

## Two at the Helm at Saint-Romain

### THE BUISSON BROTHERS

*Meet Franck and Frédéric, who are now at the head of the family enterprise, which they run with great joy, a buoyant energy, and a deep respect for Absolu, their surprising, sulphur-free cuvée.*

BY LÉA DELPONT  
PHOTOS BY MICHEL BAUDOIN

Saint-Romain is nestled in a gap at the foot of a 40-meter cliff, at the outer edge of the Côte-de-Beaune region. To reach this village, home to the Lalou Bize-Leroy winery, you must first cross the Auxey-Duresses vineyards; but as you drive along—passing the historic François Frères cooperage and their world headquarters en route—you will not see a single row of Pinot or Chardonnay grapes. Franck and Frédéric's SUV instinctively knows the way through the lost valley where their Saint-Romain vineyard flourishes, far from the road and the small town. It is a winemaker's paradise, free of any constructions or electrical lines. Or rather, it is an amphitheater, offering the spectator a range of exposures and altitudes, on slopes up to 100 meters high—in a patchwork of lieux-dits, true to the Burgundy style in general and to the Buisson brothers' taste in particular. In days of old, the locals—including a string of Buissons since the 12th



century—and the eight generations that followed them grew wine on the layered slopes of Hautes-Côtes, looking down on the vale. They later abandoned the hills, which reverted to woodland, and settled in the adjacent valley, whose clay-limestone soil earned them an AOC ("Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée") as an "appellation village" in 1947.

That year, Henri Buisson, Franck and Frédéric's grandfather, decided to put his wine in bottles, inscribe his name on the label, and place an "Open" sign above the entrance to his cellar. He was a pioneer in wine tourism. His grandsons—a salesman and an oenologist—owe him a great debt, beginning with their magnificent single-plot vineyards: "Sous Roches" (3 hectares) and "Sous la Velle" (2 hectares). "At the time, a vineyard was less expensive than a field with a cow in it. You really had to believe in it to buy one," Franck, the salesman of the duo, says with admiration. Thanks to this priceless heritage, which has been propagated via massal selection since the 1950s, the brothers are able to offer six single-vineyard Saint-Romain cuvées (two reds and four whites) that bring out the best of the estate's various climates. The two brothers cultivate 19.5 hectares, 11 of which are located in their village. "We were lucky to inherit some premiers crus and some grands crus from our parents; but at Saint-Romain we have the plants





Franck, the salesman, and Frédéric, the oenologist.



and terroirs we need to make some magnificent wines." Their mother, a fiery woman of Italian descent, went to the bank and signed for their first Pommard vineyard, sight unseen and without even discussing the purchase with her husband. The prestige of its name alone was enough to convince her. She also asked for a Corton vineyard—in the way other wives might ask for jewelry—which her dotting spouse could not refuse. But these two Grands Crus are no dearer in the eyes of Franck and Frédéric than their Absolu cuvées (both white and red), sulfite-free village appellation wines that are aged in cold stores to keep them below 14° C. "Gilles, our father, upgraded the estate's facilities. It is each generation's duty to streamline production and keep it state-of-the-art, for those who will follow. For us, this has meant going back to biodynamic farming, having the Climats inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, and embracing a philosophy of natural wines. But in ten or twenty years, there'll undoubtedly be new challenges to meet," says Frédéric. The estate has been organic certified since 2012, despite the oenologist's personal reservations. "I don't like the fact that they won't let me intervene, but I'm convinced that biodynamics is a

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good thing. I interned with Anne-Claude Leflaive. Yet, in 2004, my professors discouraged me from studying under her. That shows you how little it was accepted at the time!"

With or without the certification, the Buissons have practiced organic farming for many years. "Our grandfather never used potash on the grapevines. And even though our father used chemicals in the 1980s, he didn't use insecticides or rot inhibitors. And he soon realized that tossing on herbicides when you're trying to grow plants was pure sacrilege." Their father branched out on his own at the age of 18, emancipated by his own father. "Giving a vineyard to such a young man broke with all tradition. In Burgundy, children were kept under their father's rule until he died!" But this family appreciates the energy of youth. And they enjoy the globetrotter's perspective as well. Franck has worked at the estate since 2006, after getting a master's degree in international business and then working in China. Frédéric joined him in 2008, with his DNO (French National Diploma of Oenology) in hand and a world tour under his belt: he had worked as a consultant in wineries in Patagonia and South Africa, and as a sommelier in London. Echos of these past voyages re-

sonate deep in their cellar, where a Chilean man, an Italian woman and a Japanese man are all hard at work. This underground cellar, a veritable "earthquake-proof bunker" built by Gilles, is made of reinforced concrete and serves as a barricade against the riverbed. "With the high humidity here, the angels don't get much of their share," Franck jokes. Pumps work around the clock; otherwise, the water level would be knee-high. "Here, we simply accompany the vintage after sorting the grapes, picked by hand. We scrape off a bit more of the flesh in cold years to get a little more substance. And we try to preserve some of the freshness in hot years." The white wines age for over ten months in large, 500-liter containers ("fewer lees and less fat means more purity and more minerality"). The reds age for a year in barrels ("no more than 20% of the barrels are new, in order to preserve the fruit aromas").

"What's good about oenology is that we've now gotten to a point where we can actually go backwards," says Frédéric. That is why he has kept the cement vats and even has plans to install new ones in the planned extension to the cellar. "It was obvious they'd make a comeback: they breathe better and have better heat retention during fer-

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mentation." Oenology also allows you to take risks, at least the way Frédéric practices it! "At university, that's obviously not the case: they teach you not to take risks. But I'm not a lab technician or a consultant—I'm a winemaker. I have to test the limits. Through focused analysis, you can avoid a purely systematic approach." His attitude explains the sulfur-free cuvées and the "constant experiments to better grasp the essence of the terroir and the wine's journey, and to improve its character. We explore in order to progress." For example, this adventurous oenologist in his thirties practices pre-fermentation oxidation on his white wines, a somewhat "sulfurous" technique, but one in which you avoid treating the must with sulfites immediately, so that the most fragile polyphenols may be oxidized. He thus prevents uncontrolled oxidation from occurring later on.

Franck and Frédéric are young, but solidly rooted in the terroir of their ancestors. With music blasting in the vat room, they look towards the future with the hindsight of several generations. They strive for excellence, but know that it is buried beneath their feet. As Frédéric says, "Making wine means extracting the sky from the earth." ⇨