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Pinot Noir is a Finicky Grape that Likes to Play Hard-to-Get

Late Night Pinotology

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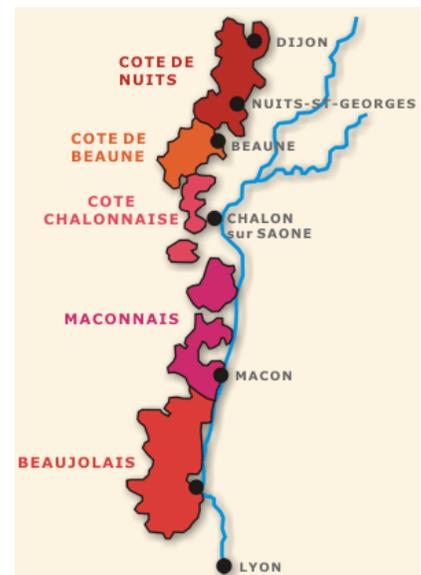
May 10, 2004

I am sure that many readers have seen the hilarious spoof on the Catholic Church's teachings called *Late Night Catechism*. I thought it would be appropriate to structure a Burgundy lesson in the same catechism (question and answer) format, since the Catholic Church played such a vital role in the emergence of Burgundy as a major wine growing region in France. It was of course the hard-working monks who first successfully planted and tended vineyards in Burgundy. They were not the first to launch viticulture here— that was either the Greeks or the Romans— but they developed the potential of the region. Burgundy flourished in the Middle Ages due to the Catholic Church and specifically under the Benedictine Order of Cluny. At a time the English controlled Bordeaux, the religious orders controlled Burgundy and during the mid 14th-mid 15th century, Burgundy was an independent state at the center of Europe's trade routes.

If you really want to know Burgundy you have to solve the maze of appellations (at least 120), you must learn to pronounce French, and you need to memorize the vast interlocking and overlapping regions. Of course you must know the names of the 33 Grand Cru and 584 Premier Cru vineyards and the names of a good portion of the 4,200 producers. Finally, you have to be willing to open your wallet since Burgundy is expensive— the smaller the appellation, the rarer the wine, the more notable the producer's name, the higher the price. The following Pinotology primer will get you started in the right direction.

Q: How many growing regions in Burgundy? Ans: 5. From north to south: Chablis (Chardonnay, one Grand Cru and 39 Premier Crus), Cote d'Or (30% Chardonnay, 70% Pinot Noir), Cote Chalonnaise (Bouzeron, Rully, Givry, Montagny— value-priced Chardonnay and Pinot Noir— no Grand Crus, 119 Premier Crus), Maconnais (excels in Chardonnay, ie Pully Fuisse— no Grand Crus, no Premier Crus), and Beaujolais (Gamay). For Pinot enthusiasts and for this lesson, we look only at the Cote d'Or (also called simply "the Cote").

Q: What does the name Cote d'Or stand for? Ans: "Golden Slope". This is a small ribbon of land, in most places less than a kilometer wide, that runs south from Dijon to Chagny. It is 20 miles of gentle southeast facing slope that is situated to capture a maximum amount of sun from very long summer days in the region.



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Q: Where are the best vineyards on the slope? Ans: 1/2 way up— like the beef in the middle of a hamburger. The soil in the lower vineyards has too much clay and water; the upper vineyards are too windy.

Q: The Cote d' Or is divided into what two regions? Ans: Cote de Nuits in north, Cote de Beaune in south. The Cote de Nuits has 24 Grand Crus, 138 Premier Crus, 462 producers, and 90% of production is Pinot Noir. The Cote de Beaune has 8 Grand Crus, 288 Premier Crus, 903 producers, and 70% of production is Pinot Noir.

Q: The historic division of the Cote d'Or into two regions is due to differences in the character of the wines— true or false? Ans: False. The Cote de Nuits red wines are often characterized as rich, robust, rustic, and requiring aging (true in many cases), and the Cote de Beaune red wines as softer, more elegant, and lighter (also true in many cases). But, a village such as Pommard, which is the Cote de Beaune has more in common with Gevrey-Chambertin. And Chambolle-Musigny and Vosne-Romanee in the Cote de Nuits often have more in common with Volnay in the Cote de Beaune (that is, softer and silkier).

Q: In Burgundy, there are how many red and white grapes legally used? Ans: 2 red (Pinot Noir and Gamay— Gamay is only allowed in Bourgogne appellation wines and Beaujolais) and 3 white (Chardonnay, Pinot Blanc, and Pinot Beurot).

Q: Burgundy is always cooler than our coolest viticultural regions in California— true or false? Ans: False. In 1999 and 2003 Burgundy was warmer. Vintages in Burgundy vary wildly due to extreme fluctuations in climate from year to year. When buying Burgundy, the success of the vintage is critical information.

