

# Champagne Fidelity: An Adventure *Par Excellence*

Jan Didden, while visiting historic wine country in northeast France with a group of fellow audio DIYers, was moved by this encounter with a French viticulteur.

By Jan Didden

**W**e met Cedric Bouchard after roaming around his residence in the village of Celles-Sur-Source on the southern tip of the French Champagne region. This 30ish-looking Frenchman changed his slippers for something sturdier and invited us to follow him to his cave.

We had just spent a weekend at Stella Plage near Boulogne in Normandy enjoying a gathering of like minds at the European Triode Festival. One of our group had set up appointments for us to sample the champagne in the Reims area. Small vineyards usually don't open their gates to private customers, but instead cater to high-end restaurants and caves. Just a few minutes into the conversation with Cedric, my buddy whispered to me: "This guy would make a hell of an audiophile!" and I fully agreed with him. This is why.

After graduation, "this guy" left his sleepy village for the high-life of Paris, not being interested in the slightest in his father's small vineyard. But in Paris, between partying, he got into discussions about biological farming and ecological food products, and realized he could actually make a difference! Being the kind of person that puts his money where his mouth is, he returned to his father's place and started his own little champagne production. But he left all the rules and accepted ways behind him and started his own adventure, his own search for the soul of the grape, letting Mother Nature do what she does best.

His production is tiny—a few thousand bottles from this plot, a few thousand from that, but very high quality. For example, he doesn't use the hydraulic presses everyone else does, but instead, keeps to the old ways: treading the grapes by foot! Less yield, of course, but much more character in the liquid—no additives of any kind, and no mixing of several years and several grape varieties to try to maintain a constant taste over time. His champagne is different from year to year.

He explains: "There are no bad years or good years, there are only different years. Every time one of my bottles is opened, a new adventure starts, with sometimes unexpected outcomes." He routinely opens a bottle from a lot for the very first time in the presence of other enthusiasts, because he wants to experience what people who buy his champagne experience when they open the bottle, and he wants to feel his own apprehension that is so necessary to maintain drive and ambition.

His father still operates his part of the vineyard in the traditional way. "How's your relation to your father?" I asked him at one point. He looked at me and said, smiling, "complicated." But, he adds, out of conflict come constructive ideas, more adventures.

Then he told me that a few years ago he got a disease that paralyzed him from the waist down. Incredibly, he overcame that and today he runs around without a trace of any limitations. But, he says, "it profoundly changed my perspective on life. I

am determined to live the life I want, to enjoy it to the fullest, to be my own man."

So, what does all this have to do with being an audiophile? What all of us recognized in this man—at a level we can only aspire to—were dedication and commitment to his craft. Isn't that also what the audio avocation is all about?

Determination to build the best amplifier, best speaker, best DAC you can. Even if it is not the world's best, it is your best effort, and something you can be proud of. Because it was you who made the decisions, it was you who solved all the myriad smaller and larger problems, you who did the painstaking parts selection and sourcing, and you who put it all together. Switching it on in the company of your friends, because you want to share that adventure and that apprehension and ultimately the enjoyment of having done something well.

Maybe we should all remember this pride in accomplishment when we critique designs that do not conform to our own rules and ways, or when we voice disapproval on how a fellow audio DIYer solved a problem. Because it is not about the absolute measure of performance, it is about enjoying what you do, about being the best you can be. This hobby of ours is a way to enjoy life and to be proud of what we do, in a world replete with jobs and tasks that can be boring at best and dehumanizing at worst. Let us cultivate this avocation, let's promote it, and let's respect one another for it. *ax*