

CRAZY FOR CHARDONNAY

by Jodie Morlet



Spring Newsletter 2016

ISSUE IV

CREATING THE CRAZE

Growing up on his family's domaine in Champagne, France, Luc developed an affinity for the noble Pinot Noir and Chardonnay grape varieties. Although his family had owned Pinot Noir vineyards for generations, they leased a steep Chardonnay vineyard in Mont-Hurllet. It is on this chalky hillside where he was first introduced to Chardonnay as a toddler.

Over the years, he assisted his father in developing the family's own Chardonnay vineyards. This first-hand experience of observing the unique features of each site eventually led to Luc's dual winemaking approach in the expression of the wines. He would come to understand both the significance of the influence of each vineyard's *terroir* along with block per block vinification, as well as the ability to envision each *terroir* as a component for a blend.

When Luc was 13, he and his father planted the 'Grande Terrace' of their Gilbertin vineyard in Ay-Champagne. Comprised of extremely chalky upper subsoil, this *terroir* leads to a refined, elegant and mineral filled Chardonnay. By contrast, the family's Berziret-Renard vineyard in Mutigny, planted when Luc was 18, consists of a heavier clay upper loamy subsoil. This results in wines with a muscular structure, richness and overall weight.

Growing up, as Luc worked on his family's vineyards, he quickly discovered that although the difficult to grow Pinot Noir grape is referred to as 'L'enfant terrible' (The terrible child), Chardonnay is not necessarily a 'Fille facile' (Easy daughter)! Chardonnay might be easier to grow;

however, in order to make great wines,

Luc learned the importance of understanding the relationship between the grapes and each vineyard's specific *terroir*.

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Family Vineyards



Overlooking the Pacific Ocean, the Fort Ross-Seaview 'Ma Douce' mountain vineyard (above) strikingly differs from the inland 'Ma Princesse' vineyard (below) nestled in the Russian River Valley.

This understanding was solidified during the harvest of 1988, when he interned at Champagne Hostomme in Chouilly. This special viticultural area is exclusively dedicated to the growing of Chardonnay grapes and is known as 'La Côte des Blancs.' Upon the conclusion of the internship, Luc enrolled in the Lycée Viticole de Champagne (La Viti d'Avize). As part of his studies, he worked at Domaine Chanson Père et Fils in Beaune. While working on the well-known Premiers Crus 'Meursault Les Perrières' and 'Pernand Vergelesses Les Caradeux,' he discovered the Burgundian winemaking techniques which included the gentle handling of the fruit, barrel fermentation, *sur lies élevage* (aging on the lees), weekly *bâtonnage* (stirring) and careful racking. Before returning to Champagne to complete the Brevet de Technicien Supérieur Agricole de Viticulture et d'Œnologie degree, he further experienced the influence of French oak barrels, the specific forests from which they come and the various toast levels, as he spent time at Tonnellerie François Frères with proprietors Jean and Noelle François.

Luc then studied at the Université de Reims. His thesis for the Diplôme National d'Œnologie (DNO) led him to spend the harvest of 1991 at Champagne Duval-Leroy. Founded in 1859, this famous Champagne house in Vertus, in the heart of the 'La Côte des Blancs,' has always been devoted to the production of high quality Chardonnay grapes. After completing his DNO, he stayed at the university to obtain a Diplôme d'Étude Supérieure Spécialisé (DESS) in Enology.

Luc went on to obtain an MBA in Wine Business from École Supérieure de Commerce in Dijon. During this time, he was influenced

by some of the top producers of Burgundy, including Coche-Dury, Olivier Leflaive, Pierre Morey and Fontaine Gagnard. He studied under Professeur Claudine Charpentier, whose research demonstrated the importance of *Autolyse des Levures* and *bâtonnage*. During *élevage* (aging), a natural reaction occurs in which the *lies* (lees) releases vital components that build the mid-palate and complexity of the wine. These types of Chardonnays are often characterized by a creamy mouthfeel, floral aromas, notes of biscuit and brioche, nuttiness and a strong aging potential.

