

Woman in white

She's been voted *Decanter's* top white winemaker in the world. Burgundy's queen of biodynamics, Anne-Claude Leflaive, tells CLIVE COATES MW the secrets of her success

DECANTER INTERVIEW

LEFLAIVE AT A GLANCE

Born: Paris, January 1956
Education: Diplôme de Technicien en Oenologie (TO), Dijon 1979
Career: Teacher (adult education, sales techniques), 1982-1988. Thereafter, Domaine Leflaive
Family: Married to Christian Jacques, an engineer. Three children, all girls. The eldest, Marianne, recently qualified as an architect
Second love: Music - singing in a jazz group named 'Healing the Soul'
Dream vineyard: Monthélie, Côte de Beaune
She says: 'Biodynamics concentrates the mind on the essentials.'
They say: 'That an outfit as traditional and pivotal as Domaine Leflaive should be among the first Burgundians to blow its biodynamic trumpet is down to the strong, non-sheep-like personality of Anne-Claude Leflaive.' (Jancis Robinson MW)

THE LEFLAIVE DOMAINE lies in the Place des Maronniers next to the sleepy village of Puligny-Montrachet in the Côte de Beaune. At its helm is the attractive, youthful, white-haired Anne-Claude Leflaive. An aura of calm surrounds Leflaive and her Burgundy domaine. It is a mirror of her character and her natural, minimalist approach to winemaking. Serenity is all around.

Leflaive took over the estate from her father, Vincent, in 1990. At first she ran the domaine jointly with her cousin Olivier, but since 1994 she has been in sole control. How does she feel to be in charge of arguably the finest white wine estate in the world? 'It is a responsibility and a privilege,' she replies. 'But I don't let it give me sleepless nights.'

It hasn't always been so calm. The early 1990s saw some fundamental upheaval at Leflaive. Jean Viro, the domaine manager, retired at the same time as Vincent Leflaive, to be replaced by Pierre Morey, vigneron in Meursault and ex-share-cropper for Domaine Lafon. More significantly, Anne-Claude Leflaive's arrival gave the opportunity for a radical reassessment of the domaine's viticultural attitudes and its eventual conversion to biodynamism. Though not the first, Domaine Leflaive is now perhaps the most important biodynamic estate in Burgundy.

'Before I'd even heard of biodynamism,' says Leflaive, 'my instincts told me that whatever we do in our lives must be done with a respect for nature and the environment. Too much of what we were doing at the domaine was in total contradiction to an ecological way of life.'

'I had started working at the domaine in the early 1980s - my uncle Jo (Vincent's brother and co-manager) had been against this at first; but my father told him not to be so silly - and I became more and more convinced that things had to

change. In 1989 I met Claude Bourguignon (author of ecological bestseller *Le Sol, La Terre et Les Champs*) and it all fell into place. My father was very encouraging. He said to get in touch with Aubert de Villaine [manager of Domaine de la Romanée-Conti], who was employing François Bouchet as a viticultural consultant. I've used Bouchet ever since, until his death last December.

'Our domaine's wines in the late 1980s were not as good as they should have been. They lacked concentration. The first thing to do was to suspend the use of fertilisers and herbicides; to start ploughing the vineyards again and to prune shorter and stop over-cropping. In October 1990 we began testing biodynamism. By 1998 we were completely biodynamic.'

And it works? 'Let me give you an example. Back in 1989 the vines in our Bienvenues vineyard were riddled with *court-noué* (grapevine fanleaf virus). Common sense suggested we rip them up. Instead we adopted the biodynamic approach. They recovered. Someone who was researching *court-noué* came down last year and tested the vines. His analysis said that the viral attack was so prevalent the vines should be dead. Instead they are very healthy plants.'

PULLING TOGETHER

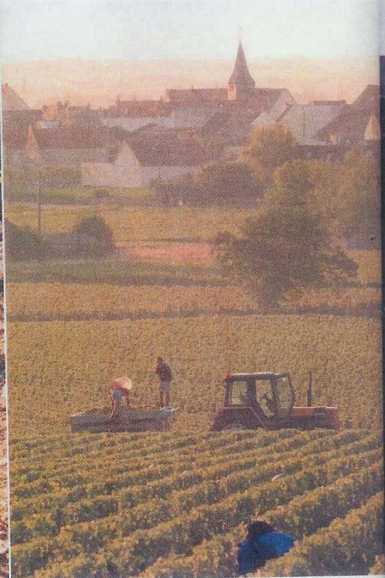
I ask Leflaive what else she does at the domaine that others don't. How has she achieved such quality today? 'Our *modus operandi* is logical and consistent. And we are a united team. Everyone not only has the same objectives, but also shares the same approach to achieving those objectives. It is a good team, and I am able to give them lots of autonomy.'

