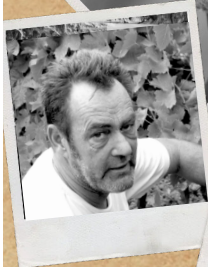
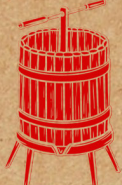


**DIRECT PRESS**

WINE CLUB



**DECLASSIFIED**

A special report on how France's AOC system is forcing great winemakers to go Rogue

**SEPTEMBER, 2023**

# Should you judge a wine by its label?

It's complicated. Art and design is a matter of taste, but the words on a bottle? They are there to help a consumer to quite literally judge a wine, with piles of legal paperwork to back up information like the name of the producer, the alcohol content, and the vintage. The region, however, is less objective than you would expect. Putting a region on your label, even a basic one like Côtes du Rhône, requires local officials to determine whether it tastes like a wine from the area 'should.' This is where things get really messy; as such, France's labeling system has been in peril for decades now, and it's unclear what can be done to fix it.

All of the wines featured this month are declassified from the French AOC system for various reasons. As wine drinkers become less dependent on the AOC system, winemakers in turn can leave more freely, furthering the crisis. The AOC is a venerable framework that helped rescue the wine trade less than a century ago. What happened?

The French appellation system, or *appellation d'origine contrôlée* (AOC for short), is famous for requiring consumers to know which grapes are permitted in each region. Sancerre,

for example, has to be 100% Sauvignon Blanc. Chablis must be Chardonnay. You can't have Grenache in your Morgon. Yet this is only the start of the laws that make up the AOC system: laws that on their face are designed to value a region and its historical character, but are nowadays facing criticism for reinforcing modern winemaking manipulations and chemical farming instead of actual regional character.

Natural winemakers have been the most vocal in their opposition, with many leaving the system and simply bottling their wines as '*Vin de France*,' the most basic designation, which replaced '*Vin de Table*' in 2009. Ironically, these wines are often made with historic grapes and with nothing added or taken away, so they should be the most vivid examples of regional character. Any classification that fails to take enough of this into account is in serious danger of losing its legitimacy, and that's where the French appellation system is today. At the middle of the controversy are local tasting panels that can issue warnings or reject wines for not being 'typical' for the region. However, these panels are frequently controlled by the biggest, most commercial producers, who see natural wines as 'flawed' and their own heavily-manipulated wines as 'regionally correct.' Fred Niger of Domaine l'Ecu in Muscadet was issued such a warning by the Muscadet Sevre-et-Maine appellation. So starting in 2022, his 'Classic' Muscadet is now simply 'Vin de France,' as are

the other two Muscadets he produced under the AOC for decades. When I spoke to Fred he told me, "I decided to leave the appellation and I will NEVER return! I don't like to be spanked when I asked for [AOC status] in good faith."

Most Direct Press members will get to taste Fred's formerly-known-as Muscadet this month, and I think you'll see how ridiculous this is getting. I've never tasted a wine that so clearly delivers on the promise of terroir, with all the savory, stony, mineral depth that great Muscadet can express. It's a damn shame to not have 'Muscadet' on the label.

Wine production after the devastation of half of France's vines by the phylloxera insect in the late 1800s was at a historic low. Demand was met by making fake French wine

with the artful use of water, sugar, and other scrumptious additives like plaster and sulfuric acid. Raisins from the Middle East would be shipped to ports like Marseille, where they would be rehydrated and turned into fake Bordeaux. So in 1907 the French government officially defined wine as 'the alcoholic fermentation of fresh grapes,' which doesn't sound like much but it actually did a lot to combat fraud. (Weirdly, this definition could be just as effective today in limiting the use of over 70 modern additives that can be used in winemaking. I'm not comparing oak chips and excessive sulfur to plaster or lead, but why are the people making wine simply from fresh grapes on the defense nowadays? Shouldn't the winemakers using bags full of powdered chemicals be the ones to justify themselves? Yet I digress.)



Olivier Cousin showed up at the courthouse with his horse, Joker, to defend himself against the French government's accusations of fraud.

