

# SOBERING DOWN

A person's hands are visible, holding a small cluster of round, purple objects that look like grapes or berries. They are scattering these objects onto a light-colored, wrinkled fabric surface. The background is a wooden floor.

*How to responsibly transmit  
knowledge, techniques and  
innovations in wine-making*

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# INTRODUCTION

Wine has been part of my life for the past 23 years. I've watched my parents and my grandparents till the earth, prune the plants, harvest the fruit and produce wine year after year. I never was too involved in it, because as long as I can remember I've always wanted to work in an artistic field. But now that I am an adult, I'm able to see the profession's negative sides: social, economic, ecological and political issues govern the wine-making production. As a spatial designer, I had to find my place in this kind of subject. Spatial design could be defined as design that eases the interaction between users and the spaces they practice every day. Spatial design goes from interior to landscape design, scenography and set design, so there are plenty of ways for me to develop a project linked to the wine-making industry.

If we make the premise that the wine industry is still to this day a really polluting industry, but that it is slowly but surely evolving - as the rest of the agribusiness industry - to better methods of production, then it makes sense to me, as a spatial designer, to try and display this evolution. People often have misconceptions about wine. Some believe that the process of wine making includes distillation, some believe that only the geographic origin can make a great wine, others believe that every vineyard owner is incredibly rich, some others believe that transitioning from a conventional way of production to a certified organic vineyard is

as easy as snapping fingers. So many ideas and misconceptions that show that wine, in general, is still quite unknown because of the fake imagery linked to it. A detail that never ceases to annoy me, is when people see wine as something very elegant and distinguished. If you think about it, every wine is just old grape juice in a bottle. The "nobility" of a wine, in my opinion, should not come from the fame of a domain or the scarcity of a type of grape, it should come from the production methods. In my eyes, a wine that results from a well-treated vineyard and a vinification method that does not involve chemicals, is a noble wine; or, at least, a nobler wine than one produced conventionally.

The question that helped me construct my essay was : **How to develop practical experiments within an empirically-based research in viticulture in order to allow a territory to assert its identity?** Through this abstract, I will present a condensed version of my theoretical research that has led me to practical questions for my diploma project.



## *Vanishing identity of a wine-making territory*

If there is anything that represents France from an outsider's point of view, it's probably wine – well, I can conceive a baguette or the Eiffel Tower as good contestants as well, but let's focus on wine. In 2019, the equivalent of about 7795 Olympic pools of wine were produced<sup>1</sup>. France is still to this day, the first exporter country of wine in the world, but only the second producer, behind Italy. After many decades and centuries, **France is still considered as the land, not only of wine, but of elegant, smart and top notch wine.** France is a diverse country, with thousands of landscapes, with different climates depending on the regions. And this ascertainment can be applied to wine as well. There is not just one type of french wine, the diversity of the country mirrors the diversity of its products. For this reason, I chose to focus on a specific region, to understand better its distinctiveness in terms of grapes and wines.

My field of work is the region of Charente-Maritime in the South-West of France. This area has been a wine producing region since Antiquity. It was the world largest vineyard during the 18th century, but now its wine territory is way smaller than what it used to be. At the moment there are 80 000 hectares of vineyards

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<sup>1</sup>. Organisation Internationale de la Vigne et du Vin (2019)  
*Note de conjecture actuelle : Situation du secteur en 2018*

## FRENCH WINE



16% of the wine produced in the world

First world exporter



10M oenotourists by year



558 000 workers

160 country wines



7,9M€ of exports by year

340 Protected Designation of Origin



## « LE VIN CHARENTAIS »



2000 hectares of vineyards dedicated to « vins charentais »

Between 80 000 et 100 000 hectoliters/year



About 600 producers of « vins charentais »

## « LE PINEAU DES CHARENTES »



79 000 hectoliters sold in 2017,  
almost 25% less than in 2016

3000 hectares of vineyards dedicated  
to « Pineau des Charentes »



in Charente-Maritime, that is to say about 10 percent of the vineyards in France (825 000 hectares in 2019).

The specific location of Charente-Maritime's vineyards makes them vulnerable because of **the proximity to Bordeaux in the South and Cognac in the East**. Bordeaux is obviously known worldwide for its wines and numerous wine-producing castles and domains; Cognac is not only a city but an entire area of vineyards producing a liquor named Cognac made with distillate wine. The territory of Charente-Maritime is squeezed between these two giants of wine and wine liquor **and, therefore has to constantly struggle to assert its identity** as a legitimate wine producing area.

