

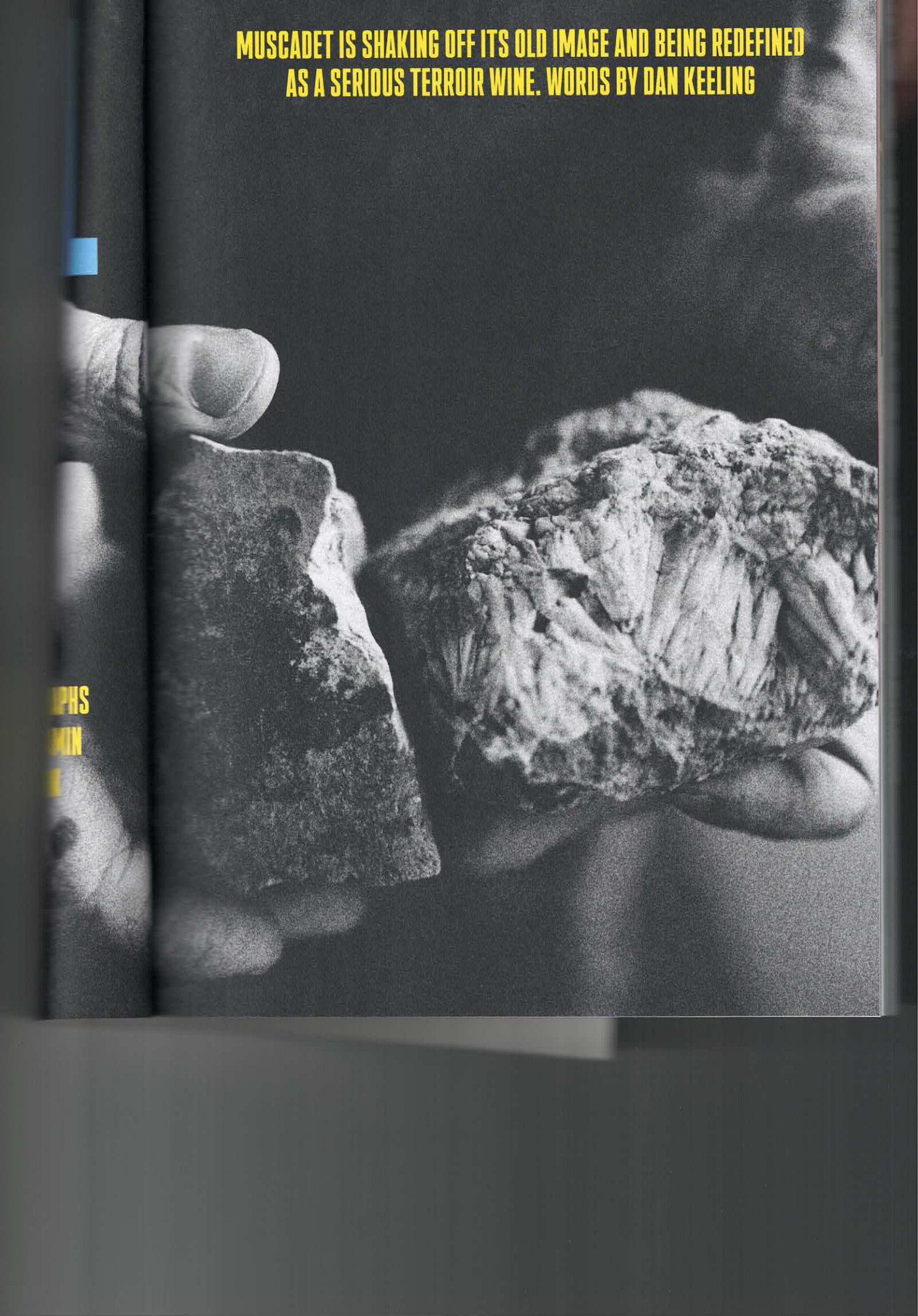
# SCHOOL OF ROCK

PHOTOGRAPHS  
BY BENJAMIN  
MCMAHON



**MUSCADET IS SHAKING OFF ITS OLD IMAGE AND BEING REDEFINED  
AS A SERIOUS TERROIR WINE. WORDS BY DAN KEELING**

**PHS  
WIN**

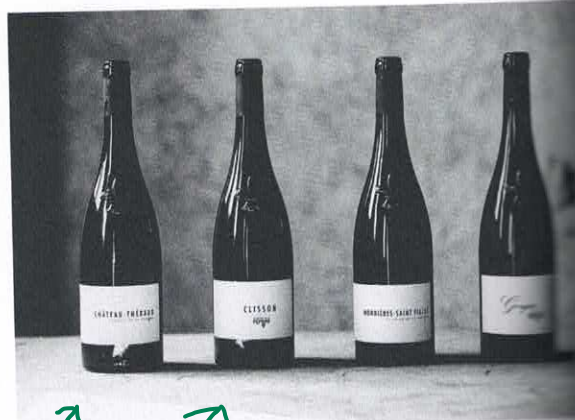
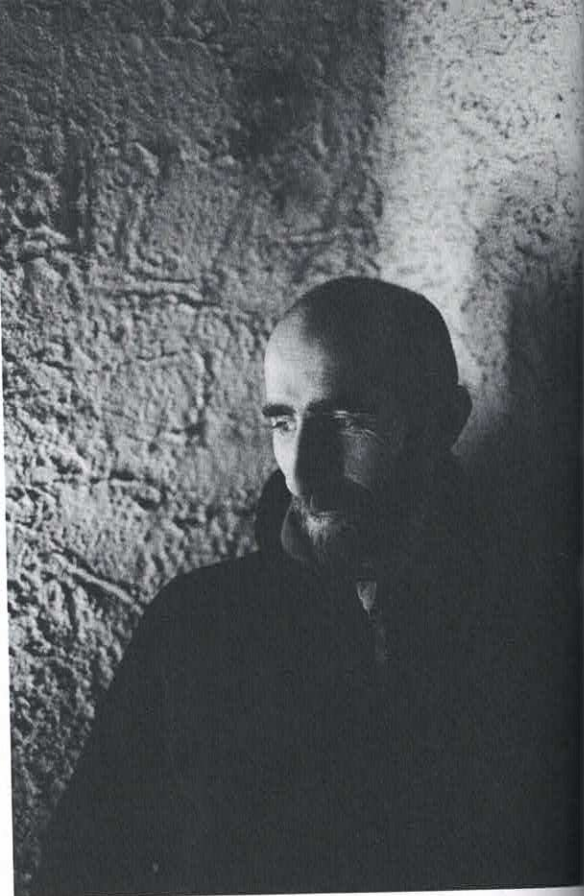




It all comes back to Burgundy, as so many things about wine do. Or, more specifically, to the fact that great bottles are made through a miraculous amalgamation of climate, soil and human philosophy known as *terroir*. Yet when the familiar feeling hits, I'm not in eastern France but a ramshackle outbuilding-cum-tasting room in Muscadet, south-east of Nantes on the Atlantic coast. A moment of clarity as enlightening as tasting different *cru*s in a Vosne-Romanée cellar for the first time; a shock at the profound variations in taste of a single grape variety grown on neighbouring vineyards. Rémi Branger, a local *vigneron* with a thick black beard and piercing brown eyes at the helm of Marc Ollivier's Domaine de la Pépière, serves me four wines made in four of Muscadet's nine recently defined *Crus Communaux*: 'Clisson', 'Gorges', 'Monnières-Saint Fiacre' and 'Château-Thébaud'. One grape, one hand, across different subzones – a kaleidoscope of flavour.

I hadn't expected to find such character and precision in Muscadet, one of the great also-rans of French wine regions. Made exclusively from the grape Melon de Bourgogne (now comically rechristened as the Spice Girls-esque 'Melon B' by the authorities), the wine has long been thought of as a cheap, innocuous, moderate-alcohol accompaniment for seafood, lacking the sophistication or longevity of the noble Chardonnay, Chenin Blanc or Riesling. But Muscadet has been quietly improving and, having started producing its first single vineyard cuvée 'Clos des Briords' at the turn of the millennium, Pépière is at the vanguard of the area's bid to be recast as a serious wine of place. Taught, linear and intense, with a salty finish comparable to Chablis, the stony, high-energy 'Clisson' (from well-drained gravel and pebble soils) offers a revelatory contrast to the subtly herbaceous, smoky 'Gorges' (a mix of quartz, gabbros and clay).

