

# *pipette*



the indie mag about natural wines

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# BELLA CIAO

Julie Balagny,  
partisan of the Beaujolais

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A DOG I DON'T RECOGNIZE BOUNDS OVER AS I cross the threshold into Julie Balagny's courtyard in the hilltop hamlet of Les Thorins. He's a muscular, row-colored mutt, waist-height, brimming with curls of dirty fur. Balagny follows him, screaming maniacally at the dog to get down. She explains the dog belongs to Magali, her girlfriend and collaborator of two years, who waves from a picnic table at the other end of the courtyard in front of the farmhouse.

"He only listens to me when Mag is here," Balagny complains. "When she's away, forget about it. Down!"

It's a familiar ritual, though previously Balagny's fury was directed at a different dog, an energetic brown pup called Poppette, who trots behind the larger dog today. Unusually for a winemaker in the Beaujolais, Balagny is a pale, photogenic blonde of around forty, Parisian by birth, with electric blue eyes. I have often wondered whether the comical imprecations she hurls at her dogs are a way of playing against type—a way of showing arriving guests that this Parisian will curse like a farmer without hesitation. Today she wears her trademark kerchief in her hair and a clean sky-blue shirt that throws her sunburn in high relief. It is July in a precocious, slightly arctic vintage, when heat and humidity have conspired to double the work of vigneronns.

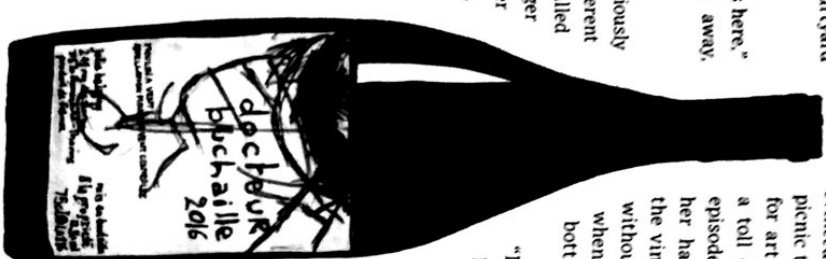
Balagny nonetheless appears strikingly calm, once the dogs have relaxed. "It's nice to be on time this year," she agrees, referring to her vineyard maintenance. "It's a good team now."

She credits the help of Magali and a neighbor, Pascale Buchaille, a former winemaker who

inspired the name of her 2016 Moulin à Veu "Pocteur Buchaille." "He knows the vines perfectly. You can leave him alone and you know the work will be done well," she says, adding, as if there were any doubt, "I'm in the vines a lot too, of course."

Balagny's dedication to her vocation is legendary. But her winemaking operation hasn't always evinced the tranquility it does around her picnic table this evening. Her natural affinity for artists and eccentrics occasionally takes a toll on efficiency. I recall hearing of one episode when she was beside herself because her harvesters had taken hallucinogens in the vines. This season she has been working without the usual cast of interns. "It's better when it's like this," she admits, placing two bottles on the table.

"Instead of always having to be behind people, worrying about not explaining things well."



It's been over a year since I last visited Balagny. I used to frequent her cellar, in 2015-16, when I lived nearby, researching a book project on the Beaujolais. Inquiring about her 2017 vintage, I learn that her calm belies what has been an agonizingly stressful year. Last August, Balagny discovered an invasion of wood-boring beetles in her tank room, which required a costly, last-minute pest control intervention the week before grapes were to come in. Balagny, who farms organically and eschews all pesticides, was terrified for her cellar's native yeast populations. Harvest came, and grape yields were minimal, averaging around 10HL per hectare. To top it all off, during fermentation, analyses of certain tanks showed a minimal, but alarming presence of *brettanomyces* (brett), the loathsome, uninvited guest of wild yeasts, which can give rise to unclean, dairy-farm aromas.

"We put the wines in barrel and we didn't taste for several months," Balagny says, exchanging a wry glance with Magali. "That way we didn't get wry hairs."

I have a certain Parisian friend, an investment manager, who has a heart of gold but who cannot shake certain hilariously blithe upper-class mannerisms, like placing his scooter helmet where he places when he enters a restaurant. I was once tickled to learn that Julie Balagny hails from the same Parisian suburb as him: Saint-Cloud, one of the wealthiest towns in France. She is a descendant of Georges Balagny, a pioneering Gilded Age photographer. Much of her family works in agriculture, working summers at the restaurant of a chateau in the Roussillon. When she narrowly failed to obtain entry to a select university degree program, she decided to move to Perpignan, in the South, and pursue a course in winemaking. She worked for the Château de Rey for several years before becoming winemaker at the biodynamic domaine Terre des Chardons, located in the sunny southwestern Rhône region of the Gard. She spent a decade there before deciding, in 2009, to strike out on her own in the Beaujolais. Now, after twenty years in provincial winemaking communities, Balagny's origins are hard to discern. Her enthusiasm for rural life extends even to its limited ethnic dining options.

