

A WINEMAKER'S  
PASSION FOR THE  
CRAFT OF A  
MASTER COOPER

by Jodie Morlet



MORLET  
*Family Vineyards*

*L*UC was first exposed to barrels by his grandfather, Pierre Morlet, who was the winemaker for the family's domaine Champagne Pierre Morlet et Fils. Growing up, Luc assisted in the preparation of the barrels. He soaked the barrels with water so that the staves would expand, thus preventing the possibility of losing wine due to a leaking barrel. When Grandpa wasn't watching, the three youngest members of the family, Luc, Paulin and Nicolas, often competed to see who could roll empty barrels the fastest. Pierre wouldn't have considered this to be a step in the barrel preparation process, but the three brothers definitely had fun!

Sadly, Pierre Morlet passed away in 1988. During that same year, Luc visited Monsieur Saintot, the last remaining artisanal cooper (barrel maker) in the Champagne region of Aÿ. The craftsman explained the use of each of his tools and how, after so many years, he was still motivated to make the best barrels possible. Luc interned at Domaine Chanson Père et Fils in Beaune, where his affinity for barrels was further enhanced as he helped with the barrel fermentation, the *sur lies élevage* (aging on the lees) and the weekly *bâtonnage* (stirring). He also spent time at Tonnellerie François Frères (Tonnellerie is French for cooperage) with proprietors Jean and Noëlle François. It was here that Luc began to understand the effect that French oak barrels, the specific forests from which they come and the various toast levels have on wine.

Luc was at a crossroads. Should he pursue a career as a master cooper or continue his studies toward becoming a winemaker? With four generations of winemaking behind him, the decision was made. Although he chose the winemaking path, his high regard for the cooper's craft never left him.



*Cabernet Sauvignon slowly ages in barrels,  
Morlet Family Winery, St. Helena, Napa Valley*

When Luc returned to his family's domaine, he observed that his father had followed the trend of many Champagne winemakers at the time: moving more and more to the use of tanks. Tanks are much easier to care for than oak barrels. There is little preparation needed, and they are easy to clean and sanitize. With one tank being able to replace twenty or more barrels, a reduced need for labor was appealing. Not wanting the art of coopering to die, and convinced of all of the benefits that a skillfully constructed barrel offers to a wine, Luc reinstated

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the traditional use of French oak barrels at the winery. He brought in the *Tonneaux* (family of barrels): *Pièces* (206 liter), *Demi-Muids* (600 liter) and *Muids* (1200 liter). When his grandmother Geneviève Morlet, Pierre's widow, first tasted the wine that Luc had crafted, she exclaimed with glee, "*Ah, c'est précisément comment Pierrot faisait ses Champagnes!*" (This is exactly how my husband used to make his Champagnes!)

THE INFLUENCE OF OAK AND A  
CALIFORNIA SWEETHEART

Luc pursued winemaking experiences in other regions of France. In 1994, he was hired as the *ré-gisseur* (winemaker) at Château Dauzac, a classified Margaux growth. Luc was granted the freedom to conduct barrel trials. He would select five barrels each from eight different cooperages to age the same wine. Over the course of multiple blind tastings, Luc recognized the periods in which a barrel's influence is the most significant. *Prise de bois* (Taking from the wood) occurs during the first four months while a wine is aging. Oak tannins and aromatics such as toasted coffee bean enter the wine. *Fin d'élevage* (End of aging) takes place during the last 10-14 months a wine is in barrel and is the most prevalent tasting. The bouquet is developed and the polymerization of the tannins occurs.

During his time in Margaux, Luc met his California sweetheart (that's me!). He decided to enroll in the École Supérieure de Commerce in Dijon to obtain an MBA in Wine Business. This program offered an externship, and Luc hoped to secure a way to work in California one day. While at business school, Luc sent his resumé to all of the French cooperages who exported barrels to the United States. How wonderful it would be to blend his love for barrels and for his young lady waiting for him on the other side of the Atlantic!

