THE SOURCE
FRANCK BIMONT
LE PUY-NOTRE-DAME

WRITTEN BY TED VANCE

Le Puy-Notre-Dame gives me the same feeling I had on my first visit to Brézé in 2010. Its soft vineyard slopes, quiet roads, modest rises in elevation, and fields stretching into the distance without being broken up by cliffside walls or rocks protruding from steep hillsides, as in places like Portugal's northeastern winescape. It feels calm, even boring, which is what makes these places so deceptive.

One of the most enlightening discussions about geology more than a decade ago, with now well-known wine-focused geologist Brenna Quigley, who was on a tour with me through the Loire Valley, was with the Touraine-based, PhD geologist, Charles Pomerol. Charles researched and wrote with a team of geology researchers, "The Wines and Winelands of France." We talked about many things, but I left with what seemed to be some big-fish stories, like the Loire River used to flow through what is Paris today, virtually the entire country of France tilting to the west during the Alpine Orogeny, and the different colors of tuffeau around Saumur and other appellations further east that have this same mother rock, like Bourgueil, Chinon, Vouvray and Montlouis. I decided to circle back to our conversation while writing this piece, to dig a bit deeper on that last topic. As

expected, the situation is far more than my binary mind wants it to be. (Those of us in the wine industry love hard truths and binary options.)

Some of the greatest wine hills are not necessarily the most visually dramatic. Burgundy teaches us this. And in Saumur, Brézé reminds us of this. If you've not had a wine from the hill, with the first look at it, you'd wonder what all the fuss could possibly be about. But standing on that butte, the feet stand on one of the most geologically heterogeneous and complicated little worlds in the Loire Valley. Le Puy-Notre-Dame shares this complexity.

Within a radius of only a few kilometers around the hilltop center of Le Puy-Notre-Dame, the geology is complex. The hill rises modestly above the surrounding landscape, and at just over 100 meters in altitude, it's one of the highest points in the greater Saumur area. However, the altitude itself isn't important; it's that those meters that rise above a certain level lie on geology perfectly suited to wine, left intact after millions of years of flooding. Like all hills that rise in this appellation, above this floodplain sits a geological time capsule where ancient marine worlds overlap in tight proximity.

BEING FRANCK

From a twelfth-generation family of winegrowers in Saumur, Franck Bimont carries forward a long lineage, one that has passed from father to son for generations and settled deeply into the rhythm of the land and Franck's work. His path into wine was not a search but a continuation, though it sharpened into focus when his father passed in 1989, a moment that marked a turning point and set him firmly on his course. Since he was 13, he'd already worked the vineyards alongside his grandfather. They became close, and his grandfather remains his most important influence. His formal training followed in Montreuil-Bellay, just ten minutes away, and later in Bordeaux-Blanquefort, where he completed agricultural and oenological studies, earning his qualification as an

oenologist. By 1992, he completed his first vinification at the domaine, beginning the work that continues today. Franck has known no other profession.

Franck's wines mirror the openness of his hospitable personality, rooted in the idea that wine should be a source of pleasure and sharing, bringing happiness to those who drink it. They also follow his personal preference for wines with tension and terroir-clarity. For him, wine remains above all the expression of terroir, something that gives birth each year to a new result while remaining tied to its origins.

THE TIMES, THEY ARE A CHANGIN'

Climate change has reshaped the rhythm of Franck's work over the past 40 years. He explained that budbreak and harvest now occur approximately one month earlier than they did one or two decades ago, leading to more homogeneous and riper harvests. The shift has been particularly beneficial for red wines, which now reach levels of ripeness he considers far more interesting than in the past. At the same time, maintaining freshness and acidity has become more difficult in certain years, particularly with Chenin Blanc, and vineyard and cellar practices must be adapted accordingly. Franck notes that winemaking techniques will need to continue to evolve, with a closer watch over the grapes as they ripen and the wines as they move through élevage.