Luc returned to his family's domaine where he reinstated their vintage Champagnes, beginning with 1992. In addition to focusing on these *Millésimés*, he hand bottled pure Chardonnay still wines. (Prior to the expansion of Champagnisation, the still white wines in Champagne competed with the top Burgundy producers and were known as 'Vin Nature de la Champagne.' Since 1974, these still wines fall under the current Côteaux Champenois Blanc appellation.) Luc put into practice all of the Burgundian techniques which he had learned throughout his studies and internships, but little did he know that he would soon be implementing them a continent away.

CONTINUING CALIFORNIA LEGACIES

In 1996 Luc relocated to the Napa Valley to join me, his California sweetheart. His first wine-making position was at Newton Vineyard, where he was hired to continue John Kongsgaard's commitment to making outstanding unfiltered Chardonnays. John worked with a select group of fine grape growers from Napa and Sonoma Valleys, such as Larry Hyde and Lee Hudson. Luc was excited to work for a winery which pioneered the use of Burgundian techniques in California. Exposed to many field selections, he came to favor the Old Wente for its more classic array of apple, pear, citrus, spices and minerals versus the more common exotic and tropical fruit expressed by other clones.

Five years later, Luc became

the winemaker for Peter Michael Winery, building upon Helen Turley's legacy for utilizing natural fermentation for the world-class Chardonnay wines. His experience in Burgundy and Champagne was a natural succession to both Kongsgaard and Turley's non-interventionist style of winemaking. As Richard Paul Hinkle, author and wine journalist, has explained, "The idea that terroir is best expressed through non-interventionist winegrowing – farming, coupled with winemaking – is more honored in its breach than in its execution. It takes both firm philosophical grounding and the confidence that your technique – in the vineyard, in the winery – are so solid, so sound as to rise above the myriad risks that rise up at every turn." (*Healthy Wines as Liquid Land* 2005)

OUR COMPLEX CHARDONNAYS

Luc began crafting Chardonnays under our Morlet Family Vineyards label in 2006. His minimalistic wine-making philosophy allows for more *terroir* expression. So naturally, Luc selected two drastically different vineyards for our Chardonnays. These sites, one located on the true Sonoma Coast (1,400-1,600 feet elevation) for our «Ma Douce» Chardonnay, and the other in the Russian River Valley (35-135 feet elevation) for «Ma Princesse» vary in their microclimates and soil profiles.

Luc continues to apply his favorite quotation by French Diplomat Étienne-François de Choiseul to his winemaking philosophy when hand-crafting our Chardonnays: *La véritable finesse est la vérité dite quelquefois avec force et toujours avec grâce*. In other words, "True finesse is about expressing the authenticity of the site, sometimes with power and always with graciousness."

As skilled as he is in allowing the unique characteristics of each vineyard to be conveyed in the wine, coming from Champagne, Luc instinctively knows how to move beyond this concept to *L'art d'assemblage* (The art of blending). In line with Peter Michael Winery's 'Point Rouge,' this selection of the best barrels is judiciously blended, resulting in a synergic interaction among varietal, *terroir* and barrel for our «Coup de Cœur» Chardonnay.

When describing our winery, Robert M. Parker, Jr. proclaimed that it is one of the "superstar producers in Northern California... The debut vintage for the Morlet Family Vineyards was 2006, and they have hardly missed a beat since in turning out sumptuous Chardonnays." More recently, when featuring our current vintage, Mr. Parker declared that they are among the top 2014 Chardonnays he tasted from the likes of Peter Michael as well as Marcassin (*The Wine Advocate*, December 2013 & 2015).

Unfined, unfiltered and naturally fermented and aged in French oak from only elite coopers, all three of our Chardonnays are inspired by the best producers of Burgundy. Robert Parker has even compared our «Ma Douce» and «Ma Princesse» to a Bâtard-



Montrachet (*The Wine Advocate*, December 2014). Luc strives for excellence each vintage, and the consistently classic style of the Morlet Chardonnays represents an authentic expression of the varietal, Burgundian winemaking techniques and our two California *terroirs*. The natural progression of Malolactic fermentation leads to complexity, softness and microbiological stability. Possessing wonderful texture and multiple layers, these wines display floral notes, minerality, stone fruit, citrus oils, hazelnut and other components influenced by the unique features of each vineyard. For Luc, the art of winemaking only starts when one has mastered, and then moved beyond, the techniques. Our three Chardonnays clearly showcase his art.

