

time, bringing up Louise on his own after her mother died very young, but his own smile, his philosophy and persistence gets him through. Raphaël's brother Etienne took over their uncles' vineyards after wine studies at Beaune and after two years delivering the crop to the Cave de Cruet, in 1999 he started the estate, building a small winery. Raphaël joined him in 2001, at which point the pair had 3.5ha of vines. Their father had been a builder, but their grandfather, Albert Saint-Germain, had made Mondeuse, Gamay and Jacquère wines until the 1970s, selling locally and in Valloire, a ski resort in the Maurienne Valley, where he took barrels on the train. Although Raphaël had always been drawn to the vineyards, he chose to do a degree in plant biology. He travelled, in particular spending time in neighbouring mountain valleys, Switzerland's Valais and Italy's Aosta Valley.

The brothers put huge energy into building up the estate, quickly reaching 10ha, and they soon gained a good local reputation. Raphaël had always been keen to embrace organics and they began conversion in 2009 with full certification in 2012. Sometime after this, Etienne, a talented winemaker, ran out of steam and has since taken a back seat, leaving Raphaël in sole charge. The vineyards are almost all in St-Pierre in various plots below the jagged Dent d'Arclusaz mountain, many in sight of the imposing fortress, Château de Miolans. There is a 0.6ha plot in St-Jean-de-la-Porte and in 2017 Raphaël took on 0.4ha of Bergeron from Louis Magnin (recently farmed by Adrien Berlioz). Raphaël enjoys offering a big range of wines and champions Alpine and rare grapes. He has about 4ha of Mondeuse and just over 2ha of Altesse, along with other classic Savoie varieties. Among the rarer varieties are 1.6ha of Persan plus small plantings of Veltliner Rouge Précoce,

Domaine Saint-Germain

The smile of Raphaël Saint-Germain's teenage daughter Louise lights up a room when she serves her father's wines at tastings. Pursuing a programme of wine studies, she will surely be running this fine organic estate one day. Raphaël has not had an easy



Raphaël Saint-Germain is a fervent supporter of organic wine-growing in Savoie.

Mondeuse Blanche, Verdesse, Petite Arvine and Douce Noire. Raphaël's priorities in the vineyard are to adapt to climate change and encourage long, slow ripening of the grapes. He tries to create maximum biodiversity, keeps copper use as low as feasible and aims to keep the soil alive, so biodynamics and plant preparations play a key role.

Fabrice Bouché is the main winemaker and also works at Oeno Conseil. Originally from Champagne, Fabrice came to Savoie for paragliding, but he has 30 years' winemaking experience and is very much a right-hand man for Raphaël. And in 2016 Philippe Gazet became a partner too, focusing on the vineyards. He has worked for years in Savoie vineyards and also looks after an organic garden for Château de Miolans. In addition, there is a permanent team of three women who work in the vineyards – Raphaël is convinced they have a gentler touch with the vines than men. Raphaël is everywhere at once, leading the team, trying to anticipate issues, questioning everything.

In the winery Fabrice works with cool temperatures and, to keep sulphites to a minimum, saturates the tanks with carbon

dioxide before filling. Rather than buying commercial CO₂ gas bottles, he recycles the gas released in the fermentation process. He uses only indigenous yeasts, with chaptalization only if necessary, mostly for Mondeuse. The latter is partly destemmed, partly whole-bunch, depending on the cuvée. The main winery is a clutter of different tanks, and there is a barrel cellar up the road. From 2019, barrel ageing will be in the 17th-century vaulted cellar of Château de Menjoud, where Raphaël is creating a tasting area too. Housing a convent for many years, a private buyer purchased it from the town in 2016. The new owner was keen to renovate and to find new uses for the property; Raphaël proposed planting a 2ha vineyard in the main walled *clos* as well as using the cellars and developing wine tourism.

Domaine Saint-Germain makes a range of classic varietal wines and, increasingly, blends. Most of the wines need time in bottle. For years I have enjoyed Raphaël's whites, especially the way Altesse develops into a harmonious, herbal style after three or more years in bottle. As for the reds, I have been consistently impressed by the light-structured Pinot and the two main Mondeuse cuvées, aged only in tank: the earlier-drinking Les Taillis and the fabulous, brooding Pied de la Barme both evolve beautifully. The plummy, rounded Persan is one of the best examples – the first vintage, 2006, tasted superb from magnum ten years later. The deliciously easy-drinking pair of blends labelled Crac Boum'bu are Raphaël's cheeky response to those shunning the local ski resort trade. The Gamay-dominated red features a mountain biker on the label; the Jacquère-dominated white (pictured on p. 36) shows a skier. More serious blends, which reflect Raphaël's ongoing interest in the grapes of the Valais and Aosta, are the pair named Par Delà les Versants

(roughly, 'the other side of the mountains'): a sumptuous white, vinified in oak from Petite Arvine, Roussanne, Mondeuse Blanche, Viognier, Marsanne and Altesse; and a firm, acidulated red from Gamaret, Pinot, Mondeuse and Persan grown on a dramatic hillside named La Perrouse (the oaked Mondeuse cuvée La Perrouse is being phased out). The first tiny cuvées from the young vines of Domaine du Clos de Menjoud will be released in 2019.

The labels may be challenging but they are printed on environmentally friendly paper, made partly from grape bunch stems, and adorn lightweight bottles. About 40% is exported, mainly to the US, Canada and Scandinavia. About 10% is sold direct and the rest to restaurants and wine shops, mainly locally. Raphaël has not ceased to evolve and expand the estate; he helped start the Pétavins group and works hard to promote organics and Savoie as a fine wine region. Louise may have a busy future ahead.

Domaine Saint-Germain

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Map ref: p. 180, D4

Vineyards: 14.5ha

Certification: Ecocert

Visits: Tasting room,
preferably by appointment

