

# Domaine des Hâtes Chablis



Pierrick Laroche grew up in Maligny, the northernmost village in the Chablis appellation. His father farms 200 hectares (494 acres) of cereals in the outlying hills, and always maintained a few acres of vines to sell the production to the reigning co-op, La Chablisienne (an entity that accounts for roughly one quarter of Chablis's production). Beginning in 1985, his father applied to the INAO for rights to increase his plantings by about an acre and a half and did so every year thereafter. When Pierrick came of age with a passion for the vine, this proved prescient.

Pierrick got his degree in enology at Beaune, did an internship at Villa Maria in New Zealand, and returned home to start life as a grower. He quit his father's practice of using herbicides and reduced applications of fungicide to a minimum, began plowing his vine rows, and worked on a design for a simple gravity-operated winery. He made his first commercial vintage in 2010—just 2,300 bottles, but they garnered him top billing of three stars in France's wine magazine the *Guide Hachett*. For a kid just out of the starting gate, this was a coup. England's MW Rosemary George stumbled upon him around the same time in 2012 at Chablis's annual post-harvest fair. She wrote: "Pierrick Laroche...has taken his family's vines out of the cooperative and made his first vintage in 2010. And very good it is, too, with some firm, fresh minerality."

Didier Picq has known the senior Laroche, a contemporary, since their formative years, and he had heard the tidings of the son. He took me there in the summer of 2013 to taste the wines for the first time. Two things impressed us. First, that Pierrick had a go-slow approach for growth—bottling only the very best of his early production and selling the rest in bulk to the traders until he had a solid base of customers. Second, that Pierrick's Petit Chablis was underpinned with minerality. This class of wine is typically about fruit and little else.

Didier was also impressed by the state-of-the-art German press that Pierrick had bought for himself. He whistled at the sight of it, proclaiming it the best one out there. Pierrick's new cellar is built into the side of a hill, like an old bank barn, so that from one side of the bank or hill the upper level is the ground floor, while from the other side the lower level is the ground floor. Hence, gravity is utilized. That press is on the upper level, where the grapes are received, and the tanks are on the lower level.

Pierrick makes Petit Chablis, Chablis, and Premier Cru—three of the four levels in the hierarchy of Chablis. His wines are raised in steel, undergo full malolactic, and rest on their lees throughout the *élevage*. Much like Didier, he aims for purity and minerality. The difference lies in the ground. Didier is in the south of the appellation, where the soil tends to emphasize the calcareous aspect of limestone, which translates into a mineral salinity in the wine. Up around Maligny, the soil emphasizes the clay aspect, which holds water (good in dry years, bad in wet years), and gives weight, body, a flinty, smoky minerality, and forthright acidity to wine. For what it's worth—and this goes to the other divide of Chablis, that of east and west of the river—most of Didier's vines are on the right bank of the Serein; all of Pierrick's are on that side. The right bank is said to be the precocious side when it comes to ripening, but that is a generality driven by the more southern facing Grand Crus, all lining the right bank.

Concerning the name of the Domain, *hâtes* is an old word that once was an agricultural unit of measure—similar to the English rod, which probably has roots in the pole and rope a farmer would use to direct oxen while walking behind a plow. A rod became the basis of all land measurements leading up to an acre. In the old days, the longer the row, the easier the plowing because of less turns, hence fields for sowing tended to be long and slender. A *hâte* frequently referred to such a field.

As for the name of the family, there are a number of Laroche families in Maligny, the most famous being that of Michel Laroche, who built a domaine under his name into one of the most powerful in the region before merging it with a *négociant* firm in Languedoc in the 1990s. Any relationship between the families of Pierrick and Michel Laroche is, however, lost to history.