

Daniel-Étienne Defaix

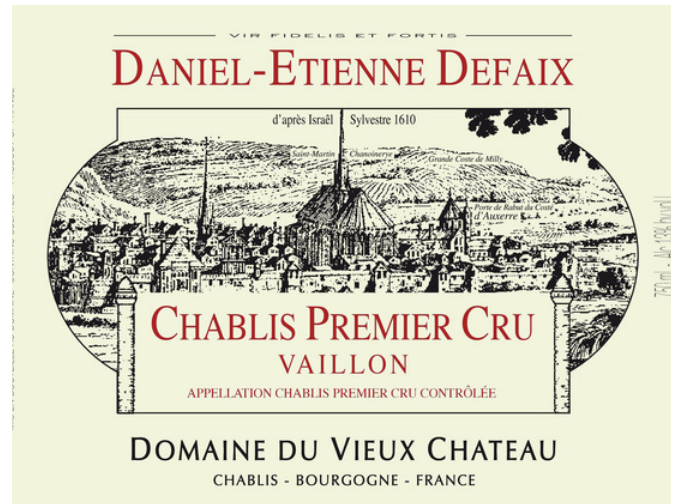
Chablis 1er Cru Vaillon

We are fortunate to work with the exuberant Daniel-Etienne Defaix, whose family has been plying their trade in and around Chablis since the 17th century. In generations past, long aging in Chablis was more the rule than the exception, but today Daniel is virtually alone in that practice. The Defaix family—one of the oldest winegrowing families in the region—owns thirty hectares of vines, the vast majority of which are in premier and grand cru vineyards, but Daniel designates only his best lots each vintage as cru-level, declassifying the remainder as villages. Astonishingly, he bottles these cru-level wines only after eight to ten years of aging in tanks, therein undergoing a slow natural settling which prevents the need for filtration.

Long aging is not the only way in which Defaix distinguishes himself. He relies exclusively on naturally occurring yeasts—a rare practice in Chablis—and his fermentations routinely last between three and six weeks (inoculating gets it done in four-to-six days), with malolactic fermentation sometimes requiring two years to finish in his frigid cellar. He favors extraordinarily long lees contact, but employs stirring only for the first two years, and then only seldom; this extended period of yeast autolysis guards a wine's color and promotes a generosity of texture, according to Daniel. Furthermore, it takes a significant amount of time for the lees to settle, and Defaix relies on patience rather than fining or filtration—two practices which are par for the course in the region.

Wine

The astute reader will notice the singular “Vaillon” instead of the more commonplace “Les Vaillons” on Defaix’s label. The boundaries of this vineyard were extended in 1976 to take advantage of its popularity in the market, but the Defaix family owns a prime parcel in the original cru—the Vaillon. The steep 28-degree gradient and iron-rich soils of this southeast-facing site render a wine of spicy richness, and Daniel’s is a real powerhouse. Showing both remarkable concentration and excellent acidity, this wine has a luscious quality that contrasts gently with his more chiseled crus.



Vineyards

Country: France

Region: Chablis

Appellation: AOC Chablis 1er Cru

Soil: Kimmeridgian limestone-clay marls

Vine Age: 45 years

Farming Practices: Lutte raisonnée

Winemaking

Fermentation: Following total destemming, wine ferments spontaneously in stainless-steel tanks for 3-4 weeks.

Varieties: 100% Chardonnay

Aging: 8.5 years sur lie