

# GILBERT & GAILLARD

INTERNATIONAL

## THE REVENGE OF THE CRUS BOURGEOIS

AFTER A SOMEWHAT TURBULENT HISTORY

**SAINT-CHINIAN AND FAUGÈRES:**  
TERROIR WITH A CAPITAL T

**VOLCANIC WINES:**  
AMAZING ITALY

**D.O. RUEDA:**  
THE BEST SPANISH WHITE WINE?

**STARS AND WINE:**

SOFIA VERGARA AND JON HAMM

Saint-Omer,  
aging director  
château  
lenne



MER 2015



Frédéric Guégen has been chairman of the Chablis growers' organisation, the Fédération de Défense de l'Appellation Chablis (FDAC), since 2011

# Territory CHABLIS

A CROSSROADS OF CULTURES

*Deeply rooted in the Cistercian traditions introduced by the monks of Cîteaux Abbey in the 12th century, Chablis has retained the same exemplary purity whilst adjusting to the needs of the modern world. The focal point of human endeavours, which even now still revolve around a quest for spirituality, is a wine tinged with gold and displaying the delicate aromas of a bountiful land, whose quality continues to improve with every vintage.*

By Alexandra Reveillon

Photographs BIVB / IBANEZ A. - BIVB / GESVRES J.