The recent vintages reflect both the opportunities and challenges of this evolving climate. The 2022 vintage offered excellent conditions for Cabernet Franc, with both ripeness and harvest quality aligning well. In 2023, the season was warm and generous, though it required vigilant sorting during

harvest. Marked by cold, rain, and challenges in achieving ripeness, the 2024 vintage proved more difficult. By contrast, 2025 was warm and early, with little rainfall and near-perfect sanitary conditions—seemingly, just like the rest of France; it's safe to say that we can all be excited about 2025 French red wines.

PHILOSOPHY

A long-time organic practitioner, Franck runs a team of four over 19 hectares owned and leased. He describes himself first as a farmer, and his philosophy reflects this grounding as he works to protect biodiversity, preserve terroir, and avoid excessive competition in the vineyard so the vines can produce in a healthy, balanced way. The soils are worked carefully. Ploughing is carried out from spring to early summer in three passes per year—March, May, and July—always with attention to depth, never going too far, to maintain soil structure and life. Annual treatments in the vineyard average around eight, though they can range from six to twelve depending on conditions. There are fewer than in the past, and they're also more targeted. 60% of plant material comes from clones and 40% from massal selection, a notable contrast to the broader Saumur region, where Franck estimates that massal selection amounts to only about 10% of plantings.

Harvest decisions are guided by both analysis and experience, but ultimately through tasting the berries. In the cellar, his work follows a similar logic of clarity and restraint, focused on preserving the typicity of regional wine and producing honest, straightforward expressions that respect their origin.

LES VINS

For the **SAUMUR BLANC**, Chenin Blanc grapes are harvested at full ripeness to bring complexity, then gently pressed and settled before racking and then its native fermentation. The 2024 version has just the right touch of green, which, in this case, is a positive; the previous years I tasted weren't always balanced on the green side as this one. The palate sends waves of melon, sweet greens, sweet pear, a minerally nose, ripe lemon skin, chamomile, almost a touch of Chartreuse liqueur, and medicinal qualities tucked quietly inside. The aromas feel viscous, and it has a perfectly gentle, bitter and juicy palate.

After fermentation, the Chenin Blanc is racked with lees resuspension and undergoes bâtonnage for six months. During élevage on the lees, approximately 3 g/hL of SO_2 is added to protect the wines from oxidation, followed by blending in April and bottling in May with an additional 2 g/hL of SO_2 and a light filtration, without other interventions.

Franck approaches his **SAUMUR ROUGE** with a clear aim to minimize vegetal character, with grapes harvested in the sweet spot between full maturity and sustained tension. It's labeled as a Saumur appellation wine, but all the fruit is grown within Puy-Notre-Dame. The 2023 is a straightforward wine—no cellar tricks, just terroir, soft handling, and classically styled. It's more red-fruited than expected, but with a touch of riper fruit. What I like most about it is its directness. It's also not a green Cabernet Franc, which may make it easier for modern wine drinkers who often prefer fruitier wines without any green elements to appreciate. The palate is smooth, the tannins soft, and the wine

