

The Queen of Chablis

Clotilde Davenne is well known to Sweden's wine lovers and not least for readers of Allt om Vin. The photographer Claes Löfgren visited Chablis in November and of course took the opportunity to meet one of his favorites in the wine world. Come along to winemaking star Clotilde's estate in the village of Pr hy, which this year celebrates 20 years under its own flag.

Text & photo | Claes L fgren

Clotilde Davenne loves making wine, but also running and walking in nature.

CLOTILDE
DAVENNE

Age: 63.

Family: Married to Sylvain, son Arnaud, 45, two grandchildren Sacha, 7, and Lucas, 3.

Lives: In a small house among vineyards outside Auxerre.

Does: Winemaker. I love to making wine. Running and walking in nature, discovering France and visiting vineyards around the world.

Favorite drink: Bubbles in all forms.

Inspired by: All my female winemakers and cellar managers in our association "Femmes de Vins de France" who all make wines in their own way. They give me lots of energy.

The story of Clotilde Davenne begins in Burgundy. She grew up on a farm and learned early on to recognize scents, tastes, colors and to love nature. This eventually led her to a wine education program in Dijon in 1985.

There she was surrounded by guys because female winemakers were considered odd at the time. She decided to show that she could do an equally good or a better job. Two years later, she traveled to California's Central Coast, where she worked for champagne company Deutz in Arroyo Grande.

Her interest in sparkling wines was piqued, and so was the dream of Champagne. A dream that has stayed with her ever since. A little later, back in France she continued her studies. Clotilde wanted to learn more about working in the vineyard but then also studied marketing.

In March 1989, she joined well-known producer Jean-Marc Brocard, who had established himself in 1973 in the

small village of Prehy outside the town of Chablis. His first words to ambitious Clotilde were: "Put your bags there, we're going to teach you how to make wine!"

The two turned out to be a well-functioning team with success, not least in Sweden where Brocard dominated the Chablis and Burgundy market for many years.

Clotilde goes on to explain how she bought her farm "Les Temps Perdus" which means "Time that has fled", a reference to the hard work in the field.

- "I told Jean-Marc that I had plans to go to Champagne to work there. He didn't like what he heard and wanted me to stay. At about the same time, a neighboring farm had come up for sale and he had scouted it out," says Clotilde.

The farm was old and a bit run down, but it had a hectare that could be planted, which Brocard wanted to buy. But it turned out that the well-known winemaker was too dominant in Prehy, so they said no to the purchase.

- Then Jean-Marc suggested I buy it instead. I would have somewhere to live and I would have the chance to start my own business.

With Jean-Marc's help and loans from family and friends Clotilde was finally able to buy the property. This was in 1991 but it took many years of renovation and loans financed by the grapes that Clotilde managed to sell. It wasn't until 2001 that Clotilde moved into the farm and since she had already gotten used to the idea of to the idea of being a vineyard owner, she accepted the offer to buy 11 hectares of vineyards in Saint-Bris.

Clotilde explains:

- The owner was old and didn't want to sell to his neighbors. Now I had access to really old vines, some over a hundred years old. There was also aligoté planted and pinot noir in Irancy, in addition to the sauvignon blanc that makes Saint-Bris so unique in Burgundy. Around the same time, I was also able to buy part of the Vau de Lune vineyard in Courgis which is classified as Chablis," she says.

2004 was Clotilde's first vintage where she made the wine herself. Until then, all the grapes had been sold to Brocard but now it was time to leave. Both Jean-Marc's sons were working on the farm and it got a bit crowded in the cellar. Clotilde says it was a big step, after 17 years with Brocard, it was time to support herself.

- "But being responsible for the whole process, from vineyard to the bottle, it gave me such a good feeling. I love to being out among my grapes. The Saint-Bris venture turned out to be a success, a rather unknown appellation, completely in the shadow of Chablis. Clotilde likes working with sauvignon blanc

and also to show that you can make really good wine from the grape. Pinot noir is a more difficult companion that must be treated carefully for it to succeed. Something that Clotilde has also proved that she can. The aligoté she was still unsure about at the time, but it would later prove to be another great success.

Finances were definitely a problem in the beginning, for a while she had 42 partners, which grew to 83 in a kind of growers' association, GVF Notre Vigne, made up of wine lovers in her neighborhood.

- "But in 2023 I was able to buy out everyone who had invested money, it became too complicated with the French bureaucracy, says Clotilde with a smile.