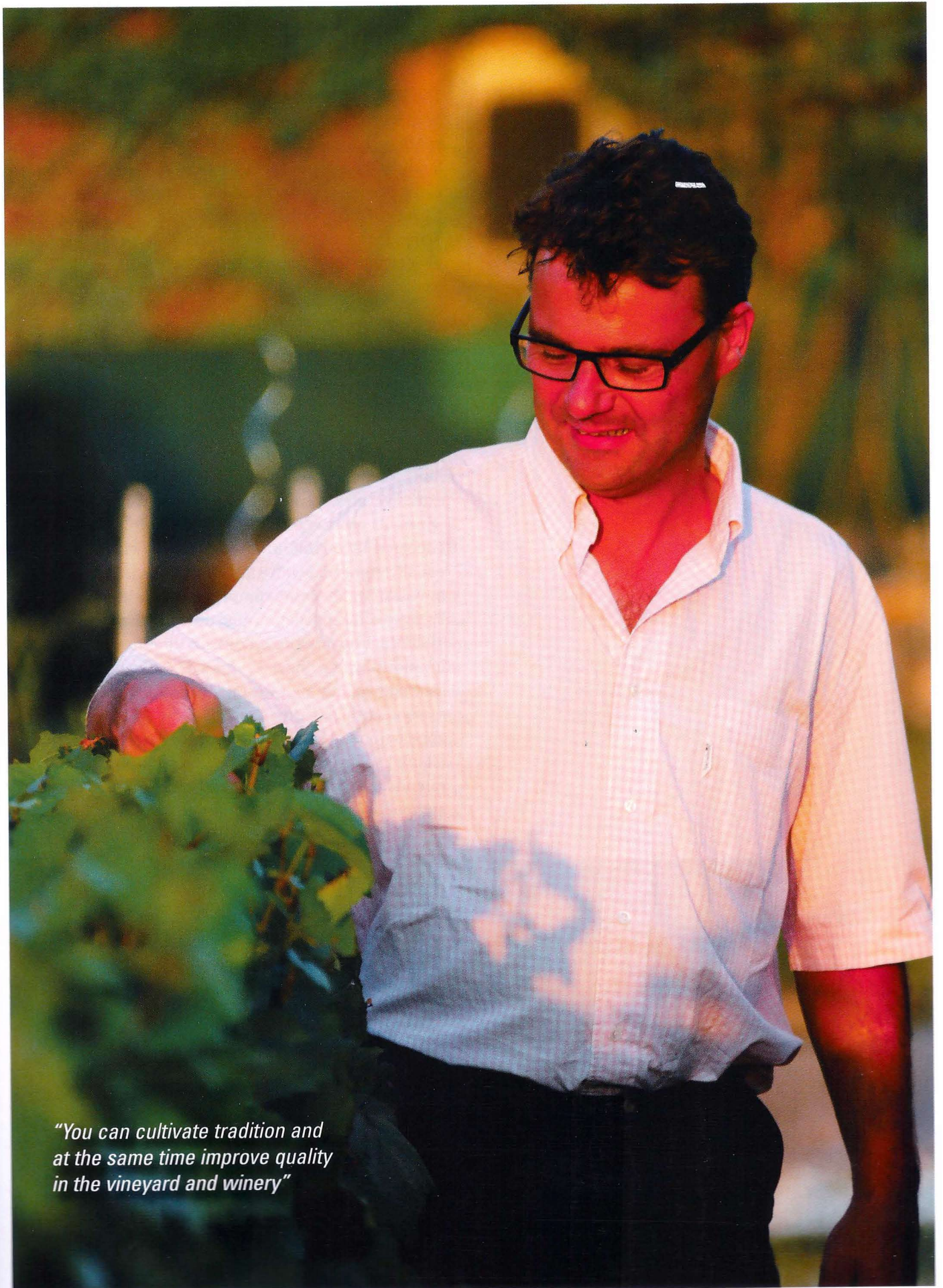
# CHABLIS

TERRITORY



Chablis feels like it should be one of France's largest wine regions. Yet, despite its excellent and long-standing reputation, it in fact only covers 5,000 hectares – a drop in the ocean by global wine standards. The wines of Chablis owe their reputation not only to Chardonnay, but also to the wide array of soil types that have been home to vineyards since Antiquity. Comprising limestone and marl originating in a geological period older than the Jurassic – the Kimmeridgian – these fertile soils enhance the varietal character of the king of Burgundy grape varieties. The rest is a story of men and women.

The origins of Chablis are inseparable from the history of the Cistercian monks. It all began in 1098 when Cîteaux Abbey was founded a few kilometres south of present-day Dijon. Here, farming the land brought a new dimension to spirituality. Passionate about vines, the hermits perfected techniques that are still in use today. Their quest for purity and simplicity was rapidly replicated elsewhere. One hundred and sixteen years later, in 1114, France's largest Cistercian church – Pontigny Abbey – was built in the heart of the Auxerre region, some fifteen kilometres from Chablis. Observing a vow of silence and poverty, the monks transformed the region's wines into a symbol of their spiritual journey. It would take only a few vintages before Chablis developed an aura that would extend far beyond the walls of their sacred enclosures, marking the rise of a wine region that is still alive and well, over 1,400 years after it was established.



*"You can cultivate tradition and  
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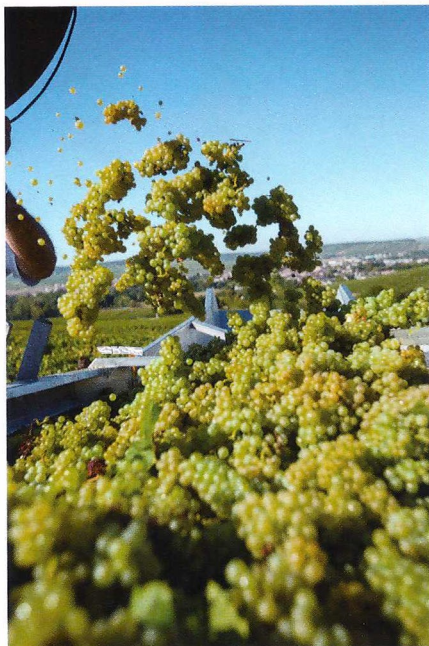
Chablis' soils, a legacy from the Kimmeridgian, still contain fossils like these ammonites.