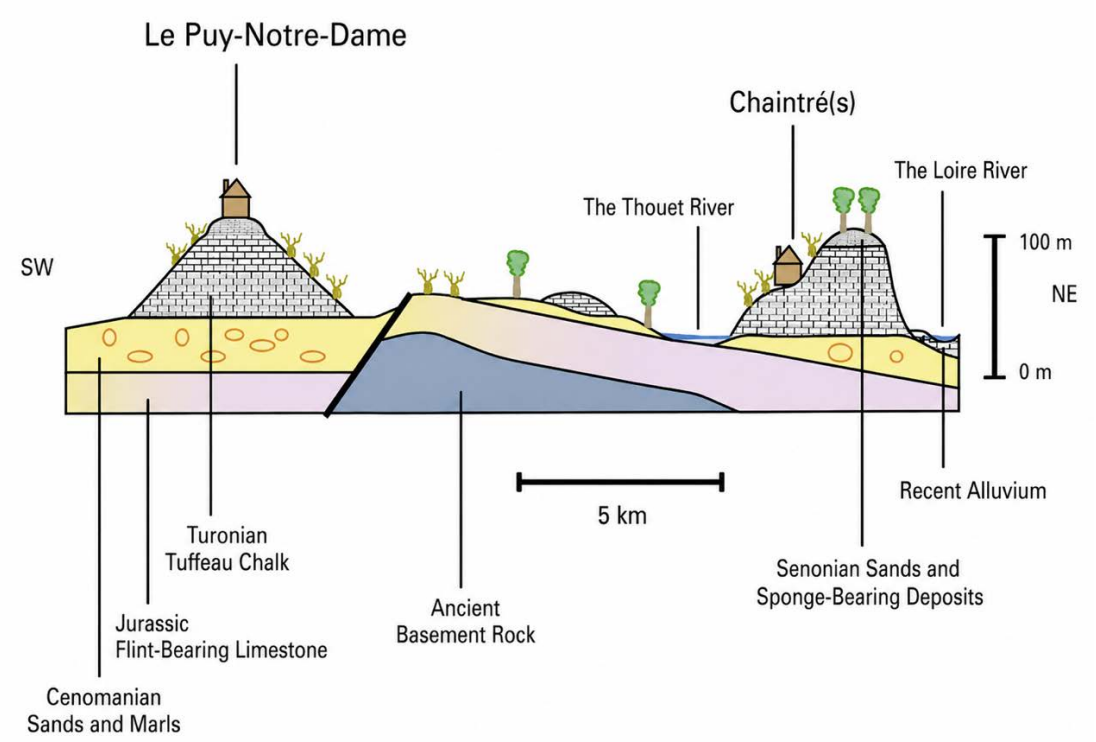
carries a wide range of textures and aromas without becoming heavy. The balance and universal appeal suggest its many *climat* spread across almost every type of soil in the area.

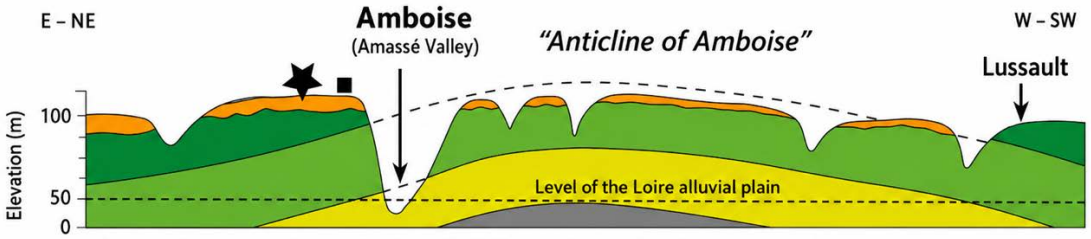
In the cellar, the fruit is destemmed and macerated for eight to 15 days, with tanks kept under CO_2 from harvest until the start of alcoholic fermentation. Pressing occurs during fermentation, after which the wine is returned to tank to complete the fermentation of remaining sugars. Malolactic fermentation follows without racking, and the wines remain on their full lees for six to nine months before being racked and blended in the spring. Before bottling, around 2 g/hL of SO_2 is added, and bottling is carried out with cellulose filtration and a final SO_2 adjustment.

DEEP DIVE: CAKES, FROSTING, PEANUT BRITTLE & BUTTES TÉMOINS

For first timers, standing in the big plateau of Saumur-Champigny perched above and out of sight of the river, or further south into the free-standing butte of Brézé and its gradual undulations, or the hilltop Le Puy-Notre-Dame a dozen kilometers southwest of Brézé by way of the charming Montreuil-Bellay, a wide and featureless expanse that offers little to the eye and everything to the glass, the central Loire can feel like a place that is hiding something. And it is.

