

# Cognoscenti magazine

Because life is short

Peter Michael Winery  
Calistoga, California

Recently **Cognoscenti Magazine** rang up Luc Morlet, winemaker at **Peter Michael**. We said we wanted to talk *terroir*.

(*Terroir?* In *Mazis-Chambertin*, sure. But in Sonoma Valley? *Is there such a thing?*)

*There most definitely is*, Luc assured us.

*Prove it*, we said.

A few weeks later we found ourselves climbing a rugged mountainside in Luc's SUV, the oversized tires grabbing for traction up the dirt track. Our precipitous route led us to a narrow bench overlooking **La Carrière** vineyard. Here we piled out of Luc's 4WD to have a look.



*Terroir matters at Peter Michael Winery*

"The key is to understand each *terroir*," Luc explained. As we gazed out over the crazyquilt of broken volcanic hills that comprises British entrepreneur Peter Michael's property, the concept started to make more sense. When it comes to valley floor wines in California, making the case for *terroir* isn't easy. Here each plot is situated at a different elevation. This is true mountain fruit, with old **Les Pavots** vines planted at 1000-1500 feet and the chardonnay vines set still higher, at 1,600 to 2,000 feet.

To a winemaker who knows his land well (and Luc does), variations in soil, rock and climate can create

an almost infinite number of flavor combinations in the wine. Take **La Carrière**, for instance; this wine's special liquid stone nuances can plausibly be traced to its cemented volcanic ash soil.

"You have to let the *terroir* talk," says Luc. As an advocate of *terroir*, Luc has chosen to accentuate these differences, stressing what is recognizably unique to each vineyard. Sometimes he takes an activist approach, working, for example, with *battonage* to effect minerality.

Luc views himself as a "classic-modern winemaker," one who attempts to pull off "a meaningful marriage of the Old and New Worlds." He seeks to fashion wines that are "rich, balanced, powerful, but at the same time elegant and refined."

We began a panoramic tasting that spanned Luc's career at Peter Michael back to 1997, starting with the **2003 L'après-midi Sauvignon Blanc** (\$38). From vines planted in 1995 at 1100-1,200 feet elevation, the color, a pretty gold/greenish/straw hue, is impressive. There's wonderful minerality to be discovered here, bright lemon-lime characters, white fruit, and something thicker in the meringue category. [Rating: 90]

Luc's grape selection process is rigorous. The chardonnay is sorted cluster-by-cluster, even berry-by-berry. Chardonnays are all unfiltered and were all double decanted before our tasting.

**La Carrière 2002** Chardonnay showed a lovely gold color with greenish tints. On the palate there's a smorgasbord of tangy fruit that runs from citrus to pear. Liquid stone provides a fine mineral basis. **[Rating: 89-91]**

The larger, more expansive **2002 Belle Côte** Chardonnay has a real exoticism to its floral bouquet along with good concentration and balance. **[Rating: 91]**

The **2002 Ma Belle-Fille Vineyard**, sitting at the top of Peter Michael's estate, is perched above the summer fog belt and perfectly positioned to absorb a few extra minutes of sunshine every day. The result is a lush Chardonnay with ripe fruit and smooth graphite mineral textures. It should continue to develop secondary characteristics until perhaps 2010. **[Rating: 93]**



*Luc Morlet in front of the La Carrière vineyard plot.*

Limited production and strict grape selection reach their epitome in the **2002 Point Rouge Chardonnay**. Producing a mere 4-8 barrels average per year, Luc goes beyond fidelity to *terroir* to attain real artistry. (Oh yes, did we mention that at \$150, it's also the most expensive domestic chardonnay sold in the United States?)

There's great color, funk and intensity to this straw-gold colored luxury *avée*. It has superb mouth weight, with fat tropical fruit and vanilla and hazelnut characters hesitant to depart in a finish of great persistence. It's extremely well knit, like all everything we tried here. **[Rating: 95-96]**

The **2001 Les Pavots** (\$115) is pegged at an intense 15.6% alcohol and has a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, and Merlot, more Right than Left Bank in style. Now this we could really grow to like—but let's give it until perhaps 2009 if we can wait that long. There's a blueberry nose considered typical Les Pavots, silky tannins and tremendous flavor concen-

tration. Cedar, anise, tobacco, a touch of chalkiness and a hint of what Luc calls the "Western chaparral"—Sonoma's version of *garrigue*—round out the intriguing spice-box. Precision as well as power is present. **[Rating: 95]**

We tasted both the 1997 Les Pavots and 1997 Point Rouge. Hailing from one of Peter Michael's top three vintages of the 1990s, the benefit of age allowed these wines to demonstrate the true potential of this *terroir* and this winemaker.

The extraordinary **1997 Point Rouge** has plenty of weight in the glass—indeed, it holds all the fat of a top *Montrachet*. Baked characters have faded with the passing time, and hazelnut now shows. The more fulsome butter/cream/truffle aspects are beautifully balanced by leaner hints of pear and citrus rind. Opulent yet delineated, elegant yet approachable—blowout quality. **[Rating: 95+]**

And guess what? Luc thinks 2003 may be Peter Michael Winery's best yet! Got on that mailing list yet?

This article was written by Jeffrey Riggs, Senior Contributing Editor to *Cognoscenti Magazine*.

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