



Thinking About Wine While Driving Around in Burgundy

by Charles M. Bear Dalton



After I came to work for Spec's in the summer of 1996, I quickly missed something about the job I had left. As much as I liked working for Spec's, I missed the time I spent driving in my truck as I called on all the Spec's stores and a few restaurants for Prestige Wine Cellars. But it wasn't really the driving I missed; it was the time. That alone time had been time to think that I suddenly no longer had. I still needed that time and I had to find other ways to get at least some of it back. Some of that thinking is now done while I walk my dog – which is almost as mindless as driving – in the morning.

The last three days have found me alone in Burgundy where I have been driving around visiting and tasting at several domaines and négociants to choose wines for Spec's. That driving time – including the five hours it took to drive to Beaune from Paris – has given me some much-needed time to think. Not surprisingly, a lot of that thinking has been about wine. Here's some of what I've been thinking about.

Value Burgundies and the wine press

Over a period of five days this week and another seven days coming up in May, I have/am/will visit around 50 Burgundy producers. During each visit, I will taste from as few as seven to over 50 wines for a total almost certain to exceed 1000 mostly very young wines. I will drink a number of other Burgundy wines at various plain and fancy lunches and dinners. Most of those wines will come from top producers making some of the best wines in Burgundy. My itineraries include domaines like Anne Gros, Domaine d'Eugenie, Domaine Louis Trapet, Domaine de la Romannee Conti, Remoissenet (ok, they are not a domaine but they are making excellent higher end stuff), Domaine Leflaive, Chateau de la Tour, Michel Gros, Mugneret Gibourg, Domaine de la Pousse d'Or, Dujac, Bernard Moreau, Roblet Monnot, and more. What do all of these wineries have in common? Virtually none of them make much of anything that normally sells for less than \$30.00 per bottle in the US. Most of their wines are priced higher and in many cases much, much higher.

So that begs a question: What's your average university professor to do? Why do I single out university professors? Well, most college and university professors have traveled a lot and many of them have developed a taste for fine wines but most of them don't have the annual budget to support drinking top Burgundy, Bordeaux, or Port. I'll worry about Bordeaux next week and Port some other time. This is my week to focus on value-priced Burgundies or what I call "Professor Pinots." Professor Pinots are priced between \$14 and \$30.00.

\$14 is close to the upper edge of my range for everyday wines. And \$30 is about the limit for what I call "weekend wines". Wines priced higher than \$30 are out of a lot of customers' ranges but many of the critics (Burdhound, The Wine Advocate, the Wine Spectator, Steven Tanzer's International Wine Cellar, etc.) are writing about only the higher priced wines. One domaine owner who says he tastes his top down with Allen Meadows (Burdhound) told me it took him four years to get Meadows to even taste his lesser-priced wines. They haven't been reviewed yet and may not get reviewed but the grower considers it a milestone that Meadows at least tasted his wines. I visited a Burgundy négociant offering wines much improved over the last several years who can't even get any of the publications to respond to his emails. So how do US consumers find out about professor pinots (and Chardonnays) – the good value, more everyday-priced Burgundy? The answer is necessarily mostly from retailers who bring in and sell the wines. That customer might ask "How can I trust a retailer to tell me the truth? Aren't they just trying to sell what they carry?" The answer is yes. They (we) are selling what we carry but back up a step. We have no pressure on us to buy any particular Burgundy. We are carrying the wines we sell because we believe in them. We have tasted ALL of our value Burgundies (and virtually ALL of the Burgundies we sell, period) before we buy and we don't buy what we don't like. I have tasted extensively at three négociants over the last three days. At each stop, I tasted some super values but also hit some clunkers. NONE of the clunkers have been or will be purchased for Spec's. Why would I buy something that I don't like that also has no market "pull?"