PHOTO: JEAN-YVES BARDIN



Even after the 1907 decree, counterfeiting was still widespread: wines from the Languedoc or Algeria were being labeled as Chateauneuf-du-Pape. So in 1937 the French AOC system was introduced, and it was quite effective in bringing back trust to a market that had been in shambles for 50 years. The AOC system, then called AOP, quickly established a new era of legal safeguards while ushering in best practices to bring up quality levels across the country.

As the 20th century progressed, it became clear that this guarantee of higher quality translated into more money; so the AOC system grew quickly, almost miraculously rescuing the wine trade and shaping it into what we know today. Wine had fully made the leap from a source of sustenance and hydration (safe municipal drinking water was not common until the 20th century) to a beverage of choice for the middle classes. Without the French AOC creating a context of trust this would not have happened. Most countries copied the French, including Italy for their DOC (denominazione di origine controllata) system in 1963 and the US for the AVA (American Viticultural Areas) designation in 1978. There are over 350 appellations in France today, all with individual regulations and stipulations. And, yes, this only reinforces the stereotype: French people take to bureaucracy like flies to a glass of Bonnezeaux (Chenin Blanc with at least 34 grams per liter of residual sugar, according to AOC law).

I have always loved the challenge of memorization and the calming sense of order that goes along with the AOC. It was an immense help when starting out in the wine business, where wielding geeky knowledge is basically blood sport. It was helpful when I had to pretend I knew what a wine tasted like, but it was also a trigger for my imagination: dreaming about the sultry beauty of a Vosne-Romanee I could never afford, or the honeysuckle notes of Vouvray that was more in my budget. I was drawn in by somber labels and solving the riddle of arcane wine laws, so I am ambivalent about the defection of so many winemakers from this useful structure. However, many of the winemakers feel the same way. They are not just punk kids sticking it to the Man. Like Fred Niger, many are older and have participated in earnest for decades, only leaving after being asked by their local AOCs to compromise not one, but nearly all of their values.

Stories of this happening are commonplace nowadays, but few can top the Dickensian absurdity that was unleashed on another winemaker featured this month, Olivier Cousin. Cousin's story is one that energized a growing base of natural wine fans in 2011 when he was threatened with a €30,000 fine and two years of jail time by France's Fraud Control for supposedly misleading statements on his wine labels.

It all began when Cousin left the



**"Drink wine, not appellations."**  
*Fred Niger of Domaine l'Ecu*

AOC because he felt that it increasingly subsidized wines made with unnecessary additives and ecologically-harmful farming methods. As it embraced bigger agro-chemical wine businesses, it also began charging more fees from members. Cousin was using organic and biodynamic farming practices while making small amounts of wine (25,000 bottles a year) and little income. He refused to pay. When the AOC permitted sugar and acid adjustments in 2003, he finally left for good, bottling everything as ‘table wine’. In spite of this he used the initials ‘AOC’ on his labels, which he claimed stood for ‘Anjou Olivier Cousin,’ and he listed the grape varieties. It was truthful, but illegal to do this on a bottle of table wine.

Cousin used his labels as provocation, calling attention to the fact that the AOC never once checked his methods in the 25 years he was a member. Yet when making *Vin de Table*—which should have left him more free of regulation—he was prosecuted aggressively for making wine the exact same way as before. He accused the agency of “being in the service of profitable wines that pollute.” It was an argument that held a lot of weight with winemakers and drinkers alike.

For over four years the case dragged on in France’s infamously congested court system. Cousin showed up at the courthouse with his plow horses and at times brought barrels of wine and supporters to picnic and protest. In late 2015, after many years of public outcry against the ridiculously aggressive prosecution, Cousin was convicted guilty—but with no jail time and no fines.

This is a particularly baroque example of the ways that natural winemakers are unfairly policed for making wines as they have been for millennia. Though Cousin’s case is old news in the wine world, little has changed. Huge agro-businesses still have the support of government agencies and are largely free to manipulate wines, ecosystems, and laborers in the service of profit. Our old friend Fifi, whose La Bascule wines are featured this month, said “I don’t think their politics will change anytime soon. The AOC are more tuned into what goes on with cooperatives—the complete opposite of what independent vignerons are doing.” The fact that we had no trouble picking ten fantastic, compelling declassified wines that demonstrate *terroir* for our members is proof that the AOC has a profound legitimacy problem. Many more talented, conscientious winemakers will defect in the coming years: I don’t think that’s good for anyone. Until that changes, we are left with the enlightened counsel of Fred Niger: “Drink wine, not appellations.”