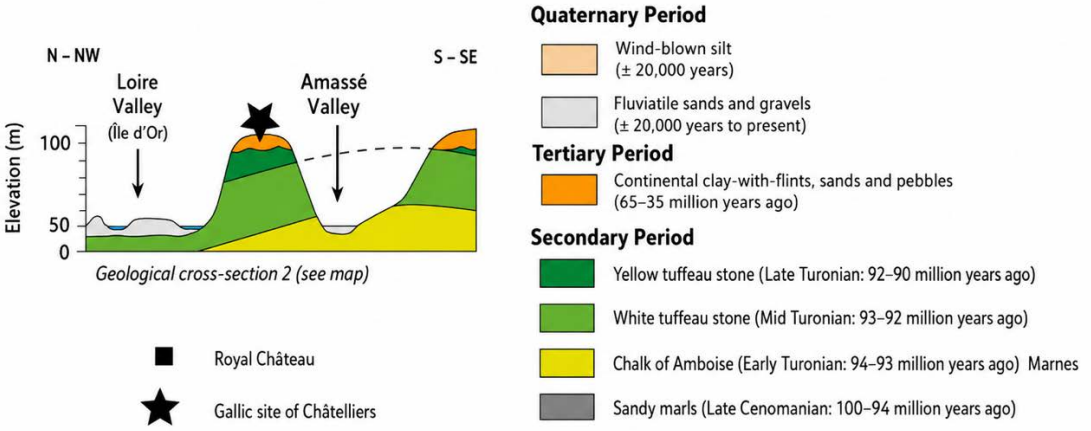
So much of its most influential geology was lost to the time it spent below the floodplains. But its common houses, magnificent cathedrals and châteaux and their tuffeau building blocks hint at what lies beneath. Like many limestone terroirs in river flood plains, there's no obvious geological drama to explain why the wines can feel so profoundly different from one place to another.





Geological cross-section 1 (view from the Loire Valley into the south hillside: see map)

Geological cross-section 2 (see map)



Schematic geological cross-sections. Geological relationships are accurate, but layer thicknesses, slopes, and distances have been simplified for clarity. Second image adapted from https://www.ville-amboise.fr/

Once under the sea, the landscape was thrumming and zooming with life in shallow marine shoals and constantly fluctuating sea levels. Long after the Turonian Sea (a shallow tropical sea that covered parts of North America, Europe and northern Africa during the Turonian age) retreated around 90 million years ago, the distant birth of the Alps, 65 to 20 million years ago, helped subtly warp and tilt France westward. The Loire—a river whose ancestral waters, believe it or not, once flowed through what is Paris today—turned west and, with other river systems, torrentially flooded today's Loire Valley over millions of years. The floods washed out much of the terrain and redeposited veil after veil of alluvial sediment, including the rounded yellow, orange, pink and purple silex (chert/flint) rocks scattered across the valley floor. Today, the middle Loire is like a buried layer cake: marine-deposited tuffeau strata underneath, river-deposited topsoil and alluvium above like frosting.

What managed to escape the full force of the floods are Saumur's most important geological features, where wines most worthy of your pocketbook and daily liver allocation come from the "witness hills" that rise above the floodplain. These perseverant hilltops, like Brézé, Le Puy-Notre-Dame, and Berrye, to name a few, are where the tuffeau strata are accessible for vine roots to dig through its calcium-rich body, drinking water with the unique nutrient cocktail that, like most wines from particular soil types, somehow seems to translate into the wine.

Far east of Saumur in the Loire River Valley wine country, the first major appearance of the silica-rich silex that looks like peanut brittle occurs. Famous in Pouilly-Fumé, the eastern side of Sancerre, and Amboise east of Tours, silex is often misunderstood in the wine business as calcareous. While it's also derived from sea creatures, it's siliceous, and it's also hard as hell—a seven on the Mohs scale of hardness, with ten the hardest: diamond. Loire Valley tuffeau would likely be a 3 or 4 out of ten. Your fingernails are a 2.5.

Further downstream, where the Loire floodplain expanded in all directions as the river began meandering through the ancient Massif Armorican, flooding continually scattered materials from upstream across the upper sections of the Saumur landscape. These river deposits became part of the valley "frosting": the topsoil and alluvial cover spread across the older tuffeau below. In Saumur, many of the silex and limestone rocks in the topsoil are more rounded from their bumpy river ride—some silex likely traveled hundreds of kilometers away. In Saumur, the multicolored, eye-catching silex stands out against the background of whiter or darker soils; this decorates the surface of many vineyards, but because of its near impenetrability, it likely contributes little to the overall expression of Saumur wines, whereas in parts of Sancerre, Pouilly-Fumé and other regions, silex can be a dominant geological feature that appears to play a more significant role in the character of the wines.