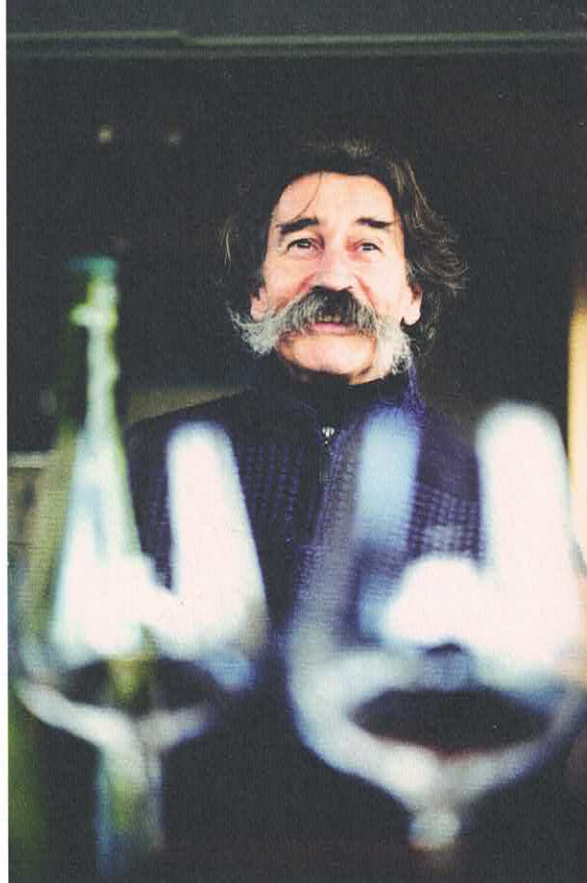
That Muscadet's *cru* classification now exists is due in large part to the work of Pépière and contemporaries such as Luneau-Papin and Domaine de la Louvetrie. If for decades it was



Top: Rémi Branger. Bottom: Domaine de la Pépière 'Château-Thébaud', 'Clisson', 'Monnières-Saint Fiacre' and 'Gorges'.

enough for Muscadet to be one of far fewer famous cheap white wines, with producers using industrial farming techniques to harvest high yields and make low-quality-big-quantity wines, more recent trends for everything from New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc to Italian Pinot Grigio have meant its ongoing survival was far from guaranteed. Realising that Muscadet had to evolve in order to prosper, a handful of these domaines undertook extensive soil studies and mapping, and pushed improvements in organic farming and lower yields. "My model is Burgundy," the grand-moustachioed Jo Landron of Domaine de la Louvetrie, who began making his benchmark single vineyard 'Le Fief de Breil' in 1982, tells me. "At its best the region illustrates what's great about French winemaking – *vignerons* taking care of the soil and finding differences between the terroirs. When you have only one grape you can really see the variety of taste." As he hands me different orthogneiss, granite and limestone rocks to illustrate his vineyards' soils, I'm left in no doubt about Landron's message: Cru Muscadet is a serious terroir wine.

Other Muscadet producers have long named their wines after the soil in which they were grown, such as 'Expression de Gneiss' and 'Orthogneiss' at Guy Bossard's ground-breaking Domaine de L'Ecu. Now owned by Fred Niger, who also grows a wide range of non-appellation varietals and has built a new winery complete with an amphorae and crystal cellar, L'Ecu represents the more experimental side of modern Loire Valley winemaking. But it's not uncommon to spot amphorae, concrete eggs, or fashionable Stockinger oak fermentation vessels in Muscadet domaines – all of which traditionally have no place in its production – a sign of a collective ambition to elevate the wines. In fact, most wineries here don't have actual cellars, but ground floor 'caravans' featuring large glass-lined concrete tanks sunk into their floors, where nascent wines can lie inert and free from intervention for many months. How much time they spend there on their 'lees' (dead yeast cells) is key to their body and



