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A Nose for Wine at Morlet Family Vineyards

"These are my diplomas from Galimard." Luc Morlet and his wife Jodie proudly hold up not one, but two certificates he earned at the Galimard Perfume Factory in Grasse, France in 2008. "I liked it so much I went back a second time," he says. For two days this Napa Valley winemaker learned the art of perfumery and blending fragrances at [Galimard's Studio des Fragrances](#). Aromatics, you see, are a driving force in Morlet's winemaking at [Morlet Family Vineyards](#). It shows in a wine he calls La Proportion Dorée.



"The Golden Ratio," as this wine is named, "is the concept of three, a pyramid with the Sémillon being the strong base, then Sauvignon Blanc in the heart and the point is Muscadelle," Luc says. By the time Luc went to Galimard he had already developed this blend, but the reason for it made sense after he learned about how perfume blends are composed. "That's exactly how the perfumers work," he says. "They have the *note de fond* which is the body and that's the Sémillon, that's going to help the perfume stand for 24 hours. Then you have the heart, the *note de cœur*, that's going to be the Sauvignon Blanc. Those are the notes that will evolve for the next eight to nine hours. Then you have the *note de tête* which will be just two to three hours." That's what we call the top note, which in La Proportion Dorée is the Muscadelle. The aromatics in wine, as in perfume, develop over time in the glass, as fragrance does on the skin.

The reason I'm even talking perfume and wine with Luc is that we discovered we both had the Galimard experience in blending perfume in Grasse, only at different times. I even got to smell his perfume, which he named for his wife Jodie. It's very classic and French, fresh, floral and pretty, as is the nose of La Proportion Dorée is when I smell it in the glass.

We're tasting both the 2011 and the 2006 vintage, to "see the progression of the perfume of the aromatics and the texture and how it integrates over time," Luc says. The 2011 is fresh, mineral driven, with notes of oyster shell and honeysuckle, and a green note, perhaps juniper berry. In the mouth there's a racy acidity I didn't expect, and even without malolactic fermentation there's a creaminess and richness, from the body of the Sémillon, the base note of this wine. "The Sémillon is what ages beautifully over time and it's what brings texture and gives the lingering finish," Luc says.



The Sémillon base becomes more evident in the 2006 La Proportion Dorée. The wine is now beautifully complex, with an element of beeswax and a nutty character. The acid isn't as evident and the texture is more seamless. The floral notes have mostly dropped out but the honey notes are stronger. Luc says they produce five to six hundred cases of this wine annually, and they set aside 100 cases to do a second release five years later. "It is to make the point to our customers that look this is a wine you should be saving, you'll have a completely different experience," he says. Indeed, this wine ages gracefully. I can't decide which vintage I like better.



I'm visiting Luc and Jodie Morlet at their wine estate off Highway 29 in St. Helena. They purchased the property which includes a vineyard that they've planted to Cabernet Sauvignon and an old stone farmhouse dating from 1853. [The 1880 Pre-Prohibition Winery] is now their tasting room and barrel room. Outside is the crush pad for harvest operations: sorting grapes, which the team spends a lot of time on, and pressing off whites and fermenting reds.

[...] Luc makes wines for several clients, including [...] Bure Family Wines [...]. Before he started his own label and consulting Luc was winemaker at Peter Michael Winery, where he still consults with his brother, the current winemaker, Nicolas. It's there that he developed new technology for a sorting table, called Le Trieur, with a sloped vibrating screen with small holes to separate out shot berries, for which he got a patent. That's a sign of how meticulous Luc is about making sure the best berries go into his wines.

Le Trieur



"What I am looking for is the crescendo of ripeness," Luc says, not wanting to pick too green or too ripe. He picks at night to retain freshness and aromatics. Again, retaining those aromatics are so important to Luc that he's one of the rare winemakers -- the only one I've ever met who has his own refrigerated truck for transporting just picked grapes from his vineyards to the winery. "I like to preserve the aromatics in the perfume and I like to preserve this maximum quality of fruit. Quality is the freshness."

He also has a gentle touch on his wines, using native fermentations and gravity to move the juice - no pumps, hoses or other machinery. Luc also prefers to crush Cabernet Sauvignon by foot - an activity Jodie and their two children take part in, and he crushes Pinot Noir and Syrah by fist. He never filters or fines, saying those processes tend to strip the wine of proteins and other components that are a support for the aromatics. Once again, you see how important aromatics are to him.

Luc makes a Syrah called Bouquet Garni, just like the little culinary bundle of herbs. The Syrah got this name because the first year he made it, in 2006, "as it was fermenting it was just smelling so much like a *bouquet garni* all those spices," he says. "I had only one hope, that we could capture that and keep it. I don't force it I don't do anything special but it remains just like this year after year."



We taste through the other Morlet wines. Each has a distinct name reflecting the wine's personality, and usually a dual meaning. Ma Douce, a Chardonnay, is named for Jodie. "Ma Douce means my sweetie, but it also means the douce or sweet breeze blowing through this vineyard," says Luc. He also named Passionnement for her, an Oakville Cabernet. Then there's the single vineyard Mon Chevalier Bordeaux blend from Luc's Knights Valley vineyard. Look closely at the label. There are two crossed swords, but one is a light saber, a nod to Luc's son who is a big *Star Wars* and Jedi Knight fan.

Luc suggests we revisit the 2006 La Proportion Dorée now that it has some time to open up. The wine aromas are less beeswax and more liquid minerals. It's become much more complex. We also try the 2011 again. It's not quite as green and the fruit has come out more.

I look forward to tasting it again in five years.

Since my visit to Morlet Family Vineyards, Robert Parker has graced the 2010 Coup de Cœur Chardonnay with 99 points. In February the 2011 La Proportion Dorée was served at a White House state dinner honoring French President François Hollande. Morlet has also just released the 2012 La Proportion Dorée, a richer, fuller bodied version of the 2011.