The first export market for Clotilde Davenne was Norway. The contact with Johan Lidby vinhandel, who imports Brocard, helped her get a foothold in Sweden. Today, it is Terrific Wines that is representing her, a collaboration that has been very successful for both, including the wine made from the aligoté grape that has become a huge success at Systembolaget.

To be honest, it was a wine that she did not really believe in herself, but sold in bulk. It was Andreas Karlsson and Lars Torstenson at Terrific Wines who persuaded her to present it to Systembolaget's buyers, who immediately took the bait. The timing was perfect, the wine is brilliant and the grape aligoté is a cult today. Everyone is talking about it.

But wine production is, as you know, weather-dependent and Chablis is so far north in France that the risk of hail and frost is always present, regardless of climate change.

So it wasn't always just about success after success. On April 28, 2016 for example, disaster struck.

Frost struck Saint-Bris, Irancy, Chitry, towards Prehy, and everything froze to pieces. A month later, a hailstorm hit the whole area around Chablis, which meant that there was no wine from there that year. A whole year of hard work was in vain. Clotilde Davenne had some wine in stock, but throughout 2017 she was both stressed and depressed. Thanks to good contacts and a female network, she was able to buy wine from southern Burgundy, so she had wine to sell, including Maconnais.

How is everything going today?

- "The economy is much better," she tells us when we met at her farm Les Temps Perdus in mid-November last year.

I came from Nuits-Saint-Georges and she came from New York. She had been home for a few days, but there was no sign of jet lag on her. I felt her as warm and cordial as she always was, ever since we first met 26 years ago.

As for her greatest achievements, one of the reasons is the focus on sparkling wine, Crémant de Bourgogne. This wine is constantly praised by wine writers

and is a big seller in the regular range.

- "When I couldn't get to Champagne, Champagne came to me," says Clotilde.

The bubbly has been expanded with a new wine, a vintage Blanc de Blancs made exclusively from Chardonnay, with the first vintage in 2022. She also makes some Crémant Rosé made from 100% pinot noir. The big news for the year is her anniversary wine, Grande Millesime 2020, originally intended for the 15th anniversary but a bit late conceived and partly delayed due to covid. Everything was canceled. But she had chosen a really good base cuvée and now it had to lie down for 60 months on the yeast precipitation before disgorgement. Normal for her is 18 months. The "secret" is that it contains some aligoté grapes from the very oldest vineyards in Saint-Bris, in addition to chardonnay and pinot noir.

When I'm there in November, Clotilde wants to take me on a tour. Among other things, we set off towards Saint-Bris-le-Vineux where a large part of her vineyards are located. We're going to look at a robot that supposedly is able to navigate itself up the steepest parts of the vineyard. This is where the spraying is done, necessary against the perennial enemy mildew. It's normally done by tractor, but some parts are too dangerous. Clotilde's husband Sylvain meets us. He looks after tractors and the other tools needed for farming and keeps track of all the work in the vineyard. They met in 2006 when Clotilde went to buy a car in Dijon. Sylvain was a salesman then and they recognized each other, old school friends. Well, the rest is history. He is a great support for her and, as I said, takes care of a lot of the practicalities and relieves her otherwise hectic everyday life.

Together with the designer of the robot, we watch as it slowly makes its way up the steep slope. This could be a solution to the problem, before drones take over completely, but may not be fully developed it turns out.

Also out in the vineyard is the other man in Clotilde's life, the son Arnault she had when she was 17 years old. He now has his own family with two children, Sascha and Lucas, who Grandma Clotilde proudly shows off. Arnault is part of the company and is in charge of renting out the apartments, welcoming visitors and manages social media. Things that Clotilde absolutely has no time for.

For the past year, she has also employed a winemaker Filippo Groppi, who takes care of the daily work in the wine cellar. In total, around 20 people are involved in the business on a full or part-time basis. As mentioned, AOC Saint-Bris is a very large part of her vineyards, the appellation consists of the villages Chitry, Irancy, Quenne, Saint-Bris-le-Vineux and Vincelottes. Allowed grapes are sauvignon blanc and sauvignon gris. Irancy is mainly pinot noir and the very rare César grape.

- I put as much effort into the Saint Bris wines as I do on my various Chablis wines," she says firmly. "We don't want them to look like Chablis, we have to create a

own identity for them.

Aligoté is planted on very old vines, her Vieilles Vignes is absolutely brilliant and shows what this grape can give when taken care of in the right way.

