

## **Spring/Summer 2006 – « A Can of Worms » !**

After a great send off at work and with more luggage than Reese Wetherspoon in the film « Legally Blond », I headed off to France with Patrick's children (Peter and Vivienne & Pete's girlfriend Laura) for Easter. Patrick's sister, Anne, her husband, Franck and their son, Aurelien also joined us.

The weather was fantastic and the vineyard was looking good. Sylvie had done a great job in the vineyards tying the fruiting canes to the wires and removing excess shoots from the vine stumps. However, the vineyards were in need of ploughing but Olivier's excuse was that he did not have the equipment to do this as the tractor had not been delivered and we needed to invest in another piece of machinery called a « decavaillaneuse » which is used in biodynamic farming to help aerate the soil particularly around the vine stumps. So, we were persuaded to buy yet another piece of machinery which would be delivered in May.

With my mind on moving to Japan I did not see what was happening (or not as the case was) on the vineyard and in particular with Olivier, Sylvie & Christian. I was being told different things from all sides and also that Christian did not want to work for us here which was surprising as he had expressed his intent to stay with us to do all the tractor work.

In the end, I left for Japan under the impression that everything was all right but when I returned in May I found chaos. Sylvie was in tears and threatening to leave ; Christian refused to set foot on the property whilst Olivier was still there ; the vineyard looked untidy/messy ; and, our temporary « guardians » - Felix & Giselle – were very unhappy with the situation. In the end, I had to let Olivier go back to working for Robert and decided to find a replacement who could work in the winery and vineyard along side Sylvie, Christian and myself.

So, I embarked on what I thought would be an easy task – to find a polyvalent caviste/ouvrier who had experience working outside of France and who could speak English fluently. Not getting much of a response from the initial job ad, I decided to list the opportunity on two international websites specifically catering to the wine industry. With little or no response from this either I interviewed some French candidates, some coming from as far afield as Bordeaux & Burgundy, a couple of whom suited us however we did not suit them (or rather the money was not enough !).

I also had to make the decision to stay in France at least until after the harvest which meant that I would be separated from Patrick for 6 months ! But, the vineyard had to come first and things needed to return to an even keel.

Another problem, more vital, related to sales. With the promise of « continuity » in terms of Combe Belle importers specifically in the UK, we bought half the 2004 vintage and all the 2005 harvest. We bottled the 2004 in June in the hope of finding an existing route to market only to discover that the previous owner had « upset » many of his contacts & buyers and that for the time being none of them were interested in Combe Belle. This was a massive blow but I continued to pursue new leads and contacts that I had made over the years. Some of them showed an interest but when it came to closing the deal, backed down. My lack of generating any kind of revenue started to put the business under enormous strain. This, coupled with the overspending in the first half of the year, put my relationship with Patrick under the worst kind of strain ever. This was the first real test on our relationship.

With a winery full of wine as yet unsold, Robert (the previous owner) and Michel came up to taste the wines and discuss how they could help me sell them. Although, this was a productive meeting

nothing came out of it and I was still a square one with no real sales leads that could convert into revenue.

Not being able to get everything done myself and realising this (probably taking some pity on me too !), Michel Poudou stepped in to offer his help and managed to arrange for half the crop to be sold to the local cave cooperative and to prepare the winery for the new harvest. And, through Bruno, I managed to find a caviste at the very last minute (2 days to go before the harvest !!).

I met Bruno in the Summer through the vineyard agent and immediately felt that he could make a difference to Combebelle. He was proposing to assist me in managing the vineyard and the business. It was an easy decision for me but a harder one for Patrick as I was asking him to take Bruno on trust without having met him ! So, the decision on whether to work with Bruno was delayed until Patrick could come over to meet him later in the year.

We also started work on improving the outside of the house and pool area which was in dire need of TLC. Working with French builders is certainly an experience – some of it pleasant and some if of frustrating ! With Patrick's first visit since April imminent, we had a pool with no water or tiling surround and were in the middle of a heatwave and a shortage of water ! Despite threatening everyone that if there was no water in the pool Patrick would start shooting someone, they continued doing the work with no real sense of urgency until I finally told the pool man to get the water or he would not get a cent from us ! Through a friend of a friend etc he finally tracked down a man who as on holiday to come and deliver 6 tanks of water to fill up our pool with literally 1 day to go before Patrick arrived from Japan. If I was not so stressed about the whole thing I would think this a rather amusing episode, something worthy of a « French & Saunders » or « Monty Python » sketch !