Jo Landron

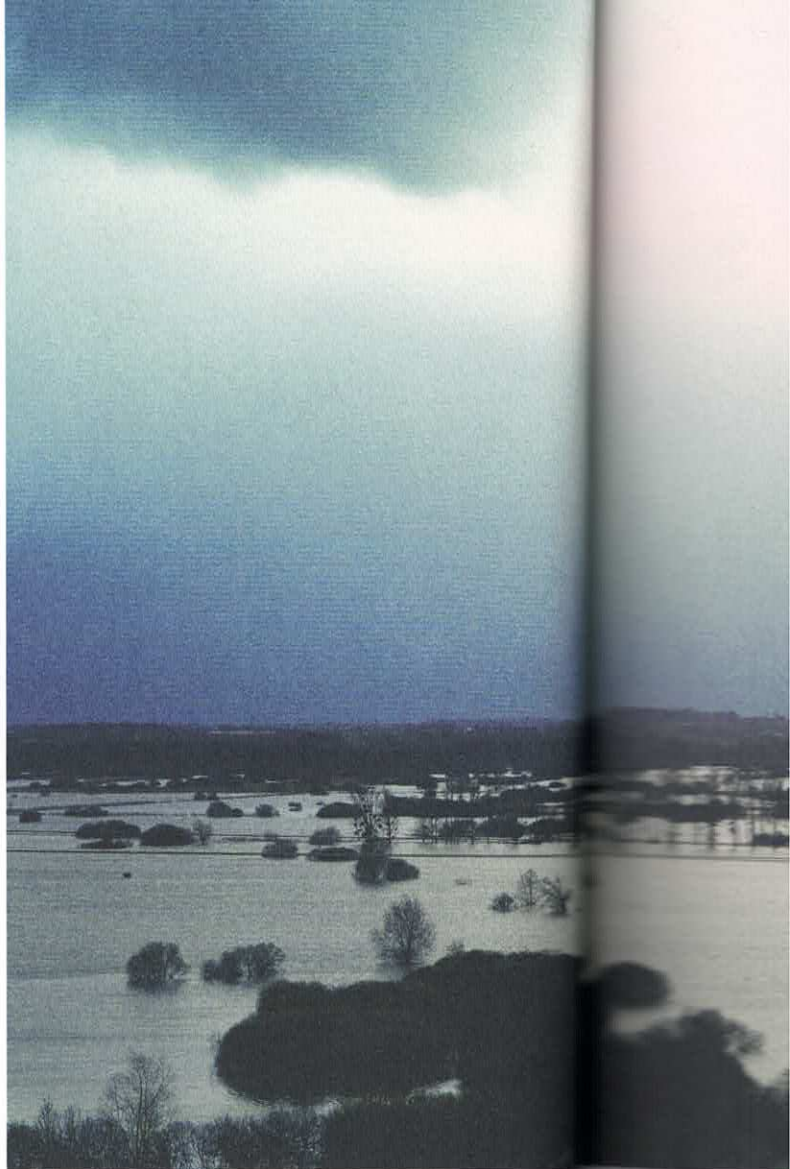




structure, although if left too long they pass a tipping point and become flabby and uninteresting. The term 'sur lie' was introduced on Muscadet labels in 1977 as a way of distinguishing quality, although today it guarantees only that a wine was bottled the year after harvest, with many longer-aged, high-quality cuvées falling outside the designation.

After tasting many Muscadet I'm convinced that it needs to be as pure and free of artifice as possible to achieve its potential. If oak ageing benefits Burgundian Chardonnay by allowing an interchange of oxygen and, in small doses, providing a complementary flavour, with Melon de Bourgogne it obtrudes like a cheap plastic surgery session gone wrong. For me, the best wines are brimming with energy and minerality as a result of the terroir. "The identity of Muscadet is unique," says Pierre-Marie Luneau of Domaine Luneau-Papin, located in Le Landreau. "We don't have the complexity of Burgundy, or the aromatics of Sauvignon Blanc, but we have saltiness and moderate alcohol." Luneau is right: with today's zeitgeist all about freshness and restraint his wines have become some of Noble Rot restaurant's quotidian bestsellers, undoubtedly aided by Muscadet's exceptional affordability.

Certainly, it's hard to think of many classic French whites that offer as good a flavour-to-price ratio as Luneau-Papin's 'Le L d'Or', or any of Domaine de la Pépière's single vineyard wines. Perhaps just as Cru Beaujolais has become increasingly coveted by Burgundy lovers who haven't been able to keep up with the Côte de Nuits' rising tariffs, Cru Muscadet will increasingly find itself held in a similar regard by those priced out of Côte de Beaune Chardonnay. When I ask Pierre-Marie if he thinks his wines have the capacity to improve with age he goes into his stockroom and returns with a 2003 'Le L d'Or' that is a ringer for a rich, saline, mature Chablis. From industrial also-ran to artisanal contender, Cru Muscadet's time has come.



#### Five to Try

1. Domaine de la Pépière – Muscadet Sèvre-et-Maine 'Clisson'
2. Domaine de Bellevue – Muscadet Sèvre-et-Maine 'Gaïa'
3. Julien Braud – Muscadet Sèvre-et-Maine 'Les Vignes du Bourg'
4. Domaine de l'Ecu – Muscadet Sèvre-et-Maine 'Expression de Gneiss'
5. Domaine de la Pépière – Muscadet Sèvre-et-Maine 'Clos des Briords'