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Well...the proprietors of Newton Vineyard in St. Helena, Napa Valley had a different plan. Su Hua and her late husband Peter had learned of Luc's reputation as a winemaker. Su Hua Newton flew to Burgundy to meet him in person. At the end of the interview, Luc was handed a plane ticket and told that he was selected to continue the legacy of John Kongsgaard!

When Luc arrived in California, he discovered that Su Hua was very good friends with Bernard Gauthier, one of the best *merrandiers* (specialized oak stave-makers) in France. Su Hua purchased oak staves from Bernard and hired master cooper Christophe Maître to craft barrels for the winery. In addition, Newton Vineyard was the only winery in the United States to have the Tonnellerie Darnajou barrels. The late Pierre Darnajou was originally the cooper for the world renowned Château Pétrus in the 1950's and 60's and won the prestigious award *Meilleur Ouvrier de France* (France's best craftsman). The following decade, Pierre started his own company, and in 1976, Tonnellerie Darnajou began. Luc developed a close relationship with Bernard and Pierre, but little did he know what would happen several years later...

#### A DREAM REALIZED

Darnajou barrels had always been in high demand in France, used in the cellars of such prestigious wineries as Château Laffleur and Cheval Blanc. In 2007, Pierre's son Vincent and daughter-in-law Nadège asked if we would become their exclusive importer. Luc would be able to represent barrels after all! Unbeknownst to us, Bernard Gauthier's two sons, Fabien and Guillaume, had decided to start a cooperage in addition to running the family's stave-making business. We began representing Tonnellerie Gauthier Frères (Gauthier Brothers) in 2008.

This new responsibility resulted in many trips to France. On one visit, Vincent Darnajou helped Luc to handcraft his own barrels. A master cooper can build four barrels in one day, but it took Luc two days to make only three... with help! During a phone call to France, I asked Vincent if Luc's barrels were a high enough quality to age our wines. Excited to practice speaking English with me, Vincent declared that Luc's barrels would "be great flower pots!" You can imagine my laughter that followed. Luc quickly grabbed the phone and explained that Vincent had translated incorrectly and meant to say that his barrels

would "bring great floral notes!" Eventually, those three barrels made their way to California and housed our 2013 Cabernet Sauvignon - the very wines which we are offering this fall! While I am proud to say that Luc's barrels did not leak, I'm glad that he decided to pursue a career as a winemaker and not as a cooper!

#### THE NOBILITY OF FRENCH OAK

Louis XIV's Prime Minister Jean-Baptiste Colbert ordered the planting of vast forests in the center of France. These ancient forests are controlled today by the *Office National des Forêts*, in compliance with a strict international sustainability agreement. In 2008, the Gauthier family showed Luc their stave-making facility in Méry-ès-bois. They also took him to the central forests, where he was amazed by how the family selects the oak trees. In this part of France, an ideal climate and superb soils allow French oak trees to be very slow growing. They don't elicit much sap, unlike American oak, which can overwhelm the wine. French oak trees carry a sweetness and chromatic complexity which enhance the aromas of great wines. The *Quercus Robur (Pédonculé)* family of oak trees has a slightly larger grain, which is more suited for brandy. For high-end premium wines, the *Quercus Petraea (Sessile)* family, which possesses the tightest grain, allows for a long aging while still maintaining a wine's freshness.

Two forests in the center of France are chosen for the aging of our Cabernet Sauvignon wines. Darnajou barrels made from oak coming from the *Tronçais* forest bring structure to the wine, while the *Jupilles* forest enhances the wine's fruit profile. Chardonnays and Pinot Noirs are more



Luc measures an oak tree in the Forêt Domaniale d'Allogny, Cher, France, summer 2008

sensitive, thus the Gauthier barrels from the *Saint-Palais* and *Allogny* forests complement those varietals.

#### THE ART OF COOPERING



The Gauthier family hand-splits oak along its natural grain

Handcrafting a barrel is a labor of love. It begins with working with an exceptional *merrandier* to obtain the *merrains* (staves) of the highest quality. The wood is hand-split, which preserves its integrity. By respecting the natural grain, the resulting barrel provides even contact with the wine, a moderate oxygenation through the pores of the wood, and an overall waterproof quality of the barrel.