'The next thing is never to be satisfied. I am continually considering ways we can improve. Our biodynamic system concentrates the mind on the essentials. We don't get easily distracted.'

PHOTOGRAPH: NICK ROCK/CEPHAS



Above: the Leflaive approach sees much of the viticulture left to nature in her Puligny vineyards such as Les Pucelles (right), but there's no beating a hands-on assessment



I refer to the domaine's purchase of a small parcel of Le Montrachet in 1991, correcting an anomaly where no domaine based in Puligny owned a vine in this magic vineyard. 'It seemed very expensive then: FF2 million the *ouvrée* (0.04ha). But now people are talking about €1 million an *ouvrée*!' Would she like to acquire more? 'Yes; but it's difficult,' she explains. 'All too often there are two prices: the official one, on which all taxes and commissions are based, and a higher price. The difference is an in-the-back-pocket tax-free bonus for the vendor. I can't work with a system like that.' Nevertheless, she adds, the domaine recently acquired a few parcels of Chassagne-Montrachet, La Maltroie.



In an ideal world, where else would she like a vineyard? And whose wines does she most admire? 'I love the wines of Chambolle-Musigny,' she replies. 'But I like a challenge. I'd be very happy to have a vineyard – in the same way we have recently expanded in the Mâconnais – in the Côte Chalonnaise, or in Monthélie. Somewhere less well known.

'As for favourite wines, it's the person behind the wines that attracts me. I need to feel kindred with their personality and

philosophy. Aubert de Villaine, for instance: a man of total moral and intellectual integrity.' Marc Angeli of Thouaré in the Anjou and Guy Bossard of the Domaine de L'Ecu in the Muscadet are two others she cites.

A complement to biodynamism is an abhorrence of moves to genetic modification. In 1999, together with Pierre-Henri Gagey of Maison Jadot and Michel Boss, husband of Véronique Drouhin, Leflaive helped found the association 'Terroirs et Vins de Bourgogne'. There are now 120 members, spawning similar organisations in other regions. And the 500-strong 'Terroirs et Vins du Monde' has become an increasingly powerful lobby group.

Leflaive's nomination as the world's top white winemaker speaks not only of the quality of her wine, but of the affection and respect in which she is held. Adam Brett-Smith of Corney & Barrow, her leading UK client, applauds her 'combination of humility with a total self-belief' qualities seen when we go into the cave to taste the 2005s. It is early days, but they seem magnificent. There is little that needs to be said. We taste in silence. Serenity is all around... **D**

Clive Coates MW is based in Burgundy. His book, *The Wines of Burgundy* (Mitchell Beazley) will be published in 2007.

BIODYNAMISM: PURE NATURE OR MUMBO-JUMBO?

Biodynamism is the logical conclusion of an ecological, holistic approach to agriculture. All fertilisation, herbicides, insecticides and other treatments are forbidden, except specially produced, organic compost, and copper sulphate and sulphur solutions to counteract mildew and oidium. The vines, however, can be treated by quasi-homeopathic solutions of vegetables and herbs such as valerian, nettle, yarrow, chamomile, oat and dandelion, plus silica and even arsenic. Moreover, all vineyard and winery procedures are undertaken according to the

cosmic calendar. This takes into account the position of the planets and the astrological influences as well as the moon. There are water signs that favour the growth of leaves: Cancer, Scorpio, Pisces; earth signs for the roots: Taurus, Capricorn, Virgo; flowers: Gemini, Libra, Aquarius; and those which govern the growth of fruit: fire signs like Aries, Sagittarius and Leo. The objective is to establish a healthy, vigorous vine, which will not only be more resistant to outside influences but will produce a wine with a signature of its terroir.

NEXT MONTH: JEAN-NICOLAS MEO, VOSNE-ROMANÉE

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