region's 5,500-plus hectares in production were damaged beyond all reckoning. So it was with some trepidation that we arrived on the doorstep of Régnard on May 6 to meet with owner Baron Patrick de Ladoucette and his team: Surely they'd be as devastated as the vines themselves.

If that was the case, however, the Baron was fairly tight-lipped about it: "We won't speak about this, because . . . we don't want to look at the vineyards. It's very sad." Would they lose the majority of their fruit, I pressed? "Some, because it's very early in the season," he admitted. "But in Chablis we are clever; we are allowed every year, when we have excess of the [permitted yield], to put aside a certain quantity, 20%—[so] if we do minus-40%, minus-50% production this year, we have 20% reserve wines. . . . So I'm less worried. Of course we'd prefer to do a normal crop."

Such reticence, I would soon learn, was uncharacteristic of the Baron, otherwise a raconteur of the highest order. Over the course of five hours, he held forth on everything from architecture ("The best mechanics are German, the best chefs are French, the best lovers are Italian, but the best architects are Spanish by far") to the consumption habits of world leaders ("Putin doesn't drink wine!"). Happily, he and his winemaker of 31 years, Philippe Rossignol, also had plenty to say about Régnard—and for that conversation, at least, the timing couldn't have been better. Founded in 1860 and purchased by de Ladoucette in 1984, it's imported into the U.S. by Maisons Marques & Domaines (MMD), which recently expanded its offerings from the winery in response to the growing interest in Chablis among American consumers: The United States is now the leading market by value for its wines, according to a June 2024 report in *Wine Industry Advisor*; with shipments growing by 6.7% between 2022 and 2023.



Philippe Rossignol, left, has been winemaker at Régnard for 31 years.

The Comeback Cuvée

Producing Chablis wasn't a foregone conclusion for de Ladoucette; in fact, as a youth growing up in Argentina, he asserted, "I had no idea to go into the wine business at all. Until I was 18 I drank only Coke." Though his family had owned historic Loire Valley estate Château du Nozet in Pouilly-Fumé for generations, "wine was a really side business; they were more in banking." But upon inheriting the property at age 20, he decided that "the wine business is one of the only ones where you can still be independent—do whatever you want," in his words. "In some other industries you have to be in a

big group; if not, you're nobody. But in the wine business you can express yourself even if you're a small company."

Granted, de Ladoucette does not run a small company: Today his winemaking operations extend from Champagne to Provence and beyond. What's more, en route to building that empire, he would come to discover that he could not in fact do whatever he wanted—which is precisely why he ended up in Chablis: "When you're young, you have different ideas than when you're older, and at the time, I thought, in France, we are a bunch of idiots," he recalled. "The most recognized grape for the best wine in people's mind



The author tours the winery with the Baron.

is Chardonnay, and if I was in California, I could plant Chardonnay [anywhere]—I wouldn't have to move somewhere else. You could not even put one plant of Chardonnay in Pouilly. But as I got older, I thought, there's something right about only growing *this* grape on *this* hill. Because after phylloxera, it was only the best spots which were retained and replanted—it was like a natural selection . . . which gave very special wines. So I said, 'I want to make Chardonnay. The closest place [from Pouilly-Fumé] to go if I don't stop and I don't brake is Chablis.'

Forty years on, it's now his mission to burnish the prestige of the region with the help of MMD "after its name was degraded by the American Chablis 70 or 80 years ago. . . . Let's hope that the 5-liter jug wine has not affected our name forever [and that] the real Chablis will do a comeback. We'll make a special cuvée called The Comeback Cuvée," he joked.

An Overview of Chablis and the House Style

Real Chablis, for the Baron, means Chardonnay made with next to no oak. "I can explain the philosophy of our house—which you will find as well in our Pouilly-Fumés, our Sancerres, and other wines [we make]—which is that we are not grand friends of the wood," he explained. "Our wines are mainly made in stainless steel or glass-tiled vats . . . to retain the freshness characteristic to this area of Burgundy, which is cool [with] very poor soils, giving wines that are slightly austere. . . . I think that Chablis is a unique Chardonnay of the world by its taste, its minerality, and so I think it's wrong that some of my colleagues put it through wood extensively. They lose all the characteristics of the original wine."