Most people familiar with Luc's winemaking philosophy, including Richard and JoAnne Jarvis who have been longtime supporters of our winery, are aware that our Chardonnays are crafted to age for over a decade. Recently, Rich confessed, 'I can't seem to let your Chards age – I drink them too fast!' Over the years, I have spoken with many members of our mailing list who find themselves in the same situation. For those of us who don't wait for a decade to pass, Luc recommends enjoying these wines three years after the picking date, which will allow more of the hazelnut character to shine through the already complex and multi-layered wines. (For anyone doing the math, this means holding off opening our 2014 Chardonnays until fall 2017. Good luck!)

Back when Luc was 22 years old, he was mentored in the area of food and wine pairing by Jacques Puisais, who holds a PhD in Chemistry and founded the Institut Français du Goût (French Institute of Taste). Surprisingly, the two reconnected seventeen years later at the international symposium Focus on Chardonnay, where Luc was a guest lecturer. Mr. Puisais has declared that "œnology is a science by definition, and an art because its goal is to deeply move our senses." We trust that your senses will be moved as we invite you to share our craze for Chardonnay... *A Votre Santé!*

MA DOUCE

The 'Ma Douce' Chardonnay, named in honor of Jodie Morlet, comes from a mountain vineyard in the Fort Ross-Seaview appellation. Located above the fog layer (1,400-1,600 feet elevation), the berries bask in the morning sun.



Our princess visits vineyards with Luc, October 2005

The vineyard is situated on the second ridge from the Pacific Ocean, with a north-eastern exposure and is comprised of pure sandy loamy Goldridge soil. A *douce brise* (gentle sea breeze) characterizes the wine's soft and round texture, which is evident upon release.

MA PRINCESSE

The 'Ma Princesse' Chardonnay, named in honor of our daughter Claire Morlet, comes from the Russian River Valley. This hillside vineyard (35-135 feet elevation) contrasts with the 'Ma Douce' mountain fruit. Benefiting from cool nights and mornings, the vineyard is planted with the Old Wente field selection. These old vines produce tiny clusters containing a typical *chicks and hens* (small and larger berries in the same cluster) profile. The presence of metamorphic rocks, mixed with Goldridge soil, gives extra minerality to the wine. This Chardonnay requires slightly more cellar-ing than the 'Ma Douce,' but also gains more complexity over time.



The consistently small size of the Old Wente Chardonnay clusters, held by our daughter Claire, enhances the concentration and complexity of 'Ma Princesse.'



Two barrels have been singled out with chalk by Luc. After months of blending trials, they will eventually become part of 'Coup de Cœur.'

COUP DE CŒUR

The 'Coup de Cœur' Chardonnay provides Luc with a sense of freedom to compose a wine not confined to a *terroir*. After blind tasting each individual Chardonnay barrel, Luc selects the best barrels of 'Ma Douce' and 'Ma Princesse' each year, leading him to create a unique, compelling and judicious blend. This *Art d'assemblage* (Art of blending) results in an extremely limited wine with seamless character, complexity and longevity, and is the only one of our Chardonnays bottled in magnums.

Spring 2016 Release. Featuring the 100 Point 2014 'La Proportion Dorée'



2014

'LA PROPORTION DORÉE'

SONOMA COUNTY PROPRIETARY
WHITE BORDEAUX-STYLE BLEND

A harmonious blend of the three classic white Bordeaux varietals grown in the Golden State's Sonoma County, this unique cuvée was handcrafted using classical winemaking techniques inspired from the finest producers of Pessac-Léognan. As in architectural arts, it is 'The Golden Ratio' or 'La Proportion Dorée.' (66% *Sémillon*, 32% *Sauvignon Blanc*, 2% *Muscadelle*)

Robert Parker 100 points: *A perfect wine is the 2014 La Proportion Dorée. This cuvée is from 29-year-old, dry farmed vines and was barrel-fermented. The wine is absolutely out of this world. With a light greenish gold color and a killer nose of lanolin, caramelized citrus, honeysuckle, orange marmalade and candle wax, the wine displays great acidity, a magnificent, massive, full bodied mouthfeel, and seems to come across like a Sonoma County version of a dry Haut Brion blanc. This is singular wine - profound, compelling, whatever! It should drink well for at least 10 years, if you can resist its early charms.*

—The Wine Advocate, December 2015

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2014

'MA DOUCE'

FORT ROSS - SEAVIEW
CHARDONNAY

Located on the Sonoma Coast, on the second ridge from the Pacific Ocean, this unique hillside vineyard benefits from both the cool maritime breeze (*douce brise*) and the mild and sunny mountain climate, creating ideal conditions for the Chardonnay. Handcrafted using classical winemaking techniques, this wine is dedicated to Jodie Morlet. It is 'My Sweet' or 'Ma Douce.'