"Anything with raw fish, lots of raw fish," she says into the phone, when Magali asks her to give her take-out order to friends fetching Chinese food in Mâcon.

"But it's a Chinese restaurant," I point out. "Chinese restaurants don't do raw fish." "It's pan-Asian," Balagny clarifies. "Chinese-Thai-sushi, etc."

On the evening I first met Balagny, back in summer 2015, we ordered pizza from a place in nearby Romaneche-Thorins called Pizza Movie, where each pizza was titled after a popular Hollywood film, e.g. Austin Powers. The Beaujolais is not

known for its restaurant scene.

Since 2009, Balagny's name has been closely associated with the cru de Fleurie, where she was able to acquire 3 hectares in the lieu-dit of "En Rémont." High and sloped, it is a labor-intensive site in north of the appellation, near Chénas, abutting a stretch of woods and a pasture where Balagny keeps a cow and a donkey. Two-thirds of the parcel are composed of vines just over a hundred years old. The other third are younger vines of about thirty years' age, which are occasionally bottled separately as a cuvée entitled "Cayenne."

Balagny produced her first vintage in the winery of fellow Fleurie winemaker Yvon Métras in Grille-Midi, one of the top climates in Fleurie. (The two were an item at the time; she still considers him a valuable mentor.)

The following year she moved into her own winery in the Beaujolais-Villages village of Vauxrenard, where she produced her next four vintages. Her work at Terre des Chardons had familiarized her with natural wine retailers, who were quick to acclaim her Fleurie. Early supporters like Olivier Roblin at Paris' Les Caves du Panthéon soon gave rise to a cult surrounding Balagny's complex, rare Fleurie wines. Stylistically, her wines combine the length and finesse of more senior practitioners of cool-carbonic maceration in the crus of Beaujolais—greats like Yvon Métras and Guy Breton—with a scrappy daring that is all her own. She often seems slightly more willing to risk brett and volatile acidity for the sake of purity. The response from a younger and more radical natural wine market has been overwhelmingly positive, making Balagny's wines among the rare cru Beaujolais bottles that trade on the gray market.

In 2014, preparing to move to her present cellar in Les Thorins, Balagny sold the rest of her wine stock to Roblin, rather than put the bottles through press, stress of a move. Her 100-year-old vintages, which she'd purchased in Romaneche-Thorins, disassembled, and transported to Vauxrenard, was disassembled again and transported back.

into the 18th-century farmhouse where Balagny now works.

2014 was another complicated vintage.

"It was the fact of discovering a new winery that behaves totally differently in terms of temperature," she explains.

Certain barrels lacked the clean finesse of others. The good ones she assembled—combining the old-vine and young-vine juice—as a Fleurie cuvée called "Chavot," in tribute to a bongo-playing local drunk called Chavot, who frequents the bars in Fleurie. The others she reassembled in tank and finally released in 2016, as a Vin de France entitled "Simone," an invented punk-grandmother figure, because the wine was still "a bit rock and roll."

We drank "Chavot" with the Austin Powers pizza back in 2015 when I first visited Balagny in Les Thorins. Popette the dog ricocheted around the courtyard like a Tasmanian Devil. A lamb called Jojo circled the picnic table, leaving swarms of turds in its wake. There were chickens and ducks, too: the courtyard was a zoo. I told Balagny I was hoping to move to the Beaujolais, and with a kindness that still astounds me she offered to help find me a place to live. I was to drink a lot of "Chavot" that season.

Some great winemakers carefully guard the secrets of their working methods. Balagny prefers to have an audience of volunteers. There is a continual stream of friends lending a hand to anything from pressing to racking to bottling. She used to grow hoarse shouting instructions over the din of pumps to neophytes like myself. I came to appreciate the precarious nature of her life as a female winemaker running a solo operation in the Beaujolais. Established winemaking families rarely have to worry about finding themselves short-handed. It takes a team of three people merely to assemble Balagny's ancient unmechanized press, a jacuzzi-sized contraption known locally as an *américain*.

The word most often used by her natural winemaking peers to describe Balagny's vinification methods is "folkloric." Grape pressing is a day-long affair lasting far into the night, with friends and cellar-hands taking turns strenuously pushing the bar of *l'américain* to advance the press ever tighter, allowing for an infinitesimally slow, aerated extraction of juice. (Balagny's erstwhile mentor Yvon Métras also uses a vertical press, but his is motorized and can be tightened at the push of a button.) Whole-cluster fermentation is cool and typically very long, from three weeks to over a month. Balagny usually refrigerates her harvest before vatting, though to a lesser degree than her natural winemaking forebears in the region, and tanks are gassed with CO<sub>2</sub> at vatting to expel oxygen.