Cheers to that,  
*Jonathan*

## **Domaine l’Ecu Classic Muscadet 2022**

**Loire • France**  
*Press 4 Mix/White*

I first encountered Domaine l’Ecu before Fred Niger took over from the original owner, Guy Bossard. Organic for 40 years, biodynamic for 20, Ecu is one of the bright lights of the region, and Fred’s tenure has elevated the Ecu name to become a staple of the natural wine community. He is known for frequent collaboration with other winemakers, experimentation with amphora, and a mind that is finely attuned to the forces of nature. He insists on vineyard practices with low yields, high biodiversity, and harvesting by hand. In the cellar he uses indigenous yeasts, gravity instead of pumps, and the lowest amount of sulfur he can get away with.

Despite being such a dynamic estate, the local AOC is sadly so backwards that after many decades Fred stopped asking to have his wines officially labeled Muscadet. The tasting panel gave him a warning about being atypical, threatening to declassify them, and he beat them to it, deciding it was time to leave for good.

Less buttoned-up than most Muscadet, it’s still a soulful example of the stony, savory brilliance capable in the region. Spicy pear, mint, wet rocks, and salty snickerdoodle over-

tones. I wouldn’t say this is textbook Muscadet exactly, it has more give because it goes through malolactic transformation. Most producers block malo with sulfur and temperature to create the crispy green apple notes. Here you get a version with less sulfur that truly delivers the granite and orthogneiss soils that Fred wants to express. It’s a wine that I think gets better with a little air, and I bet it will age nicely for 5-10 years. *Jonathan Kemp*



*Fabien Jouvès was dubbed ‘Bacchus of Cahors’ by Le Monde*

**Fabien Jouvès ‘Haut Berba’  
Vin de France 2020**  
**South West • France**  
*Press 4 Mix/White*

Fabien Jouvès is a bit of a wild man. He certainly has earned the title ‘Bacchus of Cahors’ that French newspaper Le Monde gave him a few years back. I can’t really share most of the stories I’ve heard, but yes, he’s a rowdy guy. Despite this, he is immensely serious about wine and is outspoken regarding the



outdated rules of his home AOC. When Cahors was created in 1971, it focused on the internationally popular Malbec at the exclusion of many other historic grapes. Fabien pulls no punches, as he is known for a cuvée called ‘You F\*%# My Wine?’ that is declassified Cahors because of the use of Jurançon Noir, a local red grape not permitted by the AOC.

‘Haut Berba’ is declassified for a different reason. He decided to purchase Gros Manseng and Petit Manseng from a friend in Ju-

rançon, about 3 hours away. This is his version of what he thought a Jurançon wine could taste like, with zero sulfur—and what a slamming way to meet Gros Manseng and Petit Manseng if you never have! Haut Berba is a *bretty* iteration of layered notes: hard cheese, warm bread, passion fruit, balsamic dressing, and burrata. A perfect cheese and charcuterie board bottle, with a little mousse on the palate and a finish that hangs out on the taste buds for quite some time. A biodynamic tour de force.

*Jonathan Kemp & Demi Elder*

**La Bascule ‘Gloriette’**  
**Vin de France 2021**  
**Roussillon • France**  
 Press 4 Mix/Red

La Bascule is a collaboration between Fifi and Domaine Leonine in the Roussillon. Before Fifi returned to France to make wine, he opened the Ten Bells, imported wine, and even had a natural wine shop somewhere

(...it’s now called Vanderbilt Ave Wine Merchants). He said his friends at Leonine “moved out of the Côtes du Roussillon AOC quite some years ago as

their wines were rejected often and they didn’t agree with the politics of the AOC at the time.” So the reason the Bascule wines are classified as Vin de France? “Yes, the reason is really the “f@#% the AOC,” he says.