For value-priced Burgundies for everyday drinking in stock now, look for the Leonce Boucquet label, Look for Bourgogne Blanc and Bourgogne Rouge as well as wines from the Haut Cotes (the slope behind and above the Cote d'Or from small domaine producers like Michel Magnien, Michel Gros, Trapet, Groffier, Ambroise, Faiveley, and Pierre Labet. Look for wines from the Cote Chalonnaise - appellations such as Givry, Montagny, Rully, and Mercurey from just south of the Cote d'Or. Also look for less touted appellations from the Cote d'Or such as Marsannay, Ladoix, Savigny les Beaune, Chorey les Beaune, Auxey Duresses, Monthelie, and Maranges from these same sorts of producers but specially from bigger name négociants such as Louis Jadot and Louis Latour. Noted Marsannay producer Domaine St. Martin offers five individual expressions of Marsannay terroirs all in the value price range. Pierre Labet's fine Bourgogne Blanc is from vineyards in Beaune and Chorey les Beaune and tastes a bit like baby Puligny.

I just tasted through the range of 2008 and 2009 Leonce Bocquet wines and will be ordering several for late summer arrival. I also tasted at a new address – Henri de Villamont – in Saivigny where we will be ordering some wines very soon. Henri de Villamont used to be "dreck" but new ownership and a new winemaker with a good resumé have turned things around. Tasting through the 2007s, 2008s and especially the 2009s, there is a lot to like here and much of it is value priced. I'll be writing more on both Leonce Boucquet and Henri de Villamont soon.

2008 Burgundies

A lot of the initial press on 2008 Burgundies was iffy and some down right bad. Don't you believe it. The wines were very late starting their malolactic fermentation and even later finishing them – so they did not show well when they were initially reviewed. Alcoholic fermentations start right after (or at the longest within days of) when the grapes are crushed and usually are finished within a couple of weeks. Malolactic fermentations (the conversion of malic acid into lactic acid) usually start in March and can go on for a month or more. In 2008, some of the alcoholic fermentations lasted for months. Most of the malolactics didn't start in earnest until almost April or later and many lasted for several months. Wines tasted in the midst of malo show stinky-funky and cannot be fairly evaluated. The 2008 Burgundies I am tasting this week (and those I have tasted in Texas over the last several months) are showing great with the best wines offering a tell-tale very long finish that comes in

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waves. Jacques Lardier of Louis Jadot says these are wines “that remember their acidity.” Many of them are brilliant in the mouth. Check ‘em out.

2010 Bordeaux Scores and Prices

There is a tempest brewing in the wine press/blog-sphere over critics releasing new Bordeaux reviews before the chateaux release their pricing. Jancis Robinson (my favorite wine writer) has been asking her fellow critics to refrain but that is not going to happen, at least not this year. James Sucking (who maybe my least favorite wine writer) has already jumped the gun with some of his video. Others, including Jancis will follow in short order. Then the stir will die down a bit while everyone waits for Robert Parker. What I know so far (and I won't actually be in Bordeaux until a day or two after this is published) is that the wines are at least very good and that the prices will be at least as high if not higher on release than the 2009s. The economy is improving and the east Asian demand – despite what is happening in Japan - for the highest priced wines is off the charts. There will be real hysteria over the first growths and their second wines (Arruades, Les Forts, Pavillon Rouge, Clarence, etc.), a few associated wines (Duhart Milon, Clerc Milon, La Mission), and certain others (Cos d'Estournel, maybe Beycheville, maybe Lynch Bages). Having said that, don't panic. If you are a real Bordeaux lover who buys Bordeaux to drink rather than collect or invest in, the market is wide open with great wines the Asians have not cottoned on to. While the top end of the market pricing will go nuts (amid lots of press and blog hype) the rest of the top and middle quality tiers will still be at least accessible and, if the quality is anything like what is being reported, worth looking at. Stay tuned for more impressions as well as notes and, yes, scores.

A Bad Winery Visit

I had a visit earlier this week at a very famous address here in Burgundy. For reasons about to become obvious, I'm going to withhold the name of the domaine. It was my first time to visit the domaine. When I made the appointment, they neglected to mention they had moved their offices and that there was no sign. I arrived and could not figure out where to go so, against all my male chromosomal programming - I called. The person who answered said they couldn't see me out their window so I must be in the wrong place. I got back in the car, drove around some more, came back to where I had been, and called again. This time I got luckier. Someone came out and took me, a few minutes late, into a tasting that had just started. I was a little frustrated but no problem. I was ready to taste. The host poured me a sip of wine and said “You must guess the wine and the vintage.” I was surprised but played along. I missed the vintage by a year and my host revealed - without my guessing - what the wine was. This continued with each wine. As the visit went on, I grew frustrated. I was being shown that this domaine's wines age well when they are not corked (two of the wines were acknowledged to be corked – we did not taste those - and one more - one of the replacements - was slightly corked but not acknowledged) but I already knew that from having tasted and drunk wines from the domaine over the years. We (my fellow tasters and I) did not tour the facility. We did not see the vineyards. Although both were implied when the appointment was made, neither was offered. Most disappointingly, we did not gain any insights. I can now say that I have been to and tasted at this domaine ... but I have learned more tasting with the rep in Houston. This was a wasted opportunity.

