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# Crossing mountains, conquering the hills

SAINT-PÉRAY, FRANCE

## Hirotake Ooka left Japan to plunge into the life of a French vigneron

BY ERIC PFANNER

“Ooka” means “big hill” in Japanese, so it is fitting that when Hirotake Ooka decided to leave his native Tokyo to take up the life of a French vigneron, he settled in a place where he would face an uphill struggle.

### WINE

In Saint-Péray, where Mr. Ooka has his winery, and in neighboring Cornas, where he owns land, the vines rise precipitously from the banks of the northern Rhône River, stair-stepping up terraces that bake in the summer heat and shiver in the winter, when the snow-covered Alps are visible on the horizon.

This is the Ardèche, a part of France known for its rustic charm, and for a certain insularity.

“In Cornas, they think someone from Saint-Péray is a stranger,” Mr. Ooka said, even though the two villages are merely two kilometers apart, or one and a quarter miles.

Mr. Ooka was not the first Japanese

vineyard owner in France. Suntory, the whiskey producer, acquired Château Lagrange in Bordeaux in 1983 and has investments in several other prestigious properties in that region.

But Bordeaux is different — an outward-looking region whose wine economy was built on trade with Britain centuries ago. Many of its vast vineyard estates are owned by absentee proprietors with little connection to the land. In recent years, investors from China have acquired more than two dozen Bordeaux chateaus.

In the Rhône, where the wine business is largely controlled by small, independent producers and family-owned firms with longstanding ties to the terroir, you don’t come across many foreign-born vignerons — especially not from as far away as Japan.

Mr. Ooka got his first exposure to wine via a bottle of Bordeaux, while on a trip to France to do volunteer work in the 1990s. He said he “fell in love” and decided to attend the University of Bordeaux to learn how to make it.

But when it came time to apply what he had learned, Mr. Ooka said he chose the Rhône because he was attracted by the deep-rooted traditions of the region and its more “artisanal” style of wine-making. This is a place where the vignerons get their boots dirty.

Mr. Ooka has indeed had a big hill to climb. He bought land in Cornas in 2002, but it was not until 2011 that he was able to harvest his first vintage there.

One day, while Mr. Ooka was clearing trees and undergrowth off the three hectares of land, about seven and a half acres, to prepare it for planting, he received a letter containing a fine of €450,000, about \$580,000, with an order to restore the plot to its previous state.





As is often the case, French officialdom proved to be more malleable in person than on paper, and the fine and the order were dropped after Mr. Ooka filled out a missing document.

Still, he had to wait until 2008 to plant vines on the site, because of French regulations restricting the willy-nilly expansion of vineyards. While Mr. Ooka's first Cornas vintage has been biding its time in his cellar, he has also been making wine from rented land, and from grapes that he buys from other growers.

While waiting for his own vineyard to produce, Mr. Ooka also worked with several prominent producers in the area, including Thierry Allemand in Cornas. With Mr. Allemand, Mr. Ooka honed his interest in so-called natural wines — those that are made with low-tech methods and little or no ingredients aside from grapes.

In a clean break from his university training in chemistry, Mr. Ooka has become a natural wine purist, rejecting the use of any sulfur dioxide, a widely used preservative.

While Mr. Allemand also works with little or no sulfur dioxide, Mr. Ooka takes the concept of "natural" even further, Mr. Allemand said, basically letting his vines do what they like, rather than intervening to deal with maladies or the vagaries of the weather. This style of winemaking results in a very transparent expression of every vintage, but also carries considerable risk. "When it's good it's very good, but it's a difficult way to make a living," he said.

Natural wines have attracted a strong following in Japan, where Mr. Ooka exports a majority of his production. The wines, sold under the label Domaine de la Grande Colline — "big hill" in French — are also found in New York, London, Paris and other big cities.

"People who live in dirty cities like to compensate with cleaner wine," Mr. Ooka said.

As his wines have gained visibility in his native country, several other Japanese winemakers with a similar philosophy have tried their hand at making natural wines in other parts of France, including Kenjiro Kagami in the Jura and Mito Inoue in the Auvergne.

I tasted some of Mr. Ooka's wines in

his cellar, formerly the well for a chateau perched on a bluff above Saint-Péray. It's a cool, humid place, covered with spectacular growths of mold and mushrooms — clear evidence of natural processes under way.

Like other natural wines, Mr. Ooka's showed certain imperfections and idiosyncracies. Some of them seemed a bit volatile, with funky flavors and aromas that are usually suppressed in more technically polished wines.

Because of their lack of typicity, the wines of Domaine de la Grande Colline sometimes fail to qualify for the use of the appellation in which the grapes were grown.

Cast aside your preconceptions, however, and these can be very enjoyable — the kind of wines that whet your interest in the next sip, rather than making you think too much about the last one. They are wonderfully open and fragrant, with lots of pure, lively fruit.

"There's a lot of passion in his bottles," said Alice Feiring, author of The Feiring Line, a newsletter about natural wines. "I find, like the best of hard-core natural wines, they are wild but compelling. It's easy to assign human characteristics to his wines."

One of my favorites was a 2005 Saint-Péray, a white wine made from the marsanne grape, which showed a deep golden color, a tangy persistence and great freshness, considering its age. I also liked a 2010 Saint-Joseph, a red wine made from the syrah variety; the peppery flavors that are typical of that grape were softened by a disarming floral perfume.

The 2011 Cornas, the first vintage from Mr. Ooka's own vines in this red-wine appellation, is still a bit rustic. It is clear that the wine comes from exuberant young syrah vines and needs some time to settle down, but I think the vineyards have potential.

"To make wine without chemicals, you have to be patient," Mr. Ooka said. In keeping with the natural philosophy, he lets fermentation happen spontaneously, avoiding the addition of industrial yeasts. As a result, some wines stop and start; his 2010 Saint-Péray was only completing its fermentation this spring.



While his winemaking style is unconventional, he insists that it has deep roots in the area — deeper than his own. Before the advent of industrial winemaking in the latter half of the 20th century, most wine was “natural.” Now, along with a handful of other producers, like Mr. Allemand and Dard & Ribo in nearby Crozes-Hermitage, Mr. Ooka is leading a revival of natural winemaking in the Rhône.

“I am a foreigner,” he said. “I see the value of tradition. I’m not trying to do anything new, just trying to make wine how it used to be made.”

He may be a foreigner, but his years in the Rhône Valley have given him an appreciation for the French approach to balancing work and life, in which wine plays an important cultural role.

“My parents worked all the time and they weren’t happy — rich but not happy,” he said. “Working on these slopes is difficult. The profitability is bad. But I can make a living.”



ERIC PFANNER/INTERNATIONAL HERALD TRIBUNE

Hirotake Ooka at work in his cellar in Saint-Péray. He said he chose the Rhône region because he was attracted by its traditions and its more “artisanal” style of winemaking.