Bourgogne Blanc is another favorite, those grapes grow in Prehy, just outside the AOC Chablis border but have the same soil and produce brilliant wines.

To own land in Chablis is very expensive but she has still managed to buy a few more hectares. For Premier Cru and Grand Cru Chablis she buys grapes from growers she has good contacts with.

Later, when we are back at the farm, Filippo is waiting with some tank samples to be assessed. Clotilde and Arnault do it together, he is gradually trained also on the production side. We also walk around the winery.

When you make 21 different wines, there are a lot of tanks to keep track of. The next investment will be some amphorae that she wants to try. The minimal oak barrel cellar is located under the house with about twenty barrels. It is only the red wines, Irancy and Bourgogne Rouge that are allowed to age in old oak, the rest are stored in steel tanks.

A separate department houses the gyro pallets, the machines that automatically shake down the yeast sediment into the bottleneck before disgorging.

This used to be done by hand in Champagne, now it goes like a dance with machines. Only the big bottles have still to be turned by hand, rémuage.

We're talking about 2024, which was a really bad year in the north of France. Frost, hail, rain, then drought.

There was no end to the misery.

- But we were lucky," says Clotilde. We did the right thing at the right time. Sylvain knows what he's doing. But the harvest is small, no doubt about it.

For example, there will be no 24 Aligoté but we have enough of 23 to cover our needs.

The producers who grow biodynamically in many cases lost the entire harvest, so we have to be grateful.

Clotilde grows according to strict rules for Haut Valeur Environnemental 3 which is the most common method of sustainable farming which still leaves some room to cope with disasters.

In the evening we have dinner at L'Aspérule, a small French-Japanese restaurant in Auxerre, a few miles away.

An exciting menu with a fusion of two food cultures.

The wine pairing goes well and ends with a Saint-Bris 2020 that Clotilde inserted.

The next day we head into the town of Chablis. On the main street she has had a small shop for five years, there you can taste the wines and buy them. The shop was not planned, but the butcher who had the premises wanted to close down and asked Clotilde if she would like to take over. She did. And with some joy, she called her friend and former employer Jean-Marc and asked if he wouldn't take the other half. He did. And so now they're neighbors here too, in the very heart of Chablis, where tourists flock daily.

The four-wheel drive Volvo takes us up the slope in the holy of holies. The Grand Cru Chablis consists of seven "climats" Les Preuses, Vaudésir, Grenouilles,

Valmur, Les Clos, Blanchot and Bougros. All except Grenouille are included in the wines that Clotilde makes. Small editions of course, a few thousand of each, mostly sold to restaurants. Tight turns, steep hills, but we'll get there. The harvest is over a long time ago, now it's time for finishing work.

Large tractors lift away old logs that have fallen for age and must be replaced. Frost control here is vital and there are water pipes laid in the vineyards to sprinkle water on the vines so they are protected by a layer of ice during frost. An old saying is that without good plumbers, there will be no wine in Chablis. Traditionally, people also light oil-fired stoves to heat up a few degrees, but this is becoming controversial because of environmental concerns. The threat is considered worse now that climate change is causing buds to burst earlier. If the weather turns like it did in 2024, disaster is a fact. But in good years, the grapes ripen better while the calcareous soil, Kimmeridgian,

Back at the farm, we taste through a large part of the range. The whites are lovely wines with fresh acidity and pleasant finish. Saint-Bris has a new label, La Préféré, and is better than ever. Red Irancy can be a little harsh and needs some ageing but has potential. A big surprise was getting to taste 100% red César which alone was fantastic! It is included with about 10% in the blend for Irancy. The sparkling ones are brilliant, and we should not forget the Crémant Rosé which works in any context.

There has been a generational change in Chablis for few years. For a long time, the excellent cooperative La Chablisienne was completely dominant, except for a number of families like Brocard and others with long traditions and the great houses of the Côte d'Or. Now things are happening and the proportion of women winemakers has increased significantly. Clotilde is now mentioned with great respect in the international wine press and in wine books, such as Jon Bonné's latest book on French wines. Are there female wines? If so, what is it that characterize one? Clotilde sums up:
- In my opinion, a feminine wine is perhaps a wine that showcases the food well and doesn't take over, doesn't dominate.
It can't be said better than that! We look forward to celebrating this queen in her jubilee year, for the warmth she brings to our glasses and for her love of wine.