If silex is the peanut brittle, then the white tuffeau is the angel food cake. This sandy and porous limestone is pale, dry, airy, fine-grained, and the microscopic calcite cementation imparts enough cohesion within the stone for it to be used as both the region's principal building material and the structural support for miles of underground tunnels with relatively few artificial supports. Hard to see with the naked eye, the black specks (in this cake, tiny coal vanilla bean pieces) of glauconite easily seen under the geologist loupe formed within shallow marine sediments influenced by iron- and silica-bearing material derived indirectly from the nearby Armorican Massif during the Turonian Sea's occupation of today's western France.

Examples of soil materials found around Le Puy-Notre-Dame: tuffeau (top), silex (middle), calcareous loam (bottom left), and siliceous sand (bottom right).

Then come the yellow and orange tuffeaux—the pound cake and carrot cake that geologically sit atop the angel food cake. They're soft and slightly richer and more open-textured in some places than the white tuffeau. These yellow and orange tuffeaux have more oxidized iron, more clay influence, and, generally, more siliceous sand. Both of these more colorful tuffeau are tied to more energetic shallow-marine deposits with greater glauconitic and sandy influence as the Turonian Sea shallowed and shifted.

And then we're back in Le Puy-Notre-Dame, which is almost a compressed geological summary of the middle Loire itself where, like Brézé, these worlds collide inside a relatively small area. But unlike many simpler limestone zones, Le Puy-Notre-Dame constantly shifts above this bedrock. In one section there are thin sandy soils filled with marine debris and silex. A short distance away, the vineyards grow on deep beds of silex and denser clay structures. Elsewhere there are Senonian sands (Late Cretaceous silica-rich marine sands) and siliceous deposits that radically alter drainage and heat retention, and therefore the shape of the wines. In some places, especially around Le Puy-Notre-Dame, tuffeau is more colorful, as a tour through town will reveal in the color of the tuffeau rock used on homes and the Collégiale du Puy-Notre-Dame. This magnificent building's exterior rock arrangements are like a reverse geological cross-section of the hill beneath it—a flip of the geology: paler tuffeau higher up, while the warmer, more oxidized and richly-colored sandier tuffeau, along with some dusty peach-colored blocks toward the bottom.

Compressed and mixed with multiple geological textures and colors in proximity, Le Puy-Notre-Dame is more a swirling of the cakes. Yet, some vineyards on the edge of town are even pure cinnamon-sugar-colored sand.

This is the heterogeneous bedrock and topsoil composition Franck Bimont is working with: silex (his vines in Brossay), white, yellow and orange tuffeau, gravels, sands, silts and clays. It's one of the reasons his wines, even those with the friendliest prices, have broad vertical and horizontal depth

and strong core compaction and structure. They strike as a sort of all-around quality of Saumur wine in both white and red, with no declaration of one soil type or the other.

Like any great terroir in a sedimentary setting, what fascinates me most is how unassuming everything appears from above. Like Brézé, the complexity of Le Puy-Notre-Dame hides beneath a landscape that almost refuses to promote itself. You don't feel overwhelmed by grandeur while standing there. Instead, the wines slowly reveal the complexity for you.

This compression of ancient marine sediments (chalk, limestone, flint), gravels, sands, silts and clay, within such a small radius helps explain why Franck's wines have a kind of tension and architecture that feel different from broader Saumur and other terroirs with less dynamic geological settings. His are not simply fresh Cabernet Franc and Chenin at an incredibly fair price. They carry a seriousness that seems tied to this fractured and arid geological environment, protected somewhat from Atlantic rainfall by the Massif Armorican to the west.

Like Brézé, Le Puy-Notre-Dame feels less like a singular terroir and more like a meeting point of multiple worlds quietly folded together. Inside Franck's collection of wines, the chaos is gently led into harmony.

Tuffeau cave at Forteresse de Berrye