



# The Art of Vixology

Wines of Vix

by John Sherwin

Driving into the *Marais Poitevin*, the pancake-flat expanse of drainage channels and cereal agriculture south of Fontenay and west of Niort, I felt the familiar tingle of guilt. Coming from the undulating bosoms of the *bocage*, one is supposed to suppress

a slightly world-weary yawn and remark how flat and dreary it all is. Not *moi*, pardner: I make absolutely sure no-one is around (*paranoïa de bocage* is the technical term) then let out a Waynesque 'yee-haar!'. You see, I rather like the big sky and the distant horizons. All I'm missing is a diner with a rusting Chevvie outside and tumbleweed the size of Dolly Parton's coiffure. But is it promising winemaking country? Heck no, buddy!

But then, following the Major (Major Tom-Tom), I was going inexorably uphill. If you think you know the *Marais*, then you have to check out this parallel universe known as Vix. By the time you get to the top you are surveying the expanse of the *Marais*, and the 'yee-haar' has become more of a thoughtful 'crikey'. OK, it's not Everest, but it's noticeable, and important in winemaking terms. Slope, drainage and exposition, Rodney; slope, drainage and exposition.

Turns out that a *really* long time ago, Vix was an island in an extension of the Atlantic. It enjoys the warmest climate in the Vendée, nestling within oceanic influences and the embrace of the Mervent forest. This background was given to me by Stéfán, one of the guys at Mercier vineyard. They have 43 hectares around the 'island', and produce on average 200,000 bottles per year. But that is as nothing compared to the really gobsmacking fact that they are the world's biggest specialised nursery for young vines – about 20 million young vines per year, half for France, half worldwide. This so gobsmacked me that I had to ask for it to be repeated three times, and although I like John Wayne, I'm not usually that dumb. The Mercier family started here in 1890. It's an interesting case of the nursery tail wagging the vineyard dog – except the tail is humongous, and the vineyard puppyish. Because the nursery

provides a very wide range of grape varieties from their own rootstock in the vineyards, the winemaker often finds himself using grape varieties which are not part of the Vendée AOC. This can be liberating if you don't mind labelling some wines 'Vin de France' and you find customers in the know. A case in point is their *demi-sec* mix of Gewurz and Chenin. I couldn't beg, steal or borrow a bottle of this: sold out, try again December for the 2013. They also do attractive whites, rosés, and Loire-style and Bordeaux-style reds. Also their own sparkling, made, uniquely for the Vendée, on the premises, as opposed to being sent to Saumur for schooling.

The only other maker in Vix is Christian Chabirand. He and his wife Estelle are young, talented winemakers on the up and up. Started in 1997, they currently make only around 35,000 bottles a year, so I suggest you get in line – after me. Punk. If that's alright with you.

More details of these wine-makers can be found online:



[www.mercier-vins.com](http://www.mercier-vins.com)



[www.prieure-la-chaume.com](http://www.prieure-la-chaume.com)

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