There are two specialities in Charente-Maritime : Pineau des Charentes, which is a mix of Cognac and grape juice. It has been a PDO (Protected Designation of Origin) since 1945. And Vins de Pays Charentais, which are country wines, it's a PGI (Protected Geographical Indication). I am more interested in the country wine in this particular project because, first and foremost, its production is not linked to the Cognac production (unlike the Pineau) and because it's a product which is quite unknown outside the borders of its region of origin.

In the early stage of my research I had interviewed Jean-Paul Mounier, a wine producer from this territory. Even if his production is not officially organic certified, a part of his vineyards are cultivated and produced in an eco-friendly way, but we will come back to the delicate question of labels and certification later. This exchange with him made me understand that because of the position of the Cognac area, many wine producers have to choose to sell their production directly to the Cognac industry.

**“Nowadays, I'm selling 80% of my production to Cognac making. It is more profitable for us.”<sup>2</sup>**

First of all, it's way easier for producers to conduct the entirety of the production and let the Cognac houses deal with the selling process. But it is also more profitable for them, as Cognac houses often pay a good price for their wine before turning them into liquor. For this reason, **it is true to say that the territory of Charente-Maritime is losing a huge part of its identity to the region of Cognac**, as producers have

Jean-Paul Mounier in his cellar during our interview back in December 2019



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**2.** Extract of my interview with Jean-Paul Mounier in December 2019 : « Aujourd'hui, je vends 80% de ma production pour le Cognac. Il est certain que c'est plus rentable pour nous »



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to stop making country wines to sell their entire harvests to Cognac houses.

But another aspect causes wine territories to slowly lose their identity (and not only in Charente-Maritime): climate change. Temperatures are rising everywhere around the Globe, adverse weather conditions such as hail storms, heavy rains or droughts destroy the plants and **producers have to adapt their domains and the way they cultivate grapes in order to overcome the effects of climate change**. Some studies show that by 2050, half of the world's current vineyards could disappear. In the end, vineyard all over the world will drastically change because of climate change. As an example, some grape varieties originally cultivated in the South of France, can now be cultivated in England, Netherlands and even Sweden.

**“UK Environment Minister, Michael Gove, says climate change is ‘an opportunity’.”<sup>3</sup>**

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3. Unknown author (2018). *Avec le changement climatique, les viticulteurs anglais se frottent les mains*. (extract from the online article : « Pour le ministre britannique chargé de l'Environnement, Michael Gove, le changement climatique est « une opportunité »)



Natural wine and organic wine could be a way do address the effects of climate change but also a solution to reverse these effects. By changing our habits of culture and production, we can adapt more easily to the future. These two kinds of wine are regulated by strict rules concerning the culture of the plant and the vinification methods. Organic wine is considered “official” as it is controlled by European regulation. But, to this day, the label is still controversial. Some argue that it is not strict enough, as Sulfur and Copper are allowed in the wine-making process (Sulfur is used in the vinification process and Copper replaces pesticides in order to treat the vineyard). But these two additives are known

English vineyards and domains gain a lot from global warming. About 34000 hectares of british lands are now favourable to vines cultures. To this day, it is now possible for the UK to cultivate a certain number of french and german grape varieties : Chardonnay, Pinot Noir (East of France) and Merlot (South-West of France) for the french ones; Dunkelfelder, Riesling and Schönbürger for the german ones.

to be pollutants. On the other hand, Natural wine is less known in general because this “label” is not official. The rules of culture and production are much stricter (less Sulfur and Copper is authorized in it). But overall, there is no denying that Natural wine and Organic wine are indeed better ways of producing wine.

Transitioning to one of these “new” methods of production demands time and patience during the whole process. It is not something that can be done overnight. Plus, it is necessarily more complicated to produce wine using natural or organic methods.

**Failure will inevitably be part of the process** as organic wine and natural wine are more likely to alter (for better or worse) through time. **Natural wine represents change and accepting that, sometimes, a more “brutal” change can be the solution.** In the end, things will necessarily be completely different, but it doesn’t have to happen fast. One of the reasons wine producers are so reluctant to making natural wine is because they are afraid of change. The purpose of my project is to make this change smoother, slower and easier to interiorise.

