

Claude Branger

Muscadet Sèvre et Maine



The Wines:

- *L'Éclipse Méthode Traditionnelle*: The grapes for this wine come from three adjacent plots of Melon de Bourgogne in the Clos Joubert vineyard. These grow in relatively heavy clay soils on gneiss (clay translates into power and acidity for white grapes) down slope near the Sèvre River. The plots add up to an acre and a half, and they were planted in 1964, 1968, and 1976, and 1985 (this last representing ¼ of an acre). The wine is made entirely in house rather than at an *elaborateur*, and the artisan approach is carried through to the back label, which details the date of bottling and the subsequent date of disgorgement, allowing anyone to determine the length of time the wine spent on its lees in bottle.

The name comes from October 3, 2005, when the father and son team harvested their first *vendange tardive* grapes in the Clos Joubert vineyard for an experimental lot. That day they witnessed a partial eclipse of the sun, and a name was born. Today, this vineyard is the base for both sparkling wine and a little late harvest wine.

- *Le Fils des Gras Moutons*: This is the domaine's base wine, and a great buy it is. The wine comes from 26 acres of Melon de Bourgogne vines in Branger's earlier maturing plots in their home commune of Maisdon-sur-Sèvre (while named *the son* of the wine below, this does not come from the same vineyard—but it is made in the same spirit). The soil runs from 10 to 16 inches deep and the granite bedrock is metamorphic gneiss full of mica and quartz. These vines average 25 years of age and their yield averages 50 hectoliters per hectare (the legal maximum permitted in the AC, and thus the norm, is 55 hl/ ha). Ferments typically are half spontaneous and half yeasted with a neutral yeast, followed by gaining on the fine lees for six to seven months before bottling. A productive year will see 5,800 cases made.
- *Terroir Les Gras Moutons*: This is a single-vineyard wine, made now from 18 acres of Melon de Bourgogne vines (before 2009, their parcel totaled 10 acres) growing in a celebrated vineyard named the Fat Sheep*, one that occupies the high and gently sloping ground. This is in the adjacent commune of Saint Fiacre, which is the smallest of the 23 communes in the Sèvre et Maine AC and one with some of the best grape growing land. The rocky gneiss soil here is thin, between 6-14 inches deep, in a seam of amphibolite, a greenish metamorphic rock. The vines were planted between 1930 and 1986, and average more than 50 years old. The meager soil and old vines on this small hill give naturally low yields, averaging 45 hl/ha. After spontaneous fermentation, the wine rests on its lees in underground tanks for twelve to fourteen months, and it is quite concentrated by Muscadet

standards. Ripe, round, and intensely mineral, this wine can age beautifully, developing aromas with bottle age that are a cross between Riesling and Pinot Blanc. A productive year sees 3,625 cases made. Note that Gras Moutons is authorized for Monnières-Saint Fiacre cru production; it's up to the grower to decide if he wants to bottle within 14 months of sur lie aging or pick a lower yield and wait a minimum of 24 months.

* Fat Sheep is the current literal translation, but it's pretty far off base. Gras moutons comes from the old local dialect for *gros moton* or *gros motton*. *Gros* refers to something important, as in big or prominent. *Moton* is derived from *mons* in Latin, referring to *mont* (mount in English), the base for *montagne* or mountain. *Motton* comes from *motte*, referring to a natural levy or rise in the ground. Whether you go with *moton* or *motton*, it's clear that Gras Moutons refers to a high point of ground in the area.

- *Monnières-Saint Fiacre*: This cru is based on a geology of gneiss soil and comprises the best sites in the commune. The Brangers have four parcels awarded the right to make this cru, but, critically, use only one: Gras Moutons. In good years, three to five acres of their 18 in Gras Moutons are dedicated for the production of Monnières-Saint Fiacre, and this makes their rendition of the cru rather unique because of the seam of amphibolite that runs through Gras Mouton's gneiss. The amphibolite adds an almond bitterness to the crispy saltiness of straight gneiss wines.

Sébastien first made this wine in 2009, all of 400 cases. Ferments are spontaneous and the wine ages on its lees for a minimum of 33 months in an underground tank. Check the links below to see maps of the crus and of the Branger parcels, but remember it's only the Gras Mouton parcel that goes into this wine.

- *Château-Thébaud*: Like most of these crus, Château-Thébaud takes its name from the local village. This cru is based upon sandy granite soils. The Brangers have two parcels, both planted in the 1960s and they total 8 acres. The Melon de Bourgogne grapes here ripen on the later side, ferments are spontaneous, and the wine requires extended aging--36 to 48 months on the lees--to really show its stuff. Thébaud often has notes of fennel and anise in the nose and tends to be an up-front wine, displaying its attributes across an open fan in contrast to the soul-searching ocean depths of Monnières-Saint Fiacre.