

Domaine Merlin-Cherrier

Sancerre



Thierry Merlin was the first producer I started with, and he has been one of the most consistent. He works fourteen hectares of vines in Bué, one of the principal hamlets surrounding the old walled town of Sancerre. That town, once a Protestant stronghold, was sacked in the 16th century and again in the 17th during the Wars of Religion. It was a stronghold because Sancerre commands the highest hill above the Loire River, rising above a landscape of hills on the east side of the river (the appellation of Pouilly-Fumé across the river has little of Sancerre's muscular hills and dales).

Bué occupies a small pocket canyon behind Sancerre, and the hills rising above this village on three sides are covered in vines. Bué's soils are composed of Sancerre's two main types: *caillottes* and *terres blanches* (the third important type is *silex*, or flint, and is restricted to a north-south fault line that runs right through the town of Sancerre). *Caillottes*, referring to stones, is a very stony, compact chalk without a lot of clay and marl. Geologically, *caillottes* is Oxfordian Limestone. It's generally found on the lower hills and in the middle north-south zone of the appellation, and it predominates in Bué. This soil makes for perfumed, elegant wines. *Terres blanches*, or white earth (in dry periods, the seashell-rich soil turns white), is found on higher hills--it's a younger soil type than Oxfordian--and dominates in the western arc of the appellation. *Terres blanches* is limestone pebbles and rocks mixed with a good amount of clay marls on Kimmeridgian limestone. The technical term for *terres blanches* is Kimmeridgian Marl. This soil makes for pointedly fruity, rich, long-lived wines.

Bué's wines tend to be influenced by the *caillottes*, making this hamlet's distinguished whites recognizable by their broadly floral aromas, their finesse, and their precision.

Such are Thierry's wines. Quick to smile, hardworking, and a man of obvious intelligence, Thierry made his first wine in 1982 (superb in 2000!). He is the fourth-generation Merlin to farm vines and his fourteen hectares (35 acres) are divided between twelve (30 acres) planted to Sauvignon Blanc and two (5 acres) to Pinot Noir. These hectares are further divided into thirty parcels, all of which are in Bué except for three parcels in the commune of Sancerre and one parcel to the south in the commune of Veaugues. He works these vineyards side by side with two employees very closely—plowing and hoeing are standard here, as is careful pruning to create optimal spacing between vines and shoots to alleviate mildew pressure.

As for the name of the domaine, the property was passed down from Thierry's maternal grandparents, named Cherrier. His father, a Merlin, married one of the three Cherrier daughters.

<http://www.merlin-cherrier-sancerre.fr/index.html>