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The territory that I have chosen to study struggles with many issues in regard of the wine production industry. But by changing the general methods of culture and production, Charente-Maritime might re-assert its vanishing identity as a very specific wine making territory.

As change requires time and years of validation, I wanted, in the second part of my essay, to understand how a place could be the driving force for change and evolution.







## Learning from tests and trying differently

As wine is a living matter that never really stops evolving over time, it made sense to me to think of a place where you could learn about wine in an empirical way. Learning about wine should not be something immutable. It has to change and evolve as time goes by. Plus, as explained earlier, natural and organic wines are alterable liquids. Because they are not controlled by chemicals, they are more likely to turn undrinkable with time. Supporters of the natural wine philosophy think that this is the beauty of natural wine.

It occurred to me at first that ecomuseums could be a solution to show wine not only as a product but as the result of specific techniques and practices. **The purpose of ecomuseums is to preserve and to reconstitute in the exact location of the original buildings, the type of activities** – from one or two centuries ago, or sometimes just a few decades – **that the passing of time has made us forget**<sup>4</sup>. They are a display of a past way of living and working. For example, the ecomuseum of Skansen in Stockholm, shows the way people used to live in Sweden in the end of the 19th century. As the country was moving from a rural

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**4.** « Les écomusées ont pour but de préserver ou de reconstituer sur les lieux mêmes des bâtiments, des types d'activité dont le passage du temps nous a coupés depuis un ou deux siècles, parfois à peine quelques décennies » is the definition given by Claude Lévi-Strauss in *Territoires de la mémoire* (1992)

to an industrial way of life, the ecomuseum was created in 1891 to preserve what used to be the rural life in Sweden.

France also has its own ecomuseums, representative of different regions of France. The ecomuseum of Marquèze, located in the Landes region is a true leap into the past. As you arrive at what you think is the entrance of the park, you have to leave your car in a parking lot. Hidden by the building of an old station, awaits an old steam train, painted in bright green. The train takes you through a small forest before stopping at another station and, there you are, in the village of Marquèze, a typical village of the Landes, recreated as it existed in the beginning of the 20th century.

The entrance to the village of Marquèze, with its famous bright green steam train.



We can argue that ecomuseums are often “frozen” in time (that’s the main purpose of these places actually), and that this type of display would not be particularly interesting in regard of wine and wine-making techniques. **Wine is “alive”, it’s a living matter, and it should be presented as such.** Plus, I don’t want to show old ways of cultivating vineyards and producing wine. I want to show new ways of production that might find similarities in the old way of thinking wine farming. My essay is not an advocacy of ancient working methods as I don’t mean to say “everything was better before” because it was not. Working in the fields and the vineyards was hard, and still is nowadays, but the evolution of wine-making during the second half of the 20th century – which notably saw the emergence of machines and tractors – helped many workers in their daily life.

What I would like to say and demonstrate in my essay and later in my design project, is that, **as wine is not something immutable and static, the methods of its production should also be able to change and to evolve taking into account the historic and the geographic context.** I want to prove that change can be part of the process, that experimenting, and sometimes failing, should also be part of the process. For this reason, I started examining projects where the concept of experimentation was the driving force.



The castle of Guédelon, in Burgundy, France, came early in my quest for places where experimentation is part of the visiting process. The construction of this place began in 1998 in the forest of Guédelon. Two years earlier, Michel Guyot, owner of the castle of Saint-Fargeau (also in Burgundy), decided to start archeologic research about his estate. The remains of an older castle were found beneath the foundations of Mr. Guyot's property. He came along with the idea of rebuilding this 900 year-old castle in a different location. The peculiarity of this construction is that everything was to be built exactly in the same way as it was done 900 years ago in France, using medieval building techniques from the 13th century. And, it is not just the techniques but the ways of living as well : builders are dressed in medieval clothes, they are not allowed to use their cellphones or any modern tools of measurement on the building location. They are also served medieval cuisine, prepared by a team using recipes from the 13th century. This construction has been going on for 22 years now and it should end in three years. The construction site is open from March to September every year, not only for the construction team but also for visitors, willing to know more about medieval castles and construction techniques. Another point, that is very unique here, is the fact that **there are interactions between the professionals working on the castle and visitors**. There are obviously guides who can answer questions, but **the purpose is to allow visitors to exchange directly with the construction team about specific subjects that only them master**.