**Step 1: La préparation du bois** (Preparation of the wood) When the staves arrive at the cooperage, they are carefully categorized and gently stacked.

Exposed to the elements, the staves are left to the mercy of the weather for 18 to 36 months. This drying process is essential for the wood, which originally consists of 80% water. The tannins naturally found in the oak gradually lose their harshness and the vegetal character is replaced by rich aromas. Vincent Darnajou possesses a remarkable sensitivity for the feel of the oak (the weight and aromatics) and is able to select the optimum moment to bring the staves inside.

**Step 2: Le Montage or Mise en Rose** (Raising the barrel) The staves are aligned on a raising



Staves are exposed to the elements, Méry-ès-bois, France



Luc raises a barrel at Tonnellerie Darnajou, June 2013

table. Temporary hoops are used while the cooper gently taps a hammer to adjust the staves one by one.

**Step 3: La Première Chauffe** (The first heating) Once the staves have been put into place, the cooper utilizes fire and water, two seemingly opposite elements, to assist with the bending of the wood. The craftsman gives shape to his barrel.



Vincent Darnajou uses fire and water to give a barrel its shape

**Step 4: La Chauffe**

(Toasting) During these few minutes, the cooper is preparing the barrel to achieve a perfect harmony with the wine it will eventually store. The toasting level refers to both the length of time a barrel is toasted as well as the intensity of the flame.

In general, a light toast brings the most oak flavor. A medium toast decreases the woody characteristic and adds notes of vanillin, baking spices and toasted bread. A heavy toast further adds touches of coffee and mocha.



The toast has begun, Tonnellerie Darnajou

**Step 5: Le Rognage** (Chiming) Once the barrel has been toasted, it is ready for the two heads to be put on. The diameter is determined by using a compass, as no two barrels will have an identical head.

The cooper uses a *croze* to cut grooves into which the heads are secured. This ensures that the fit is airtight.



A croze cuts the grooves needed to attach the heads of the barrel, Tonnellerie Darnajou

**Step 6: La Finition** (Finishing) A barrel is sanded multiple times and the temporary hoops are replaced by permanent galvanized steel. The beauty and pattern of the grain displays the nobility of the French oak. As a final touch, each cooper from Tonnellerie Darnajou uses a hammer to imprint his branded initials into the rim of each barrel he has crafted. An artist signs a work of art, and each cooper signs his *pièce de maître* (masterpiece).

**Optional Step: Le Reliage** (Binding) As an artisanal characteristic, barrels can be made with pine crossbars held by chestnut pins to reinforce the barrel heads. These barrels have two chestnut hoops bound with willow reed and are referred to as *bordelaise traditionnelle*.

#### A PASSION CONTINUES

Decades after first being inspired by his grandfather, Luc's passion and respect for the art of coopering remains the same. Just as a Michelin-star chef must select the best ingredients, Luc still conducts barrel trials and chooses only the highest quality of French oak for our wines. His palate can detect the impact on a wine from one master cooper's barrel to that of another's, within the same cooperage! One craftsman keeps the staves slightly more damp while beginning to make the barrel, while another prefers to maintain a slightly warmer temperature of the wood. These subtle differences allow Luc to notice how each barrel influences a wine in a slightly different manner. This amazing ability leads to multi-layered yet seamless wines, as he blind tastes each barrel throughout the three to four months he spends determining a final blend. In addition to Tonnelleries Vincent Darnajou and Gauthier Frères, Luc ages our wines in barrels from other outstanding coopers such as Taransaud and Louis Latour.



Luc and Vincent signed the masterpiece they made together



A bordelaise traditionnelle barrel at Morlet Family Winery in the Napa Valley

As with all living organisms, wine needs to breathe. The barrel provides an exquisite environment for this natural process to occur. Luc ferments one-third of our red wines in large open top *Demi-Muids*, historically called *Gueule-bée*, and now commonly referred to as *Open Puncheons*. All of our wines are aged with a combination of "new oak" and "old oak" barrels, most of which are toasted at a medium-plus level. The flame intensity is the same as a medium toast, but the barrel remains over the fire for a longer duration. The surface of the wood is not too heavily toasted, as the heat is allowed to penetrate more deeply into the staves. This caramelizes the polysaccharides (naturally occurring sugar molecules) of the wood and thus brings more sweetness and roundness to the future wine. This toast level also leads to less torrefaction, therefore preserving the purity of the wine's fruit profile.