With that in mind, we toured the winery, where Rossignol began with a review of the roughly 5,500-hectare region, start-

ing with its four appellations (Régnard works in them all). Representing 1,500 hectares, the typically higher-elevation, north-facing vineyards of Petit Chablis yield "less ripe . . . wines to drink in their youth as they don't have the complexity to age," according to Rossignol. Chablis proper covers 3,500 hectares, where the mid-slope hillside vineyards are mostly north- and northwest-facing. Premier Cru Chablis consists of 40 different climats, or named sites, spread across 800 acres. And Grand Cru Chablis, constituting about 100 hectares overlooking the Serein River, boasts seven official climats with primarily southwestern exposure.

Predominant throughout the region are the famous Kimmeridgian soils of limestone and clay where, Rossignol reminded us, "You find a lot of sea fossils"—notably *Exogyra virgula*, a type of extinct oyster—"that give the minerality of Chablis," whose likewise famously cool



While Chablis encompasses roughly 5,500 hectares, its Grand Cru sites cover only about 100.

climate is also a driver of character; of course. Granted, global warming is impacting it: Now generally starting around early September, “harvest was like three weeks later 30 or 40 years ago,” noted the Baron—“which is a great advantage for the northern vineyards because they used to be not ripe enough and now they are quite ripe, [while] some of the vineyards toward the south sometimes get too much sun [and] they have to start the vintage in the middle of August.” Even so, frost is a perennial threat. In both its estate vineyards and those of its multigenerational grower-partners, Régnard protects against it through the use of candles;

water spray that “freezes around the vine and, like an igloo, protects the bud,” in Rossignol’s words; and heated wires.

Following harvest, the winemaking process “is very simple,” asserted Rossignol. The grapes are pressed and left overnight to undergo *débourbage*, whereby the solids are separated from the must through natural settling. Fermentation takes place in stainless steel for two to three weeks at 20 degrees Celsius; about half of the must is inoculated with natural yeast and the other half with commercial yeast for the sake of variation—as the Baron explained, “You are always better when you have different wines to make your assemblage.” Once malolactic conversion has been completed, the wine rests in the aforementioned vats or in tank on the lees for four to seven months, depending on the vintage, before it’s fined with bentonite, blended, gently filtered, and finally bottled. To the extent that barrels do enter the picture, they represent “maybe 1% of the volume of the production,” Rossignol estimated; added de Ladoucette, “It’s just when Monsieur Rossignol has ideas about a specific cuvée that he wants to add a bit of complexity or richness to.”

Excepting the Petit Chablis, the wines are then meant to continue to age in bottle: “For me, Chablis is always drunk too early,” lamented Rossignol. “You must know that [standard] Chablis is better after two, three, four years, and the Premiers and Grand Crus are better after five, six, seven, eight years. This is one of the few regions of the world where white wines have the capability of aging 15–20 years.” With that, the Baron recalled, “When I arrived here in ‘84, I had my first tasting of the wines of ‘83, and I said, ‘What is your bullshit?’ Because the Petit Chablis was quite similar to the Chablis and to the Premier Cru and to the Grand Cru. And they said, ‘Wait a minute, sir; you’re young and tough, but we will show you.’ So they went and brought back one bottle of Chablis with one year bottle age more, a Premier Cru with one year more, and a Grand Cru with one year more—and then you could see the difference.”