Craftmen working on the construction site of Guédelon. There are the ones making countless discoveries regarding medieval building techniques.

The castle of Guédelon is a great example regarding my field of research. Not only is this project a good way to enhance artisanal jobs and techniques but **the main purpose is to show that developing practical experiments in a project is a perfect way to discover things, we wouldn't have thought of in the first place.** For instance, during the process of building the castle, the masons discovered that the line used to embed the stones started leaking and created ugly traces on the walls of the castle. This event, that could have been considered as a simple mistake in the building process, allowed the archaeologists and scientists supervising the construction to support a theory about medieval castle's aesthetic : the stones of the walls were not apparent but rather covered with plaster and painted in bright colours in order to hide traces of lime. By carefully recreating the medieval building methods, discoveries could be made, through mistakes and tests.

And this is what I want to learn from this example in order to apply it to wine. You cannot make someone change drastically his or her habits without proving to him or her that this is worth it. Some people might be open-minded and ready to change the way they cultivate vineyards and produce wine. But others might need more time and work to just change a tiny part of their working methods. **By creating a place for experiments, for tests and even failures, we would give these people the time they need to accept and embrace the change in the vineyards and cellars.**

Experimentation as a way to learn differently: rather than learning from conventional knowledge and information, people could learn by trying theories and practices. Some may work, others may not but it is possible to learn from mistakes and errors.

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At this point of the research, I knew that I wanted the future space of my diploma project to be **a place of exchanges between professionals of the wine making industry and neophytes.**

If the final purpose is to induce a change in the misconceptions people have about wine, then, this change will have to come from the people who know wine best: those who spend most of their lives producing it.

In this way, the third part of this abstract will mark a turning point between theoretical research and practical ideas for the space (or spaces) of my diploma project, as I have chosen to examining design examples in the “ wine field ”.







## *A space for sharing knowledge and experiments*

Currently, visitors want something different when they visit vineyards. There is a strong demand for a real experience of visit when they come directly to a domain to buy wine. **Owners are expected to upgrade their installations and, most of all, to rethink entirely what people are given to see and experience.** Hence, many of them have decided to build a specific place to welcome visitors, in order to make the visit more memorable. The point is to make sure the visitors – and incidentally, consumers of their products – will return, or spread the word about the great time they had there. We can see this new trend in France, of course, especially in the region of Bordeaux, but some domains around the world are also riding this new wave.

The Bouchaine Vineyard, located in California is a great example of the will of wine domains' owners to change their installations for visitors. The couple that run this vineyard decided to call an architect's services in order to create what would be a visitor center in their domain <sup>5</sup>. What is explained in the article is that the owners wanted visitors to be in awe in front of the new building. Together, with the project manager Michael Cook, they decided to create a complete and unforgettable experience for the visitors.

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<sup>5</sup>. Unknown author (2019). *Bouchaine Vineyards opens architecturally significant new visitor center*.





The idea is also to imagine a visual and spatial identity for the vineyard. **This is brand identity in a bigger scale.** The creation of a 5000 square foot space only dedicated to visitors and a massive shared kitchen shows that the owners thought wine testing as a way to reunite people. And historically, it is true. Wine has always been about connecting people and making them work together in order to enjoy the final product of their labour.

So, we could imagine building a place where you may come with family or friends to learn about wine, **a welcoming place where people may gather and enjoy a pleasant and experience.** Visitors seem to be really interested in discovering the place where wine is produced and learning more and more about techniques and methods.



Because I definitely do not want to work “against” the wealthy industry of Cognac, I looked at what was done there in terms of visit experience. One of the two biggest houses of Cognac is House Martell. It is the oldest house of Cognac production, created in 1715. Recently, the old wineries were completely redesigned by Nathalie Crinière and her scenography agency, in order to reach the expectations of the public. Light installations, interactive games, staging of the wineries as how they used to work four centuries ago, **every detail was carefully thought to entertain**

◀ The new Bouchaine Domain in California. The large terrace and the brand new shared kitchen were designed to welcome more visitors and to make sure their visit would be an incredible experience.



