



## Notes on my conversations with Jean Schaezel

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Jean Schaezel is proud of his vines, his wines and the terroir that makes them special. He is one of a handful of top Alsatian wine makers who firmly believes that there is something special in the sloping vineyards of Alsace and he works to capture their essence in his wines.



Many Alsatians are proud of what other Frenchman view as a corner of France with a chilly climate and a chillier welcome to outsiders. Amongst certain Alsatian wine makers, pride of place has translated into a sense of environmental stewardship that is more pronounced than anywhere else in France. The big names of Alsace are nearly all organic and most are biodynamic. Olivier Humbrecht of Domaine Zind-Humbrecht, who is in Robert Parker's estimation "a genius, one of the best wine-makers in the world" says that he farms not for this year's crop but for the crop in one hundred or one thousand years' time. His decisions are intended to foster the preservation and the ecological amelioration of his vineyards at each turn. Jean-Michel Deiss of Domaine Marcel Deiss is one of the loudest proponents of natural wine-making in France and his wines are

sought out by collectors worldwide. While there has long been an appreciation for organic techniques, wine-makers in Alsace have embraced biodynamics in the last fifteen years with refocused efforts to grow wines that speak of the place they are from and nothing else. Jean Schaetzel is responsible in large part for this ongoing revolution in Alsace<sup>1</sup>.

Owner and winemaker of Domaine Martin Schaetzel, Jean is credited with stimulating the Biodynamic movement among Alsace's top producers and seen as something of a "founding father" in the region. Jean himself gives no indication that this is the case. He is



Damien, Jean and Scott tasting the 2004's

a winegrower and a scientist who lectures frequently at local universities. He is curious about all subjects that offer the potential to improve his vines, his grapes and his wines. Said Jean "I will experiment with anything that I think may be beneficial, regardless of what others think. If it works, I'll repeat the experiment. If it works again, I'll apply it in the vineyard. If it fails, I'll try a second time but if it fails twice, I move on." He bases his biodynamics on what he perceives to be facts and has little time for the spiritual, other-worldly approaches used elsewhere. If he is responsible for change in Alsace, I suspect the clarity of his wines paired with his unassuming approach has given him room to make suggestions to colleagues.

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<sup>1</sup> Biodynamic Wines, Monty Waldin. Mitchell Beazley Classic Wine Library

Jean Schaetzel's grows twenty five individual wines each year on roughly thirty acres of land. His parcels are a diverse mix of Grand Cru vineyards of varied soil types and exposures. Jean separates his parcels and grows the wines he finds most appropriate to each, with Gewürztraminer, Riesling and Pinot Blanc predominating. He works Biodynamically in the vineyard, which you might think of as uber-organic. His actions are intended to have a positive effect on the entire ecosystem over the long term. He is a proponent of composting to increase soil fertility and vine vigor and he fights pests with natural predators. Natural yeasts are responsible for fermentation and Jean fights to preserve them by using only natural fungicides. No chemical fertilizers are used and there use elsewhere is condemned. Jean's wines reflect his approach in the vineyard. Twenty five wines from thirty odd acres and each has a clean, vibrant and unique flavor.



Kaefferkopf. Jean's vines are on the left. Jean depends on the local fauna that grows between his vines to attract beneficial bugs. Good ecology is at the core of Jean's approach.

Because Jean uses no harsh or harmful additives in the vineyard or in the cellar, he has the luxury of letting fermentation takes its course. His two Grand Cru Rieslings from the Kaefferkopf vineyard come from separate sub-soils. The Cuvee Nicolas grows on an outcropping of limestone which is an island in the middle of the all granite vineyard that grows the Cuvee "Granit". Jean has

found that the grapes, which draw different nutrients from their respective soils, mature and then ferment at different rates. Jean does not intervene in the process letting each process go as long as necessary. He finds that since converting to biodynamics he can let the grapes hang longer before picking because they are healthier and more resistant to cooler weather. The fermentation of these healthier grapes is slower and longer than it was before. This is good news for the wine as they gain body weight and density as they stay in contact with the lees. Jean feels the bitterness that often results from extended contact with the lees is rarely an issue because the grapes, and thus the lees, are clean, having never encountered chemical treatments. Jean can not explain exactly why the fermentations are slower since converting to biodynamics, but the improvement he tastes in the wines has convinced him to stay the course. What's more, the extended contact with the lees increases the natural sulfur dioxide in the wine allowing Jean to add only minimal amounts of sulfur to protect against oxidization. Leave a bottle of Jean's wine open for five days and more often than not, you will not be able to taste the oxidization that ruins lesser wines in half the time. Healthy grapes make healthy and long lived wine.

Jean is a quiet, rather unassuming man whose intent is to make wines that express their place of origin. He truly lets his wines do the talking. Tasted side by



The tasting room at Domaine Martin Schaezel. The larger barrels contain an entire year's crop from one of his many vineyards.

side, his Grand Cru Kaefferkopf Cuvee Nicolas and Granit Rieslings seem to be made from different grapes in different climates. The Nicolas, grown on the island of limestone, is delicate, floral and seductive as the better viogniers from Condrieu can be. It is a wine that inspires delicate sauces and the lightly poached white fish. Nicolas' neighbor Granit is firmly entrenched in the tradition of northern European Riesling. It smells broad and deep with hints of petrol and tarmac one might expect from Grand cru Riesling while remaining crisp and fresh on the palate. The backbone of this wine leads the one towards darker flavors of halibut or salmon seared or grilled skin side down and dusted with sea salt. While these differences may intimidate some consumers, they inspire Jean Schaezel to continue on the path he has chosen. There are many labels to choose from, but the surprisingly clear differences between wines can serve as an ideal education to the neophyte. What better way to understand the concept of terroir?

The economic ramifications of Jean's passion and the choices he makes in the vineyard are easier to understand if one compares his Grand Cru wines to those of his more southerly neighbors. Imagine the same philosophy applied to any of the Bordeaux first growths. While it would be fascinating to taste and compare Merlot bottlings from one part of Mouton to another, how would they ever create clear brands? Consumers purchase Mouton knowing that they will have a blend of grapes from one of the world's finest vineyards. There is only one 1961 Mouton-Rothschild and this makes it easy to buy and understand for those willing to spend the money. There are however 25 Domaine Martin Schaezel wines from 2001. Beyond grape varieties, there are vineyard plots and different levels of sugar to understand before choosing the right bottle for any given situation. I suspect Jean would be horrified if he were obliged to blend all his

grapes into even just ten different bottlings. Flavors would be muddled and the clarity that marks his wine would be lost. Jean prefers to make as many different first growths as the vintage and soil allow.

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Each of the barrels that Jean uses to finish his wines prior to bottling has a different intricately carved stopper at the base. In the low light of the cellar, they are hard to see and easily missed. They are examples of understated artistry consistent with Jean's approach to winemaking.

