

33. Vin de Liège



The come-back of Liège wine

recentre



Romain Bévillard & Fabrice Collignon
© Dominique Houcmant

Like a lot of Belgian land, the hillsides of the Citadel, in Liège, and the grounds located in the valley of the Meuse have been cultivated as vineyards for a long time. Belgian wine production started in medieval times and flourished until the 15th century. Thanks to their favourable exposure, the vineyards of the hills along the Meuse banks enjoyed an excellent reputation until they were faced, like other Belgian wines, with a number of difficulties: the « Little Ice Age » (from the end of the 16th century to 1850-1860), the competition of beer and the industrialisation were the deadly blow to the vineyards.

However, since the 1960s vineyards cropped up here and there, replanted by a few vine and wine enthusiasts. The movement of the revival of Belgian vineyards, first driven by amateurs, and paradoxically encouraged by global warming, was the reason behind the appearance of some fifteen professional wine producers from the 1990s. In Liège, however, except for a few vine stocks lovingly cared for by a handful of budding wine growers, there were few ambitious vine growing projects until recently... That was without taking the dynamism and creativity of Fabrice Collignon into account. In his capacity of administrator of La Bourrache, a non-profit organisation, the marketing engineer often had discussions with the trainers of this training association through work in organic growing: « when I complained about the poor yield of vegetable plantations of our land on the hills of Liège, they often told me that the soil was poor and pebbly and would be better suited to vines. As I like wine, I thought that was a great idea... » That is how, barely conceived, the idea for the creation of a Liège vineyard estate was the subject of a thorough feasibility study, started in September 2008. To achieve this task, Fabrice Collignon surrounded himself with a direction team, with different profiles analysed the technical feasibility of the production of a quality wine in Belgium but also the existence of a market to sell those products, by meeting wine growers, plant nursery experts and Belgian, German and French consultants and by visiting projects in Belgium and abroad.

Based on that assessment, the opportunity to launch a company was confirmed. A business plan was then created on this hypothesis: 10 hectares of land, a company... and therefore, a capital that must be build. The creation of a cooperative company was chosen, a legal form that gives the project its full scope while also giving it a social dimension. « We wanted a participation project, in which shareholders could be involved, explains Fabrice Collignon. They will be invited to plant the first vines with us, and later they can help with the harvesting.

That is how, barely conceived, the idea for the creation of a Liège vineyard estate was the subject of a thorough feasibility study, started in September 2008.

////////////////////////////////////

» On 21 December 2010, 27 founder co operators have officially founded the cooperative company « Vin de Liège » before a notary. They should be joined by other co-operators recruited from the general public and enterprises, for 500 euro per share in 2011. Currently they amount to approx. 100.000 euro, and the sales of shares should enable us to raise a capital of 1000.000 euro, to which some 750.000 euro in loans will be added.

While the fundraising is ongoing, the cooperative has started a new preparation phase in the implementation of its vineyard, thanks to the commitment of Romain Bévillard, a young vintner and oenologist, trained in wine growing in the Nantes region and in œnology in Reims in the Champagne region. « Romain is only 26 years old, but he is multi-skilled. It is a disadvantage but also an advantage because he has no earlier prejudices. He will get stuck in and will be able to launch his own wine estate. Furthermore, and it is important, Romain shares the environmental and human values we wish to defend in this project. » As « Vin de Liège » does not wish to get involved in traditional wine growing, with extensive spraying of chemical

products, great attention was given to research of growing methods which are favourable to organic use in the project. « Formerly, explains Romain Bévillard, the vine varieties here were inspired by Burgundy, Pinot noir and a few Alsatian vine varieties... But these are prone to maturation problems, and there also is the high hygrometry which favours sources of disease. The pressure of diseases has increased in the last 30 or 40 years. » That is how the choice of vine varieties went to Régent (red) and Johanner (white, close to Riesling), naturally resistant varieties that produce quality grapes, developed by the German wine growing institutes.

As « Vin de Liège » does not wish to get involved in traditional wine growing, with extensive spraying of chemical products, great attention was given to research of growing methods which are favourable to organic use in the project.

////////////////////////////////////

The density of the plantation was also planned in that sense: it will reach 6.600 stocks/ha to « combine a healthy competition between the vine stocks and mechanisation. It is also a strong tool in the hydric regulation of the vine, because it will force the vine to search its nutrients in depth ». In the search for an authentic product of high quality, and respectful of the environment the project also aims to cover a social dimension: « we want to stay connected with La Bourrache which is a shareholder of the project, says Fabrice Collignon. We wish to involve the trainees of La Bourrache in the vineyard work and give the opportunity to « Vin de Liège » to become a training centre. » This section of activities will take place in the part of the estate which will also be the shop window of the enterprise: the Coteaux de la Citadelle (the Vineyards of the Citadel). This land is located on a steep hill and difficult to work mechanically and will be completed by another surface located in the Lower Meuse, which is more productive





because less hilly. The first vines, initially scheduled for the spring of 2011, will probably be planted in 2012: negotiations for the purchase of the land are ongoing... « That means we will probably have the first harvests in 2015, and that the first bottles will go on sale in late 2016.

In the search for an authentic product of high quality, and respectful of the environment the project also aims to cover a social dimension.

////////////////////////////////////

» Until then the challenge for the promoters of the project « Vin de Liège » is considerable: investors-co-operators interested in this original economic model must be recruited. « It really is not easy, admits Fabrice Collignon. But we notice there is a growing number of people who would like to invest differently: we propose them a concrete project here, far removed from blind speculation. » « Vin de Liège » strives for a capital yield equal to the saving interest rates, or even higher, whilst also allocating a part of the profits to social purposes. « Financial investment in the revival of the Liège vines means supporting the economical regrowth of the region in a healthy and sustainable activity. It is a product filled with symbolism and pride. »

•
Isabelle Masson for REcentre
Interviewee / Fabrice Collignon (Director of the board) and Romain Bévillard (Oenologist-wine producer)

Vin de Liège
Rue du Beau-Mur 48
4030 Liège
Belgium

www.vindeliege.be

Sector • Wine production

Year of foundation • 2010

Number of employees • 1

Turnover • N/A