**the public, and also, to make them feel enlightened.** We may, however, wonder if such an extravaganza is always required. Could a more down-to-earth presentation also please the public? As I explained earlier, I think the nobility of a wine results from the techniques, the methods and the producers themselves. **A beautiful bottle, an enchanting (and very expensive) visitor center should not be what makes a wine unforgettable.**



Of course, the visit experience is important. **People are more affected by a space that is created and designed for their experience.** But it is important to remember that a small wine producer, unable to afford a famous architect's services, will not necessarily produce a wine of lesser quality. Still, it is undeniable that a narrative and educational approach of the domain will be easily remembered. Hence, the inclusion of a narrative thread in the visit will capture the attention of any visitor. Creating a "story" for the visit can entrench information in reality, but can also add a touch of fantasy and marvel.

And now is a good time to ask ourselves what is the designer's role in this kind of project. I think that creating a shared place, and making sure that an exchange could result from it, is a good start for a good project about transmission. It is important to develop a place for both wine professionals and neophytes who want to learn more, not only about wine making in general, but also about innovative production methods.

I started questioning myself about what kind of exchanges could result from a shared space between wine professionals and an external public. I also asked myself about what kind of public could visit such a place. At first, I thought that only visitors and consumers would like to know more about the wine



The wineries of House Martell in Cognac. «The Journey» (the original title is also in English) is a new visit experience designed in 2019 by the architect and set designer Nathalie Crinière, who usually work for luxurious clients (Dior, Saint-Lauren, etc).

making process, but after a conversation with Cyril Michaud, a technician working for the Syndicat des Producteurs de Pineau des Charentes (“The Union of Pineau des Charentes Producers”), it occurred to me that residents who live nearby the producers might want to exchange with them as well. Then, Mr Michaud told me that producers are also willing to explain their profession to a younger public, like students.

A shared space would include a place for the professionals to work together, to test and experiment new methods of production, and a space for visitors only, where they could learn about the wine making history in the territory of Charente-Maritime. I believe that the place should not have the grandiose and marvellous aesthetic of the many domains that ask for architects’ help. Therefore, I imagine **a down-to-earth place, and this expression could not be better chosen because wine is also about the earth, it is about cultivating a plant to maturity in the soil, it is about harvesting the fruit after a year of labour in the field. Wine is about nature and simplicity.**

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# CONCLUSION

**Now is the time to resist !** To resist and assert the identity of the territory of Charente-Maritime. It is an atypical territory in many aspects. Halfway between the noble Castles of Bordeaux and the famous spirits' houses of Cognac, it is a space of resistance. In the eyes of many, what makes the identity of Charente-Maritime – its country wine and Pineau des Charentes wine – is doomed to disappear to benefit the more successful Cognac industry.

However, by promoting its products and new methods of sustainable production, we can make sure that all will not be lost. **The producers themselves should be the conveyors of this knowledge. They should be those who inform people about the changes and evolution in the wine making industry.** And to achieve this, it is undeniable that they will need any help they can get, for an efficient communication. Designing a specific space able to enhance the communication of such knowledge and knowhow is necessary. As a spatial designer, I am especially interested in communication; this project will certainly help me understand exactly what I want to do after my degree. I firmly believe that a designer's purpose is to bridge the gap between knowledge and people.





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This abstract was written under the supervision of Catherine Pradeau, english teacher.

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The effects of climate change are more and more obvious, not only in our everyday life, but also in society as a whole. Nowadays, wine producers, that are not part of a prosperous economic system have to face great difficulties in order to continue producing wine in a sustainable way. Through the analysis of the territory of Charente-Maritime in France, I wanted to highlight the many problems that are currently putting in danger the very identity of a territory.

As a spatial designer, I focused on the ideas of transmission and mediation, to allow this territory to fight and resist. The passing on of knowledge and techniques about wine making would allow a neophyte public to understand more easily the economic and ecological issues, that are not necessarily proper to the wine-making industry. It could also help the producers themselves adapt their methods, and let them become better ways of cultivating the grapes and producing the wine.

This abstract is a condensed version of my essay *À tâtons, pour une transmission sobre de la viti-vinculture*. It has helped me identify which methods and tools of transmission and mediation could be applied and used in the precise case of the territory I have chosen.

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