Q: What is classified in Burgundy— the land or the winemaker and his estate? Ans: the land. Potential quality in Burgundy is determined by the location of the vineyard. In Bordeaux, the chateaux names are classified— in Burgundy the appellations dictate the classification and labeling. There are six appellation levels of quality: (1) General Appellation: Bourgogne rouges— from grapes grown anywhere in Burgundy— 2/3 of Burgundy production; (2) Regional Appellation: ie Cote de Nuits; (3) Regional Appellation plus the word villages— grapes from one or more designated villages, ie Cote de Nuits villages; (4) Village Appellation— label may contain the name of a specific village— ie Vosne-Romanee. There are 8 villages in the Cote de Nuits and 20 in the Cote de Beaune— 25% of Burgundy production; (5) Premier Cru Appellation— label contains name of village and a vineyard with officially recognized status, ie Vosne Romanee Les Beaux Monts. There are 426 Premier Cru vineyards in the Cote d'Or— 10% of Burgundy production; and (6) Grand Cru Appellation— a vineyard with officially recognized status that need only use the name of the vineyard on the label as it is assumed you know where the vineyard is, ie Romanee-Conti. 32 Grand Cru vineyards in the Cote d'Or— 1% of Burgundy production.

Q: Where is the most expensive agricultural real estate in the world? Ans: a 5 mile stretch from Vosne-Romanee to Gevrey-Chambertin. This stretch has more Grand Cru vineyards than any other similar real estate in Burgundy. No other place on earth exists where there is a comparable small strip of vineyards containing so many names that are revered by those with even the remotest interest in wine.

Q: What is the greatest Pinot Noir village on earth? Ans: Vosne-Romanee. Only red wines produced in this village. 8 Grand Crus (La Romanee, La Tache, Richebourg, Romanee-Conti, Romanee-St-Vivant, Echezeaux, Grands Echezeaux, and La Grand Rue) and 13 Premier Crus (Les Suchots, Les Chaumes, Les Brulees, Clos-de-Reas, Aux Malconsorts, Les Petits Monts, Aux Reignots, Les Beaux-Monts, Cros-Parantoux, Les Gaudichots, En Orveaux, La Croix-Rameau, and Les Rouges— the last two are inferior to the other 11— Les Rouges and En Orveaux are actually in neighboring Flagey-Echezeaux but are labeled Vosne-Romanee).

Q: All vineyards in Burgundy have single owners like most vineyards in California— true or false? Ans: False. The vineyards in France are “climats” and are divided among a number of individual owners. Some owners may have only a few vines in a row. There are very few monopoles—a vineyard owned solely by one owner. The vineyard name only indicates potential— you must pay attention to the producer to insure quality.

Remember, nothing is for sure in Burgundy. The spellings of vineyard names may take several forms. There are a lot of mediocre wines, so the vintage and producer are critical in buying good Burgundy. Top producers make quality wines at all appellation levels.

Inaugural PinotFile Wine Tasting Dinner

The first in a series of wine tasting dinners hosted by the PinotFile was held May 7 at the Pacific Club in Newport Beach. The theme was: Vosne-Romanee Premier Cru Vineyards. Wines from the most distinguished Premier Cru vineyards and from the most notable producers were tasted along with a menu featuring typical Burgundy fare. Guests were greeted with dry vermouth/cassis on the rocks and an amuse bouche of smoked duck and goat cheese. The first course was *Oeufe en Meurette* or poached eggs Burgundy style served with 5 of the 2001 Premier Crus (see listing below). The second course was “*Cote de Boeuf Rotie with Pommed Paille*” or rotisserie rib of beef with French fries and watercress served with 7 more Premier Crus. Desert was a chocolate guave Napoleon. The event was preceded by Late Night Pinotology and dinner featured commentary by Master Sommelier Rene Chazottes.

The wines:

Flight One: 2001 Domaine Jean Tardy Les Chaumes (\$50), 2001 Domaine Michel Gros Clos des Reas (\$54), 2001 Domaine Nicolas Potel Les Gaudichots (\$63), 2001 Domaine Boucard Pere et Fils Les Reignots (\$63), and 2001 Domaine Robert Arnoux Les Suchots (\$100).

Flight Two: 2001 Domaine Dujac Les Beaux-Monts (\$76), 2000 Domaine Clavelier-Brosson Aux Brulees (\$48), 2000 Domaine Cathiard En Orveaux (\$58), 2000 Domaine Lamarche Aux Malconsorts (\$50), 2000 Domaine Emmanuel Rouget Cros Parantoux (\$205), 2001 Domaine Joseph Drouhin Les Petits Monts (\$55), and 1995 Dominique Laurent Les Petits Monts (\$95).

