

WOMEN WINEMAKERS OF BURGUNDY

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ATHÉNAÏS DE BÉRU, CHÂTEAU DE BÉRU (CHABLIS)

"Feminine wines?" My host repeats the question as if wondering about the meaning, then, in the same breath: "Women aren't necessarily elegant!"

Athénaïs de Béru is a tall blonde with a broad smile. She seems to enjoy testing the limits of stereotypes. "No one dares call my wines feminine. They're afraid I'd beat them up."

Of course she's kidding; in reality people rarely call her wines feminine because she produces whites, and the "masculine-feminine distinction is more typical with reds," she says.

Athénaïs [pronounced ah-tane-ah-ees] bears the family name of the tiny Chablisien village her ancestors, the Counts of Béru, have inhabited for 400 years. Just about the only things that pre-date the Bérus are the vineyards, thanks to the delineation work of 13th century Cistercian monks. The château was constructed in the center of one of their prized enclosed vineyards between 1400 and 1600.

"As a result, it's not the *clos du château*, but the *château du clos*," she says.

A fitting distinction for Athénaïs de Béru, who seems happier to share the name of the historic vineyard than that of the magnificent Renaissance château. After six years in Paris specializing in mergers and acquisitions, it was the vineyard that "danced in her head." So, when the opportunity arose in 2003 to take over the vines, which had been under lease, she took it.

Athénaïs makes Chablis and Chablis Premier Cru from her family's 14 hectares (34.5 acres) of vineyards, including the entire 4 hectares of Clos de Béru Monopole, which surrounds the château. In 2010 she launched an eponymous négoce label to widen her range.

"It's surprising, but I think it might be easier for a woman winemaker than a man winemaker to get a start these days. People are impressed to see a woman who's not intimidated by this masculine universe. They say, 'she must have overcome a lot of challenges to succeed.' In reality, it's great marketing to be a woman winemaker! It draws attention."

She flashes a playful grin before clarifying that "of course, in the end, people taste your wines and it's not the fact that you're a man or a woman that counts, it's the quality of the wine."

Good marketing aside, one thing Athénaïs can't stand is organized tastings of wines made exclusively by women. "What are the criteria for participation in these tastings? The fact that you're a woman? That's not very assuring as a gauge [of quality]. When was the last time you went to a special tasting of 'man-made' wines? It would be the same problem."