100% Syrah, farmed organically, whole cluster fermentation in fiberglass, a short maceration, and zero sulfur added. This makes for a very fresh Syrah with less olive brine and more strawberry notes. Easy to chug, easy to love. A ‘10-minute bottle,’ as Fifi would say. *Jonathan Kemp*



*Fifi and Maya in front of Passage de la Fleur. Reminds me of somewhere...*

**Eric Texier ‘Chat Fou’**  
**Côtes du Rhône Rouge 2021**  
**Rhône Valley • France**  
 Press 4 Mix/Red

When you taste with Eric Texier, you’re guaranteed two things: incredible wine, and zero bull\$#\*%. He doesn’t want to be a part of a “scene,” and he’s been known to take shots at other winemakers when he feels like they are lying about or

otherwise disrespecting the craft. He’s a winemaker’s winemaker—endlessly reinventing, experimenting and recording the results. He wants more than great wines; he wants to push conversations forward and nudge people to become better stewards of the land and better winemakers. He was a PhD nuclear engineer before switching to wine-making, which he did without any family land or real experience. He uses his science background in order

to know how *not* to add things to his wine, however.

In the case of Chat Fou, it had been official Côtes du Rhône for many years, a lighter take on the style due to his inclusion of white grapes like Clairette. But starting in 2021 it is simply Vin de France, as he decided it was too much of a pain in the ass to keep fighting with the AOC over how light the color was. At this point he has enough of a following it doesn’t matter, so it really just proves how out of touch the AOC



*Eric Texier*

is. The 2021 is as fire as ever, with a blend of 50% Grenache, 30% Cinsault, and 20% Clairette aged in concrete with no sulfur until bottling. Silky and fresh, with plums, violets, and fine blueberry-skin texture. For a wine that is ‘too light’ for typical Côtes du Rhône, it has more weight and depth than you would think, with a long, satisfying finish. Chill it down, pair it with almost anything. I so wish I could pick up any bottle of random Côtes du Rhône and have it taste like this. *Matthew Hawkins & Jonathan Kemp*

**Olivier Cousin ‘Pur Breton’ Anjou 2022**  
**Loire • France**  
*Press 4 Red*

Olivier Cousin is in semi-retirement these days. He has fully earned his stars as a natural wine pioneer in the Loire Valley. He’s scaled back his production and given up most of his acreage to his son Baptiste, who is a leading natural wine figure in his own right. Cousin’s wines are still as wild and uncompromising as ever, yet I also am pleased to find they withstand a level of scrutiny that separates them from lots of natural wine that is later to the party. They are not just funky, they are deep, soulful wines with structure, power, and a playful spirit — and some funk, of course, but not enough to dominate, only enough to add layers and color. Cousin is not cashing in on a trend, he is a true believer who has gone on trial, literally, for making wine the way he does.

‘Pur Breton’ is 100% Cabernet Franc. The grapes are hand-harvested, brought to the winery by a horse, destemmed and gently pressed. Only natural yeasts are used and the juice undergoes an extended maceration. Aged in old oak barrels.

There’s the trademark barnyard notes from *Brettanomyces*, enough there to add some subtle funk, but not enough to be too distracting. Aromatically complex, with dried flowers, wild raspberry, and a whiff of the horse barn. The palate shows off a brambly black cherry glaze with sugar apple, cranberry crunch, and bee propolis. It has the riper profile of Cabernet Franc from Anjou but it’s matched with layers of powdery texture and spicy sizzle. Refreshing enough to chill down and drink on its own, it has the depth and structure to pair with lamb or bo ssam. Zero sulfur added. *Jonathan Kemp*

**Thierry Navarre ‘Vin d’Oeillades’ Vin de France 2022**  
**Languedoc • France**  
*Press 4 Red*

Highlighting ancient, local cultivars has been the focus of the Navarre family for three generations. Thierry Navarre, who took over in 1988, manages the 12 hectare farm in Saint-Chinian and became one of the first natural winemakers in the region. His beautiful garden-like vineyards are way up in the mountains on brown schist, different from

the more typical Saint-Chinian wines that are on clay and limestone at lower elevation. Thierry’s wines end up being lighter, fresher examples of the region.