The legacy left by the Cistercian monks is still tangible in Chablis. Over the centuries, their quest for spirituality has continued to find expression in a profound respect for the land which is mirrored in wines from the Chablis region. Grown along the banks of the Serein, between Ligny-le-Châtel in the north and Poilly-sur-Serein in the south, Beines in the west and Viviers in the East, its white wines are divided into four controlled appellations that were officially recognised at the end of the 1930s: Petit Chablis, Chablis, Chablis Premier Cru and Chablis Grand Cru.

## FOUR DISTINCT APPELLATIONS

Although they share the same grape variety – Chardonnay – and the same soils, each one cultivates its own specific characteristics. Easy-drinking Petit Chablis has its roots in younger soils, accentuating its freshness and exuberance. AOC Chablis is both the best known and the most extensive area, accounting for 66% of all the region's wines. Its aromas of citrus fruits and white flowers have endeared it to wine lovers the world over, and make it equally enjoyable with seafoods and heartier dishes such as veal stew. The more complex wines bearing the Chablis Premier Cru appellation are designed for laying down. Their highly pronounced identity mirrors the distinct locations where they are grown. Refined and elegant, they pair equally well with poultry in a sauce and cooked seafood dishes. Lastly, Chablis Grand Cru is the rarest appellation. It is grown in just seven localities – also referred to as 'climats' as in the rest of Burgundy – and extends over just one hundred or so hectares. The wines are made to standards of pinpoint precision and Chablis Grand Cru has a definite uniqueness about it. Lush and pure, it fully reveals itself with delicacies such as lobster or rock lobster.

Frédéric Gueguen is very familiar with the distinctive features that characterise each appellation. A wine grower in Préhy, on the family estate he created with his wife, he has also been the chairman of the Chablis growers' organisation, the Fédération de Défense de l'Appellation Chablis (FDAC), since 2011. The organisation seeks to perpetuate the legacy of the Cistercian abbeys by ensuring the spirit of Chablis remains intact, without compromising its modernity. "You can cultivate tradition and at the same time improve quality in the vineyard and winery", explains Frédéric Gueguen. "The latest generation of wine growers has studied wine. There is greater control over wine making techniques and vintages are more consistent". Chablis has refused to stay stuck in a 12th-century time warp and has successfully moved with the times. Even the area under vine has evolved. "Hectareage has increased seven-fold in 35 years", points out the FDAC chairman.



## UNDER THREAT FROM FORGERIES

The change has not caused an imbalance in the supply-demand ratio: according to the growers' organisation, extending the area under vine has had no effect on wine prices. "Vintages come and go seamlessly. We are fortunate not to have any excess inventory, or almost", states the organisation proudly. The region's success has sparked a much less commendable business: the spread of fake Chablis. The fraud originated in the United States in the 1980s, when the four Chablis appellations were all the rage in the US market. With childlike simplicity, labels stating 'Chablis' were stuck on bottles and the wines sold as such. Despite the fact that the quality bore no resemblance to the original wine, unscrupulous counterfeiters passed off Sauvignon and Pinot noir as Chablis across the country, with no consideration whatsoever for the varietal content of the original version. "They even went so far as to market red Chablis!", quips Frédéric Gueguen.

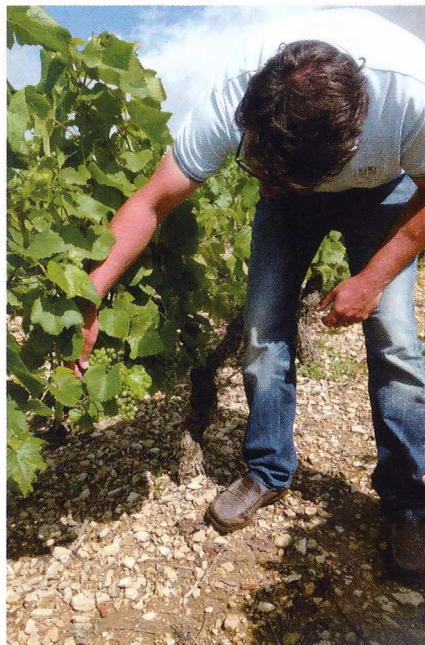
Faced with a potential threat to its image, the FDAC fought back. Inspired by the stance taken by Champagne producers, who had successfully created a brand image for their wines, Chablis set out to win back its name. It has achieved mixed results. Since 2003, no new wine grower can display the appellation on bottles of wine grown outside the appellation area. Regrettably, the change does not include the hundreds of firms established before the agreements were signed, who are still allowed to use the Chablis name, irrespective of their wines' actual composition. "From an image viewpoint, this is unpleasant, but it doesn't penalise our sales in the United States", says the FDAC chairman, putting the issue into perspective. Currently, 70% of wines produced in the Chablis region are exported. The United States account for 7% of exports, ranking fourth after the United Kingdom (26%), Germany (10%) and Japan (9%).