A Look at the Portfolio

To experience those differences for ourselves, we retreated to the tasting cellar, where we began with the Régnard 2022 Chablis Saint Pierre. “Part of the



The Baron holds forth.



story here is my own personal marketing [proclivity], because within the house, they used to call it regular Chablis, village Chablis, basic Chablis," scoffed de Ladoucette. "No, this is our signature Chablis. So we invented the new name, Saint Pierre, [after] our oldest church here." From a fine vintage that yielded "good quality and good quantity, with good maturity and good balance," according to Rossignol, the wine indeed demonstrated scintillating equilibrium in classic style, thrumming with mineral notes of smoke, chalk, and iodine while abounding in round tones of citrus (orange, grapefruit) and orchard fruit.

Another successful vintage in the region was 2020, from which we sampled the Régnard Chablis Premier Cru Fourchaume; at 130-plus hectares, "it's the biggest Premier Cru in Chablis," according to Rossignol, known for yielding "always a very feminine wine, delicate and rounded and easy to drink." "That's why we see Fourchaume a lot on wine lists in the U.S.," noted Frédéric Bernabeu, MMD's vice president, sales, who joined us on the tour along with senior communications manager Cyprien Roy. "It's something that the American palate likes, so we believe that we can be successful with this one." Florals such as orange blossom mingled with honeyed peach on the nose, lingering on the sea-salty, citrus-driven palate with tangy, almost spicy

acidity and subtle notes of hay and even pine on the finish.

By contrast, 2021 "was not an easy vintage," admitted Rossignol, with "spring frost, difficult climatic conditions, and a smaller harvest in volume." For the Régnard 2021 Chablis Grand Cru Preuses, then, "I introduced some wood to try to improve the structure of the wine. So you could smell a bit of vanilla." I asked how Preuses differs in style from the other Grands Crus. "Maybe it's softer," he mused. "You can enjoy it more in its youth than maybe some more austere Grands Crus." At any rate it showed plenty of verve. Along with oyster shell and anise, hints of smoke, flowers, and petrol lent complex intrigue to the citrus and silken pear that glimmered on a slightly oily palate balanced by chiseled acidity and a delicious limestone finish.

To illustrate Chablis' renowned age-worthiness, Rossignol next poured us a



Our tasting included a Chablis from 1985.

"mystery wine" that turned out to be from the 1985 vintage. We took our time with it. "You're seeing a bit of truffles, a bit of sous bois," the Baron finally remarked; agreed Bernabeu, "It's beautiful—truffle, hazelnut. It keeps evolving, keeps changing," glinting by turns with honey nut, green olive, and smoke while still giving a faint impression of citrus and orchard fruit. It was followed by the Régnard 2008 Chablis Premier Cru Montée de Tonnerre, brimming with notes of oyster shell, squid ink, lime blossom, apricot skin, and fennel; plenty lively in the mouth, with somewhat floral acidity, "this is a fresh wine," as de Ladoucette pronounced it. "It's already 15 years old, can you believe? If you would taste this wine blind, I would say three, four years old."

En route to lunch, we returned to the 2022 vintage in the form of the Chablis-appellated Grand Régnard, which Bernabeu called "the driver of [de Ladoucette's]



brand around the world." That's just as the Baron intended. Looking for a way to make his mark on the region, "I decided in 1992 to produce something which would be unique, an assemblage where we can put our best wine," he explained—which isn't to say that Grand Régnard is a 100% Grand Cru; some Premier Cru fruit is used as well, "giving the opportunity to Monsieur Rossignol to not be stuck in the Burgundy story of 'this cru cannot go with this cru, which cannot go with this cru.' For this wine he has the total liberty to express himself the way he wants." If the name might lead some consumers to make assumptions about its provenance, as the Baron acknowledged, "I never tried to fool people. The name in my idea was more about Grand Marnier—something [that] rings the bell that it's grand. It was only after a few years that people said, 'Ah, you want people to confuse it with Grand Cru.' . . . So then I asked Monsieur Rossignol to go into our documents of the house, and he found that, before the war, they used to call a wine Grand Régnard. Amazing!"