This one is a rare example of a nearly extinct variety, Oeillades, a genetic cousin of Cinsault that is not recognized by the Saint-Chinian appellation. It’s the perfect “gourmand” wine: snappy and fresh pomegranate and lavender aromas, with medium body, soft tannins and low alcohol. Give a light chill and serve up with cured meats or grilled things. *Bruno Sant’Anna*

**Mas Coutelou ‘Les Gris du Coeur’ Vin de France 2022**  
**Languedoc • France**  
*Press 4 White*

Jeff Coutelou was one of the first to be certified organic in France — back in 1987! His neighbors were not accepting of his methods. When he planted hedges to help block their chemical sprays from coming into his vines, they burned them down. Twice. Today he continues to take on work that many others do not have the patience or commitment for, like restoring obscure, nearly forgotten varieties to combat the effects of global warming; and planting thousands of olive, almond, fig, and fruit trees for future generations. Coutelou is hardcore about not using sulfur. None of his wines have any sulfur added and haven’t for quite some time.

‘Le Gris de Coeur’ is made entirely

from pink-skinned varieties: Picpoul Gris, Grenache Gris, and the very rare Riveyrenc Gris, all native to the Languedoc. This wine expresses itself from different angles, but perfects the balancing act of minerality and fruit in the glass. Ash and smoke leap to the nose first, followed by sultry baked pineapple. Subtly funky, with a little acid on it—the first thing I’d pair it with is blackened salmon, or a balsamic-laced salad. *Jonathan Kemp & Demi Elder*

**Le Temps des Cerises ‘La Peur de Rouge’ Vin de France 2022**  
**Languedoc • France**  
*Press 4 White*

Axel Prüfer’s wines were some of the first to make regular appearances in natural wine-focused lists here in NY, and certainly remain as reference for elemental, delicate and engaging wines (quite a feat in this warm corner of the Languedoc).

‘La Peur du Rouge’ (*translation = fear of the red*) is a unique, layered and textured take on Chardonnay grown in a vineyard just north of Beziers, dotted with large limestone rocks. Grapes were fermented in whole clusters and macerated for five days, lending an oolong tea-like herbal tension to its ripe tropical fruit character (pineapple/dried mango), ending on a salty, stony note. Zero sulfur added. *Bruno Sant’Anna*

**Alexandre Bain ‘Pierre Precieuse’ Blanc Vin de France 2019**  
**Loire • France**

Alexandre Bain started his estate in 2007 in the Pouilly Fume appellation of the Loire Valley. Alexandre works biodynamically in his vineyards and eschews the use of chemicals save for very minor doses of sulfur at bottling if absolutely necessary. He tends to pick at peak ripeness in contrast to most other producers in the region. He is committed to doing 100% of the vineyard work with his horse Phenomene. Alexandre's wines tend to be richer, more aromatic and more dense than typical Pouilly Fume. He believes his approach results in a purer expression of his terroir. Like many of his peers, he grew tired of fighting the AOC over 'typicity' year after year, and now bottles everything as Vin de France.

The Pierre Precieuse is 100% Sauvignon Blanc and is essentially Bain's entry level cuvée. This may be his entry level, but make no mistake there's nothing amateurish about this wine, this is as serious as Sauvignon Blanc comes. With a depth and minerality, complexity and balance found in opulent white Burgundy's and vin jaune or oxidative Jura white wines. Upon my first encounter I picked up a hint of smokiness which I am told is common in Pouilly Fume. I found the Pierre to be a bit less oxidative than his other wines, but there were still plenty of complex oxidative qualities that kept me intrigued. There's a bit of tart and tropical fruit on the palate that is kept in check by the intense minerality and structural components that come 20 months of lees aging and

old vines averaging 40 years of age. Zero sulfur added. *Jeremy Hernandez*

**Olivier Cousin 'Le Franc'**  
**Anjou 2020**  
**Loire • France**  
*Press 2*

It's important to acknowledge Olivier Cousin's legacy and importance — and the fact that his wines have remained as relevant and tasty as ever. 'Le Franc' is his old-vine Cabernet Franc, from vines planted in the 1950s on black loam infused with limestone. There's more development and leafy, earthy flavors compared to the 'Pur Breton' and it is also more grippy and chewy, with root beer, poppy seeds, black pepper, and strawberry with some gamey wildness. This is layered with spicy red fruits and pleasantly chewy tannins. It's clearly a rustic, natural wine, but it's far more serious to reduce it to that alone. There is a touch of barnyard but overall it's a wine with a lot of soul and balance, despite the expressive full-bodied style. Zero sulfur added. *Jonathan Kemp*