## RAISING THE PROFILE OF QUALITY WINES

Both in France and abroad, Chablis' image is a strategic priority the growers' organisation intends to leverage to bolster economic growth. "We focus strongly on raising the profile of our appellations", admits Frédéric Gueguen. The first issue to be tackled is an increase in price points. "In real terms, our prices have not risen for twenty years", he adds, confident that there is room for manoeuvre. In 2013, low yields forced wine growers to raise their prices and the move had no impact on consumption levels. "People are familiar with the quality of our wines. They are prepared to accept an increase in price, within reason". The choice of wine to spearhead the new drive is obvious: the Grands Crus will be at the vanguard of the move towards raising the



Irrespective of their appellation, all Chablis wines are made from the Chardonnay grape variety.





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profile of Chablis wines. "They are the jewel in our crown but only represent 2% of production", explains the growers' organisation. "It is our task to highlight their uniqueness and push all our appellations upwards".

One thing is certain: Chablis will be able to draw on its ever-improving quality, secured thanks to a thorough overhaul of procedures by stakeholders across-the-board in the four appellations over the last eight years. Like the entire French wine industry, Chablis had to rise to a major challenge at the end of the 2000s when the nation's controlled appellation institute was reformed. New laws introduced in 2007 placed emphasis on quality checks, both internally and externally, to ensure efficient implementation of production specifications. Whilst the FDAC was aware of the significance of the new measures from a quality perspective and complied with the directives, wine growers found them harder to accept, viewing them as outside interference. "It was, and still is, the toughest challenge we have had to face", admits Frédéric Gueguen. "Ultimately, it's an advantage: the reform allows us to be masters in our own house, but at first glance, it seems restrictive".

The checks and certification procedures soon turned the organisation's chairman into a law enforcement officer. Although the internal committees tasked with ensuring wine growers comply with specifications consist of wine growers from the appellation, it is difficult to make people realise that this is not an intrusion into their work environment. "We had to start using quality control terms which is



# CHABLIS TERRITORY



not our initial vocation”, explains the FDAC chairman. “It requires a high level of training”. The wine growers themselves complain about all the extra red tape. “It may feel like it’s taking priority over work in the vineyard, but it is a necessary evil”, admits Frédéric Gueguen. “The industry must manage its own production. It is still a work in progress but the issue is of paramount importance”.

## AGE-OLD TRADITIONS VERSUS TOMORROW’S WORLD

In the very near future, Chablis wine growers will also have to rise to another challenge: treatment of by-products from the wine making process. Until now, pomace, lees and deposit were sent to distilleries in the Mâcon area, over 200 kilometres away from the vineyards, to be transformed into brandy and fuel. A European directive aimed at reducing subsidies to distilleries may put an end to the system. “We were quite happy with the existing system but will not be able to contribute financially if funding paid to distilleries is reduced”, explains the chairman of the FDAC. “The costs would be too high, starting with the transport”. Alternative methods therefore have to be sought. Over the past few months, the organisation has been studying anaerobic digestion with a view to turning by-products into electricity which could then be sold back to the grid. “It is highly likely that we will aim towards this by 2018”, reveals Frédéric Gueguen. So who knows, in a few years’ time we may all be using Chablis to heat our homes!