Also distinguishing the label is its packaging: With a rotund base, "It's a historical bottle shape, going back to the 16th or 17th century," the Baron commented, noting its depiction "in a very famous painting which inspired me," namely Jean François de Troy's revelrous *Le Déjeuner d'Huîtres* circa 1735. But if the bottle is old-fashioned, what's inside is anything but:

"The feel of this wine is freshness, *jeunesse* [youth]," declared Rossignol, manifesting in aromas of grapefruit, honeysuckle, and cherry blossom along with nuances of gunflint and just-turned earth that resonated on a palate redolent of peach and orange zest whose rolling texture gradually revealed a chalk-dusted finish.

Still more wines accompanied our leisurely four-course lunch, including the Régnard 2022 Chablis Premier Cru Montmains, lifted by notes of pomelo atop petrichor and stone; we even sampled one of de Ladoucette's delectable fruit liqueurs under the Philippe de Bourgogne label as he continued to regale us with tales of everything from his brief exploits in the Napa Valley to Régnard's entry into the Côte de Beaune—a move made partly out of defiance: "My favorite colleagues from Beaune came to Chablis, so when they started selling a lot of Chablis, I said, 'Now I'm going to sell wine from Beaune!'"

Into the Future

Along the way, I managed to ask the Baron how the global sustainability movement might impact his work in Chablis in the years to come. His initial answer was characteristically, almost jovially contrarian. "I speak only for myself: All this is bullshit," he contended. "I say it with a French accent, because we have always taken care as much as we could for our vineyards." But then he relented a bit: "Maybe I can say that in the last 25 years . . . it's like taking aspirin. We used to take four aspirins and now we take only two. We don't use any more herbicides." And in some vineyards, "we now have much more working of the soil with robots. It's better, why not—tractors press more soil than the robots, robots press less."

In short, Baron Patrick de Ladoucette is bound to do what he feels is right when he feels it's right—an idea that brought him jokingly back to the subject of California: "The good thing is you can do whatever you want, you plant the grapes you want. So for my next project, I will grow Gewürztraminer in the Napa Valley." We wouldn't put it past him. But in the meantime, he remains just where he belongs, carrying the torch for what is—hail or no hail, diminished harvest or no diminished harvest—among the world's greatest Chardonnay-growing regions. S

TASTING NOTES

Régnard 2023 Chardonnay, Bourgogne, France (\$25) Lemon cookie, chamomile, and crème fraîche encircle a woody, soil-kissed serenity with each sip. Bright and *charmant*. **91** —Meridith May

Régnard 2022 Pinot Noir, Bourgogne, France (\$30) Aromas of cherry, violets, and mushroom lead to a dusty mouthfeel with notes of strawberry, cocoa, and a hint of toast. Crisp, with a mineral soil component and a velour-textured finish. **92** —M.M.

Régnard 2023 Chablis Saint Pierre, Bourgogne, France (\$40) Stony, sleek, and steely, with notes of bread dough and lime chiffon. Superb acidity accents seashell and grapefruit seasoned with tarragon and chervil. **93** —M.M.

Régnard 2022 Chablis Premier Cru, Montmains, Bourgogne, France (\$90) Fresh and crisp to the point of being exacting, with echoes of sage surrounding a youthful, flinty frame. Tart lime coats the tongue, adding a dusty shiver of chalky oyster shell. Notes of dill with a twist of pure lemon blossom cleanse on the finish. **98** —M.M.

Régnard 2020 Chablis Premier Cru, Fourchaume, Bourgogne, France (\$90) Creamy and energetic, with peanut brittle and peach cobbler coming as a wonderful surprise. Tantalizingly seductive notes of mandarin orange and chamomile arise, set to the rhythm of rock and brine. **98** —M.M.

Régnard 2021 Chablis Grand Cru, Preuses, Bourgogne, France (\$105) The laser-beam precision of this wine is electrifying, as seashell and Meyer lemon take a taut turn across the palate. Ethereal at first, it acquires weight from honeyed notes of vanilla pots de crème and chamomile tea before starched linen provides tension. What a contrast between austere and embracing. **100** —M.M.