Robert Parker 94-96 points—*The Wine Advocate, December 2015*



2014

'MA PRINCESSE'

RUSSIAN RIVER VALLEY
CHARDONNAY

Located on the river bench of Sonoma County's Russian River Valley, this hillside vineyard benefits from ideal conditions for the Chardonnay vines. The cuttings came from the Old Wente, the field selection renowned for its excellent quality and richness. This concentration originates from the petite size of the berries. Handcrafted using classical winemaking techniques, this special wine is dedicated to our daughter, Claire Morlet. It is 'My Princess' or 'Ma Princesse.'

Robert Parker 95-97 points—*The Wine Advocate, December 2015*



2014

'COUP DE CŒUR'

SONOMA COUNTY
CHARDONNAY

Each vintage, the tasting of individual lots of Chardonnay reveals a strictly limited number of barrels of truly outstanding features. These selected barrels are then judiciously blended to compose this unique cuvée. Handcrafted using classical winemaking techniques, it is our 'Heart's Astonishment' or 'Coup de Cœur.'

Robert Parker 96-98 points—*The Wine Advocate, December 2015*



2014

'CÔTEAUX NOBLES'

FORT ROSS - SEAVIEW
PINOT NOIR

The distinction of 'noble' for the most interesting of grape varietals is extended to one of the rare sites whose natural conditions are ideal for growing excellent Pinot Noir. Located on the Sonoma Coast, on the Eastern slope (*Côte*) of the second ridge from the Pacific Ocean (*Eaux*), this unique hillside vineyard (*Côteau*) benefits from both the cool maritime breeze and the mild and sunny mountain climate. Handcrafted using classical winemaking techniques, this wine is also a tribute to the Nobles family who has been farming this land for four generations. It is the 'Noble Hillsides' or 'Côteaux Nobles.'

Robert Parker 90-92 points—*The Wine Advocate, December 2015*



2014

'EN FAMILLE'

FORT ROSS - SEAVIEW
PINOT NOIR

For generations our family has been growing the Pinot Noir grape in France. Each harvest, we love to celebrate this time-honored commitment while our children stomp a small vat of Pinot Noir from California's Sonoma Coast. Handcrafted by using classical winemaking techniques, this special wine is dedicated to our grandparents, parents and relatives from both countries. As for any family celebration or casual gathering, this wine is to be appreciated 'En Famille.'

Robert Parker 90-92+ points—*The Wine Advocate, December 2015*



2014

'JOLI CŒUR'

FORT ROSS - SEAVIEW
PINOT NOIR

This Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir is made from the very best section of the excellent 'Côteaux Nobles' hillside vineyard which is located on the eastern slope of the second ridge from the Pacific Ocean. This great and beautiful (Joli) plot is at the very center of the ranch, its heart (*Cœur*). Handcrafted by using classical winemaking techniques, this unique wine is also named after the typically seductive character of the Pinot Noir grape. It is the 'Charming Character' or 'Joli Cœur.'

Robert Parker 92-94 points—*The Wine Advocate, December 2015*



2012

'LES PETITS MORLET'

NAPA VALLEY
CABERNET SAUVIGNON

Growing up the children of a fifth-generation French winemaker, Paul and Claire Morlet had little choice but to spend much of their childhood exploring vineyards. From the time they could walk, Luc shared his knowledge and passion about viticulture and winemaking with them. Claire first viewed the Pisoni vineyards from atop her dad's shoulders, and at the age of five, Paul saw a bear while he waited for his father to finish sampling Peter Michael Winery's 'Les Pavots' vineyard! From a judicious blend of different barrels, this special cuvée from Napa Valley embodies the youthful character and energy of the newly planted vines and is the offspring of our mature Cabernet Sauvignon bottlings. Named in honor of our children, Paul and Claire, 'Les Petits Morlet' represents their passion, talents, optimism and future.