

## **Spring/Summer 2007 – «A Dark Cloud » !**

I divided my time almost equally between « La Belle France » and Japan during this time and started thinking about the future in terms of what to do with the vineyard and how to improve the quality of the wines. I also had to figure how to generate more sales and came up with my « brainchild » of selling direct to Family & Friends – easy selling you think but they, too, are very discerning wine drinkers I can tell you ! Realising that this was probably not as easy as I originally thought I still embarked on this project generating quite a lot of interest in the idea of buying « direct from the château ». However, not being VAT registered or having a licence to sell direct to consumers started putting a damper on things until I came across Susan Mcraith MW. She was about to launch her new company – Ethical Fine Wines – and was impressed with our wines having first tasted them in January at Millésime Bio. We met up again at the London Wine Trade Fair in May and agreed that we would try one shipment of Friends & Family orders to see how this went. After several delays caused mainly by late bottling and a shipper who was not interested in collecting the wines, the shipment finally left Combeville in August with all wine sold ! I was already preparing the next shipment just to catch up with the demand which was fantastic. I also need to thank some very dear friends of mine, Dominic & Jane, who helped me to realise the Friends & Family project. They made all the deliveries themselves to make this first « trip » a more personal experience for everyone involved.

I also started working on our website which we wanted to launch just before the harvest. As anyone who has ever been involved in projects that are « internet » based knows, plans and timelines are great only if you stick to your deadlines otherwise delays are going to be inevitable. Well, the project started off well but then hit a slump as other things became more important. This meant that the anticipated delivery date of early September was pushed back to early October – not great timing when you are harvesting the next crop of wonderful grapes ! Working on this in between picking and pump overs is a challenge but it can be done – ask me ! We are about to launch the site in a matter of days just as autumn has started to come into the vineyard – with the amazing kaleidoscope of colours slowly taking over from the vibrant green that has up until now adorned the vines. New England – eat your heart out! The Languedoc has to be a must for anyone wanting to see the golds, reds and rusts of autumn.

This was also a sad time for me as I had to consider the business and how I could retain Sylvie & Christian working here. Earlier in the year I had to reduce their salary by removing most of their car allowance – instead they used the fourgon to get to and from work every day. I then wanted to offer them a new contract for 2 years but without all the added benefits they were getting which were in fact over the top when talking to other producers in the region. Unfortunately, Sylvie was very upset and decided for the both of them that they would not stay. It was all very upsetting not least because the day after I returned to Japan for a couple of weeks I received a call from our “comptable” saying that they had received a letter from Sylvie, Louisa and Christian demanding money! In France, when you leave your place of work and there is no redundancy or anything like that involved, all employees are entitled to one month’s salary and all their holiday pay etc. We were not expecting this as we offered them a new contract for 2 years with a guaranteed income each month and paid holiday which they were previously not getting. They should have been able to walk away from us without demanding the extra money. In order to prevent any further action being taken we decided to agree to their demands on the advice of all concerned, but the situation has left us nothing but sadness at the way they decided to leave. Having spent months working together and pulling together to make things work we were completely blind-sided by their greed. I returned to France feeling very upset and frustrated at the turn of these events and the story is not over! Having signed an agreement not to pursue this any further they have decided that the money we paid them is not enough and are now looking to double their payout! Needless to say

this would cripple most small enterprises and this could have a serious impact on our business. We have had to engage a lawyer who does not show us much faith but have little choice in the matter as I am not fluent in French Employment Law yet! Whatever the outcome, we have learnt a hard lesson here and one which we will not repeat in haste.

There was plenty of good news too! We won more medals for our wines. I found a couple more importers who wanted to start working with us and an agent in the UK who will hopefully help us to realise some volume sales. I have started working with some “cavistes” in France with great success. My mother celebrated her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday and the birth of her youngest grandson, Henry, on the same day! Boy, was this an eventful day and not one to be forgotten lightly, not least because the mother is my twin sister and Henry is a very special baby! We will be naming our top wine after him – “cuvé Henri”!

Another change was the arrival of Katie, a winemaker from New Zealand, who has agreed to work with us for 1-2 years. It has not been easy for her as we applied for her work visa in May/June and are still waiting as I write this. It is doubtful whether or not this will be approved before vintage which means that I will have to do all the work myself as she cannot work here without her visa and I am a stickler for abiding by the rules (very un-French!). I think we are both frustrated by the delay caused in issuing her visa as we can see no reason for this. Luckily she has been keeping herself busy with improving her French and integrating with the local community. Her brother, Ian, and his girlfriend arrived in August and are staying on to help out with the harvest which is great as we need some “muscle” in the winery. I think I should have eaten more spinach as a child really!

I will be using two companies going forward who will be doing all the work in the vineyard. Frédéric Mas (Ovitec) will be doing all the tractor work and will help me out in the winery as and when necessary. He will also teach me how to drive Claudette at last! And, Ets Nigrou will be doing all the manual work in the vineyard such as picking, pruning etc. I am hoping to receive an invitation to join the team for lunch as they have the most delicious looking Moroccan food & tea! They are all very hard workers and I hope that this will work out for us in the long run.

The vineyard is looking in excellent condition and the weather has been kind to us all year – although we would have preferred to have more sunshine! I had several visits from friends from UK & Japan and am looking forward to the time when I can persuade mother to stay for a month in June to look after me and make jam! I am looking forward to an excellent vintage too. With the growing season back on track and little rain I think we will be OK. We changed the tanks over too which will make a huge difference in the winery and I cannot wait to use them.