"I don't own a fridge," she explains, referring to a cooling chamber for grapes. "So, I often borrowed a fridge space, and by the time we brought the harvest back, it heated up a bit."

She cites the "glacial" temperature of her tank room as a factor in the length of her fermentations: nothing fermented over 13°C in 2016, for example. These days she borrows a wood stove to gently heat the room during fermentations to make sure the chill doesn't stop the yeasts entirely. *Élevage*—the progression of the wine between fermentation and bottling—occurs in old barrels, housed in a very cold cellar across the courtyard beneath the farmhouse kitchen. She bottles by hand, without filtration or degassing, using an old four-spout machine with a slow pump.

Asked about sulfur use, Balagny is transparent to the point of pedantry. The boutique scale of her winery permits a barrel-by-barrel response: she'll cite from memory which barrels received sulfur dosage during *élevage*, and how much, and which received none until assemblage before bottling.

A similar philosophy guides Balagny's approach to assemblage and labeling. She feels each new assemblage merits the creation of a new label, to

signify a new wine. Her labels bear names, usually of fictional or semi-fictional characters, and figures drawn by a local artist called Delphine Chauvin. What seems like anarchy is in fact an efflorescence of creative scruple.

Referring to her Fleurie, she explains: "With one parcel, one place, we make two wines, vinified the same way, harvested the same way—and I have two different wines, two different behaviors in tank."

In the 2015 vintage Balagny took on one hectare of high-stemmed, thin-soiled vines in the "Au Mont" *lieu-dit* of Moulin-à-Vent and another hectare of basic Beaujolais in the village of Émeringes. The result has been an expanded cast of characters on her wine labels. In 2015 she dubbed her Moulin-à-Vent "Mammoth," or mammoth, a reference to the wine's size and richness in that famously hot vintage. The wine was lighter in 2016 and she felt it strange to call it a "mammoth," so she retitled the wine "Docteur Buchaille," in reference to her neighbor who helps in the vineyards. Hail storms in 2017 left her with minimal yields in both Moulin-à-Vent and the Beaujolais in Émeringes. So, she assembled the two wines as a *vin de France*—a wine produced outside of France's AOC system—and calls the resulting blend "Docteur Buchaille feat. Ordinaire," a tribute to the wine bar Ordinaire in Oakland, California.

"The fruit isn't jumping out," she observes as we taste the vin de France, which was bottled three weeks prior. "I won't sell it before September. Two months sitting there without moving will help."

Her 2017 Fleurie is already in a more flattering stage, showing long notes of licorice. As usual, her lone parcel in "En Rémont" yielded two different wines, but she liked them better assembled as one. She calls the resulting wine "Bella Ciao," after the Italian anti-fascist resistance song: "Oh bella ciao, bella ciao, bella ciao ciao ciao..."

"What I did well was to always stay very small," she acknowledges. "After five years I took a loan [to purchase the winery in Les Thorins]. But for the first five years I stayed very, very small."

The boutique scale of her production, and her longtime relationships in the natural wine world, meant her wines were renowned from the get-go. She was able to be discriminating in choosing her clientele. Today her wines are among the most expensive of the Beaujolais, alongside those of Yvon Métras, or the conventional biodynamic Domaine Jules Desjournays. Almost 90% of her 2016 vintage was sold on the export market.

But where some winemakers measure success by how much they sell, Balagny measures it by how much she manages *not* to sell. "The wine needs time sometimes," she says. "And the economy is no longer adapted to that."

Each year she tries to hold her wines longer before release, and to spread sales throughout the year. She muses about waiting until January 2020 to release her 2018's. For now, she's proud to have kept a small stock of 2015 and 2016 wine.

"With my very old vines, on the slopes, with low yields—even with the conditions like that, which are hyper unfavorable, I was able to hold wine back," she affirms, adding, "Even if in very small quantities."

Making wine naturally, she says, requires that one *donner du temps au temps*, or leave time to time. The phrase derives from *Don Quixote*. It is a surprisingly common one in France, cropping up often in political discourse, usually as delaying tactic. Balagny restores some of its fatalistic wisdom. The waiting—and the life lived while waiting—is an end in itself. Magali tells us a terrific story about hunting pheasants with a car in her native Bourg-en-Bresse. A knock soon sounds on the barn door across the courtyard in the twilight; it is their friends arriving with pan-Asian take-out. The dogs go wild. 🐾

For all the difficulty she's overcome establishing herself in the Beaujolais, Balagny has maintained one counterintuitive advantage.