Barometric Tasting Pressure?

For some time now, I have been thinking that wines seem to taste better on days when the weather is bad. Wine seems to show at its best on rainy, drizzly, gray days. On this trip, God and Burgundy seem to be doing their best to accommodate me. Up until last night, full rain has held off but we have had a bit of drizzle. Last night and today, a soft rain has settled on the area – and the wines are showing great. I tasted 2008s and 2009s at Remoissenet's old offices in the ramparts of Beaune (With Bernard Repolt as Pierre Rovanni – my host last year – is in the US this week) this morning and I am soon off to Domaine de la Pousse d'Or in Volnay to start the afternoon's tastings.

But back to the weather and tasting. Why, if it is true, does wine taste better in rainy, drippy weather? I think it is because low barometric pressure accompanies rain and that lower pressure allows more flavor and aroma to more readily be released from the wine. The better the wine, the more this seems to be the case. Maybe someone with more scientific knowledge than me will have a look into it. And of course there is always the possibility that the mood I am in on a rainy day (I like rainy days - but then I like sunny days as well) has something to do with it. Whichever or whatever turns out to be the cause, rainy days have become my favorite days to taste the best wines.

Google Maps and Weather.com

Two of my favorite tools, both of which I use on the iPhone and the computer, have let me down on this trip. At home, I rely on and trust both Google maps and Weather.com. Yet both have given me bad or incomplete information the last few days here in France. Weather.com has predicted snow and much more rain than we have received and much colder temperatures than we have experienced. On Tuesday, I had an appointment at Domaine Leflaive in Puligny Montrachet. I put the address (Domaine Leflaive, Place Marronniers, 21190 Puligny-Montrachet, France) into the Google maps page and got a map to a location in the village of Corcelles des Arts. Courcelles des arts is not far, maybe a 45 minute walk, from Puligny so I supposed that even though Leflaive made Puligny Montrachet, they had their cellars on the other side of the D974 (formerly the RN74). When I got to Courcelles des Arts, I found a Place Marronniers (a “place” is a square or at least a wider spot in the road) and opening onto that place was a courtyard with a barn and agricultural equipment. I knocked on several doors but no one answered. Frustrated, I called Domaine Leflaive and asked where they were. The informed me that they were on Place Marronniers and they would come out to find me. A few minutes later we concluded that, although we were both on Place Marronniers we could not see each other. After a moment, I realized that Leflaive's Eric Remy was in fact on place Marronniers in PULIGNY. I was indeed on Place Marronniers ... but it was not their Place Marronniers. As it turns out, there are two Place Marronniers in the same “zip code” and Google knows the less famous one better than the one in Puligny that is also home to Hotel Le Montrachet (a really nice hotel and a great restaurant). Although I have been to that Place Marronniers in Puligny many time, I had never noted that it was called Place Marronniers or that Domaine Leflaive (which has no sign) was located there.

Five minutes later, I was shaking hands with Monsieur Remy. We had a great, very informative visit. I learned a lot about Domaine Leflaive – whose wines I have admired for years (stunningly good Puligny Montrachet le Clavoillon 1er cru) – and came away with a GREAT impression of their 2009s all of which we tasted from tank as they were being readied for bottling. These are laser-precise wines that are full of minerals and fruit. In no case was the oak ever more than a grace note. I got to taste everything except the Montrachet.

Google has failed me in France before but it has never sent me to the wrong town. I will have to be less trusting and more diligent.

My High School choir director (one Ms. Sylvia Brown who likely will never know how much I enjoyed her class) had a poster in her office that said “Sometimes I just sits and thinks ... and sometimes I just sits.” I've been getting my thinking time in. I'm hoping for some “just sitting time” soon. Maybe a horse will be involved. ✨

