

## Cosmoculture: qu'est-ce-que c'est ?

By Denyse Louise - <http://www.datamantic.com/joedressner/references/136/11-27-2001>

The word sounded suspicious, too solemn not to be serious, or too pretentious not to be crazy? Joe thought there was a cult behind it, or, at least, some voodoo involved, and he was a little nervous when we visited our first (and only) cosmoculturist estate.

All fears and misgivings evaporated when we met the Viret family: Alain, the father, and the theorist behind cosmoculture, his wife, who seems to be the catalyst of the experiment, and Philippe, their son and the winemaker just out of oenology school. This is an extraordinary group of people, and, after discovering the site, walking the vineyards, visiting the cathedral-winery and tasting the wines, it became easy to believe that, at the very least, there is some magic at work at Domaine Viret. Alain Viret has designed his method by mixing practices he has followed in the vineyards for several years, to great results, and his belief that our environment is influenced by flows of energy from the planets and constellations. He has named this philosophy "cosmoculture", because it is based on his own experience and common sense, but also on his studies of the Mayas and Incas, the greatest early farmers in the world.

The name sounds intimidating, and there is a fair amount of mystery to it, especially for those of us who are not farmers. The briefest of description could be: a form of viticulture based on the principles and practices of bio-dynamie, with the addition of other energizing media, like standing stones and cosmic posts, which capture the planets and constellations' energy and bring it to the vines and soil; the same beneficial flows of energy are at work in the vinification process.

Joe's first contact with the estate occurred last March, when he went to the Rhône valley for a week of tastings organized by the region. He wasn't much impressed with a lot of what he tasted, and came to the conclusion that it was better to stick to the well-known estates, because most others did not deserve to be known. Nevertheless, at a Côtes-du-Rhône tasting, he was steered to a table by a French wine professional, who assured him that here was a superstar in the making, and that Joe would be glad to have been there early.

The estate, Domaine Viret, was new, located in the village of St-Maurice-sur-Eygues, a name Joe had never heard mentioned before, the labels were odd, but attractive, and the young owner was nice and intelligent. There were several cuvées of a single vintage, 1999, their first, and the wines (all bruts de cuve) were ripe, big and impressive in a young, massive kind of way.

What was truly intriguing, though, was their brochure, filled with fantastic pictures of a monument seen at different stages of construction, then completed, that the estate had just built for its winery. As another local grower later stated, there was something Californian about the building, and the philosophy and practices followed by the owners were so New-Age that they had had to coin a name to describe the concept.

Anyway, something was in the air, last March, could it have been a cosmic influence? A few days before tasting the wines of Domaine Viret, Joe had met Georges Prat, a retired architect, author of a big book entitled "Invisible Architecture", who had just treated some of Eric Texier's vineyards with acupuncture needles of his own design. Over dinner, Prat "levitated" Joe (please ask Joe for details) and cured the bad Feng Shui he had detected in our New York office. Prat's interest is in the principles of ancient architecture, the Golden Rule, the precise orientation and choice of sites of all great monuments in the world, whatever the place or time of their construction. His book is devoted to several sites in Europe, nowadays mainly occupied by medieval cathedrals, but bearing traces of sanctuaries built over millenia of human presence. These sites were chosen, in a very distant past, for their particular, beneficial and mystical qualities. Prat explains that the sites are at the confluence of lines: telluric, aquatic, geologic, and that our ancestors used their knowledge of the world and the forces at work to determine the optimum spot, or vortex, to build a sacred monument.

It's easy to believe that Domaine Viret could be one of those auspicious spots: 50 hectares of land, of which 20 hectares of vines in the village of St-Maurice-sur-Eygues, at the lieu-dit Clos du Paradis. Above the family house, the vines grow on slopes in the shape of an amphitheater, in one single plot looking southeast over the river Aygues to the Rasteau and Cairanne hills. Above the vineyards, forests of oak-trees, and, among them, apricot and other fruit trees, are reminders of the times when no one in the area lived on vineyards and wine only. At mid-slope, and what seems to be the heart of the estate, stands the most prominent feature of Domaine Viret: their winery. This is the visible side of cosmoculture, a building designed by Alain Viret, with the help of an architect, who took into account all the factors that Prat cites as defining sacred architecture: ancient Egyptian measurements, precise orientation (the front opens full south, the choir is partially buried into the hill, full north), alignment with a "magnetic line" defined by standing basaltic rocks higher on the hill, full and surbased arches, thirteen pillars, and, most importantly, the vein of water that made the whole project possible.

Alain Viret is a sourcier, who, for 30 years, looked without success for water on his estate. Lack of water had made life very difficult for the three generations that had lived and worked in Clos du Paradis. Then, in 1998, he found a spring, and this "miracle" made everything possible. "It takes a lot of water to make good wine", goes the vigneron's saying. Alain Viret was able to take the estate away from the village growers' coop (of which he had been director for several years) and the winery was built in three months, of 6 metric tons' sandstones, the same size and from the same quarry as the stones of the Roman aqueduct known as "Pont du Gard". The stones are adjusted to each other, not cemented, and laid down in the same alignment they were in the quarry. The building is designed to foster harmony in its proportion and materials and it is also totally functional: the grapes and the juice go down by gravity, from the roof to the press, into the cement vats and oak barrels, as the case is. The spring water flows in the very center of the choir, where the vinification vats form a half-circle, right under an opening in the domed roof.

We have been working with winemakers who tend their vines following organic or bio-dynamic methods for years now. Although we still don't know or understand everything these entail, we like the wines they make, a great deal. We have often received, from some of our French growers and from many of our American customers, sceptical comments on our interest in organic viticulture, and on the quality of the wines made from such grapes. It seems little more than a gimmick to proponents of "modern" agriculture, a way to capitalize on the public's taste for anything organic or natural. We want to sell wines we like, but we also need to admire the people who make those wines, and share their passion for their vines and their work. So, we end up with an odd assortment of green-leaning growers, steinerites and young turks, but also a lot of pragmatists. At any rate, we do not dictate, we do not impose, we let the winemakers do their job in the vineyards and the cellar, and we focus on the results, the wines.

So, cosmoculture...