Every year, Vincent Darnajou and Fabien or Guillaume Gauthier come stay with us. Luc and the master coopers visit their clients and taste each winery's wines in barrel. According to Vincent, "The aging process brings together our two passions which merge to become one." This ongoing collaboration benefits many wines made throughout the Napa and Sonoma Valleys, as well as wines from Oregon and Washington. This year, the coopers at Tonnellerie Darnajou celebrated the beginning of their summer vacation in Bordeaux with our 2010 'La Proportion Dorée.' This happens to be the library vintage which we are offering again this fall! So, the mutual respect between cooper and winemaker extends to their love for Luc's wines as much as it does for his admiration of their barrels.

Vincent Darnajou believes that a "Cooper aims to find the soul of his barrels. This guarantees the balance between wine and wood." While I don't know if Luc will be rushing back to France to select the ideal tree or to seek the soul of a barrel anytime soon, I am confident that his appreciation for the artisans and the barrels they make will continue to be evident in the wines he crafts. We invite you to experience Luc's passion as you enjoy our 2013 Cabernet Sauvignons aged in only the finest oak barrels from France... *A Votre Santé!*

## Fall 2016 Release



2013

### 'MON CHEVALIER'

CABERNET SAUVIGNON  
KNIGHTS VALLEY

Located on the hillsides of Knights Valley, near Calistoga, our vineyard benefits from its proximity to Mount St. Helena, whose warm and windy climate is ideal for the long ripening of these red varieties. Handcrafted by using classical winemaking techniques, this special wine is dedicated to our son, Paul Morlet. It is 'My Knight' or 'Mon Chevalier.' (86% Cabernet Sauvignon, 8% Cabernet Franc, 3% Merlot, 2% Malbec, 1% Petit Verdot)

**Robert Parker 95 points:** *The 2013 Cabernet Sauvignon Mon Chevalier, a blend of 86% Cabernet Sauvignon, 8% Cabernet Franc, 3% Merlot and the rest Malbec and Petit Verdot, offers cassis, mocha, loamy soil undertones, plenty of chocolate, blackberry and a full-bodied, lush style. Peter Michael was the first to exploit just how superb Knights Valley Bordeaux varietals can be, but Morlet has certainly proven with this wine what is possible. This is a beauty to drink now and over the next 20+ years.* —The Wine Advocate, December 2015



2013

### 'CŒUR DE VALLÉE'

CABERNET SAUVIGNON  
OAKVILLE, NAPA VALLEY

Few vineyard sites truly have a strong and unique personality. The famous Beckstoffer To Kalon vineyard lies on the Oakville bench, in the heart of Napa Valley. Planted on this prime location, the French varietal Cabernet Sauvignon has become the flagship of this region, and has brought a worldwide recognition. We named this wine in honor of this unique site and its wonderful companions, Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc. Handcrafted by using classical winemaking techniques, this wine represents the vibrant heart of a very special place. It is 'Heart of the Valley' or 'Cœur de Vallée.' (75% Cabernet Sauvignon, 25% Cabernet Franc)

**Robert Parker 97 points:** *From the Beckstoffer To Kalon Vineyard, the 2013 Cœur de Vallée shows creamy tannins, beautiful blackberry and cassis fruit, and hints of blueberries, violets, forest floor and licorice. This is a blend of 75% Cabernet Sauvignon and 25% Cabernet Franc, and the black fruits are triumphant in this gorgeous wine. It should drink nicely for 25-30 years.* —The Wine Advocate, December 2015