The Premier Cru vineyards of Vosne-Romanee total 58 hectares (24 acres) and produce an average of 316,800 bottles annually. The vineyards vary in size from Les Suchots, the largest at 12.74 hectares, to tiny Les Gaudichots at .53 hectares.

There were several generalizations that could be made after the tasting. The 2000 vintage wines all showed more upfront fruit and more aging potential. Although the 2000 vintage is considered a “lesser” vintage by most wine writers, the wines are soft, fruity, and very appealing. They have better color than the 2001s, fresh aromas, moderate tannin levels, and plenty of ripe fruit. The 2001s are still lean and youthful and do not show the true varietal character of Pinot Noir yet. The 2001 vintage demands time to evolve. The good news for buyers was that, except for the Rouget Cros Parantoux, the wines can be purchased for \$50-60, not an unreasonable price for top-quality red Burgundy. The group’s favorites included the following wines. The 2000 Rouget Cros Parantoux was the best wine in the tasting. Produced by Emmanuel Rouget, who learned his craft from his uncle, the great Henri Jayer, the wine shows obvious nobility with round, rich fruit and Vosne-like silk throughout; too bad it is so expensive. This vineyard is considered by some to be deserving of Grand Cru designation. The 2000 Domaine Cathiard En Orveaux is a sturdy wine with plenty of meat. It has some Burgundy barnyard that not everyone enjoyed. The producer, Sylvian Cathiard has old vines that are 40+ years old. His style emphasizes fruit and finesse. The 2001 Arnoux Les Suchots was more extracted than other 2001s which was not surprising as the winemaker, Pascal Lachaux, who took over for Robert Arnoux in 1990, produces wines that need time to mature. This wine had an intense, wonderful nose, plenty of soft Pinot fruit, and moderate tannins. The 2001 Potel Les Gaudichots was an appealing wine that is very approachable now. Potel is one of the new breed of negociants, cleverly buying grapes and finished wine from some of the best growers in Burgundy while overseeing the viticultural process. The 2001 Drouhin Les Petits Monts was, like most Drouhin wines, elegant and clean. The wine possesses plenty of red and black fruits that are hidden behind a veil of acid and tannin that like the other 2001s, needs time to flush out. The hit of the evening was the 1995 Laurent Les Petits Monts. This wine produced the most conversation. It was inserted into the tasting to show what aging good Burgundy can lead to— a hedonistic compote of endless spice, deep aromas, saddle leather, and cashmere tannins.



When searching for top red Burgundy from Vosne-Romanee look for the following producers: Robert Arnoux, Bouchard Pere & Fils, Joseph Drouhin, Dujac, Regis Forey, Jean Grivot, Jean et Michel Gros, Lamarche, Laurent, Leroy, Mongeard-Mugneret, Nicolas Potel, Romanee-Conti, Chateau de Vosne-Romanee, Sylvian Cathiard, Bruno Clavelier, Rene Engel, Henri Jayer, Emmanuel Rouget, Mugneret-Gibourg, and Jean Tardy.

Good internet sources for Burgundy include: klwineco.com, garnetwine.com, aabalat.com, whwc.com, premiercru.com, burgundywineco.com, wintagewinessd.com, brownderby.com, winecask.com, vinfolio.com, casadelvino.net, wineclub.com.



Two Recent Good Drinks

2002 Rochioli Estate Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$40). The Rochioli Vineyard has been carefully planted in vines that are suited for the locale. Many of these vine selections were made by Joe Rochioli, Sr. who farmed this land for years before he was able to buy it in 1935. Rather than buying the latest recommended selection from UC Davis, he would go to the Davis field station to taste the grapes off the different vines. Now, along with son Joe, Jr., he releases an estate Pinot Noir which is the benchmark wine for the Russian River Valley appellation. The wine is pure and delicious, elegant and refined. It is never heavy-handed or over-muscled, just a perfect expression of Pinot Noir from one of California's "Grand Cru" vineyards. Usually released each year in April, most of the wine is sold by mailing list but calling the winery in early April may allow you to snag a bottle or two

2001 Etude Carneros Pinot Noir (\$40). Winemaker Tony Soter has been a significant figure in California wine circles since his early notoriety at Spottswoode in the 1980's. Etude was started by Soter in 1982. Through the years his Carneros Pinot Noir bottling has been consistently refined, elegant, and well constructed. Like the Rochioli, a reference Pinot Noir for the appellation, This release is full of raspberries, game, spice, and sap. Like the Lakers— purple, complex, and can bring it. Still available from Etude Wines at 707-257-5300. Etude also releases a terrific Vin Gris of Pinot Noir for those not afraid of good dry pink wines, and a complex Heirloom bottling that is made from heirloom varieties of Pinot Noir long neglected for their limited vigor.