2013

### 'PASSIONNÉMENT'

CABERNET SAUVIGNON  
NAPA VALLEY

Crafted with the passionate, uncompromised & ongoing pursuit of quality, this judicious blend draws on only the finest barrels featuring the close interaction of beautiful vineyards located on the Oakville bench of Napa Valley and our manicured vineyards on the foothills of Knights Valley and St. Helena. As the French say, "Je t'aime, un peu, beaucoup, passionnément!" (I love you, a little, a lot, passionately!) Handcrafted by using classical winemaking techniques, this special wine is dedicated to my wife, Jodie Morlet. It is 'Passionately' or 'Passionnément.' (100% Cabernet Sauvignon)

**Robert Parker 98 points:** *The 2013 Cabernet Sauvignon Passionnément comes from Oakville. This is pure Oakville bench Cabernet, with notes of Christmas fruitcake, unsmoked cigar tobacco, cedar wood and crème de cassis. There is a seamless integration of acidity, alcohol, wood and tannin, and the wine is opulent, majestic in the mouth, and very pure and rich. This magnificent 100% Cabernet Sauvignon should drink well for 30+ years.* —The Wine Advocate, December 2015



2013

### 'MORLET ESTATE'

CABERNET SAUVIGNON  
ST. HELENA, NAPA VALLEY

Our unique estate lies on the western foothills, just north of the town of St. Helena. Shallow loamy topsoil, rocky alluvial subsoil and full sun exposure create ideal conditions for our Cabernet Sauvignon vines. Respecting its historic 1880 charm, we restored the pre-Prohibition stone winery, which is illustrated on the label. Handcrafted by using classical winemaking techniques and with the uncompromised and ongoing pursuit of quality, this wine represents the precious memory of a very special place. (100% Cabernet Sauvignon)

**Robert Parker 97+ points:** *From Luc Morlet's own estate just north of St. Helena, the 2013 Morlet Estate comes across like a first-growth Pauillac. Again 100% Cabernet Sauvignon with creamy blackcurrants and blackberry fruit, some licorice, graphite, and background oak, the wine displays excellent minerality, superb fruit intensity, and a multi-dimensional mouthfeel. It should drink well for at least 25-30 years.* —The Wine Advocate, December 2015



2014

### 'BOUQUET GARNI'

SYRAH  
BENNETT VALLEY

This wine is made from an exceptional hillside vineyard located in Bennett Valley, where natural conditions are ideal for growing Syrah. Handcrafted by using classical winemaking techniques of Vallée du Rhone, this wine reveals a complex and spicy bouquet. Named after the famous culinary bundle to honor our first relative who emigrated from France to the USA, Abel Pierre Aimé Coutanceau, who was, by profession, an accomplished chef. It is the 'Garnished Bouquet' or 'Bouquet Garni.' (100% Syrah)

**Robert Parker 90-93 points:** *Bouquet Garni, which is 100% Syrah, really come[s] across like a Guigal single vineyard Côte-Rôtie such as La Landonne. This is high-elevation Syrah from the Bennett Valley. The 2014 Syrah Bouquet Garni is seductive and fruit-forward.* —The Wine Advocate, December 2015



2010

### 'LA PROPORTION DORÉE'

PROPRIETARY WHITE  
BORDEAUX-STYLE BLEND  
SONOMA COUNTY

We first bottled this harmonious blend of the three classic white Bordeaux varietals in 2011. Now, five years after bottling, the much anticipated time has arrived for this library release of 'La Proportion Dorée.' This unique cuvée was handcrafted using classical winemaking techniques inspired from the finest producers of Pessac-Léognan. Just like its Bordeaux Graves cousins, this wine has greatly gained in complexity while cellaring in bottles. (64% Sémillon, 34% Sauvignon Blanc, 2% Muscadelle — there are less than 100 cases remaining for this library release)

**Robert Parker's The Wine Advocate 93+ points:** *The 2010 Proportion Doree (Semillon/Sauvignon) is striking. It possesses more minerality, verve and backbone. Orange peel, tangerine, mint and sweet spices are some of the nuances that flow from this beautifully delineated white. This is a gorgeous white wine. Anticipated maturity: 2014-2022.* —Antonio Galloni, February 2012

# MORLET

Family Vineyards



Our 2013 Cabernet Sauvignons "are fabulous wines and are at the top end of the qualitative hierarchy in Napa Valley."

—Robert Parker,  
October 2014

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