

RED BURGUNDY

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Burgundy is the home of some of the most famous wines in the world. It produces what many feel are the best wines made anywhere, but it can also be very confusing. I have taken a number of references and tried to distill them down to the essential information for buying red Burgundy. This has been placed in an easy-to-use Windows 3.0 card file.

In defining Burgundy, I have included the extreme northerly and southerly regions, extending from Auxerre to Lyon. In the north the Yonne is best known for its white Chablis, but the south's Beaujolais is famous in its own right. The heart of Burgundy is the Côte d'Or, or Gold Slope. The true gold is found in the famous grands crus of the Côte de Nuits: in the communes of Corton, Vosne-Romanée and Vougeot. Fine (and much less expensive) wine is also available from the Côte de Beaune and the peripheral areas of the Hautes Côtes de Beaune and de Nuits, the Côte Chalonnaise and the village designated wines throughout all of Burgundy.

Choosing Wines

By far the most important aspect of choosing the wine is the maker. There are two kinds of wineries: those of the *négociants-éleveurs* and those of the *vignerons* or *propriétaires-récolants*. The *négociants-éleveurs* are middle men who buy grapes, must (juice) or finished wine from small growers and then finish them. Historically, the growers could not afford to invest in the cellars and oak barrels which were used to 'elevate' the wine or to inventory them for the number of years that was required to bring them to an age ready for market. Many of the *propriétaires-récolants'* holdings are too small to produce marketable amounts of wine. The *négociants-éleveurs*, including the village co-operatives provide an outlet for these smaller growers. They are often growers themselves and the best of them produce wine of exceptional quality. Their chief drawback is that they often blend their wines, mixing different vineyards and even villages, which loses the link between the wine and its origin that is unique to Burgundy.

The Gout de Terroir

The concept of *terroir*, is the fundamental difference between the way the best Burgundy is made and any other wine. It is the unique essence of each vineyard, or even a small part of a vineyard, which has been recognized and enhanced by hundreds of years of experiment. It is a combination of the mineral content of the soil, its physical characteristics (such as drainage), the amount of sun received by the grapes and many other factors. Extreme exponents of the concept like to make much of the mystery of *terroir* and perhaps go too far.

Burgundy is almost always made only from one grape variety and when it is not, is given a different name. The only blended Burgundy is *Bourgogne Passetoutgrain*, made of at least 25% Pinot Noir with the rest Gamay. All other burgundies, from the generic *Bourgogne Rouge* or *Mâcon Rouge* through the village and vineyard wines to the premiers and grands crus are made only from Pinot Noir. All Beaujolais, generic to crus, are Gamay only.

It is this single variety wine which lets the uniqueness of each place come out. The *propriétaires-récolants* (growers) that bottle their own wines are the usually the truest to this concept. They can concentrate on bringing out the utmost expression of the *terroir* using their knowledge of the vineyard and its grapes. A good *vignerons* can tell you the current condition of every vine in his property. At their peak, they are arguably the best wine

makers in the world. The most famous of them is probably the Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, famous for its vineyards in Vosne-Romanée and Flagnéy-Echézeaux, including their *monopoles* (or solely owned vineyards), La Tâche and Romanée-Conti. This can also be the most expensive wine in the world, though, the Romanée-Conti selling, for the 1989 vintage, at US\$500 per bottle. Total production is also low, only a few thousand cases of this wine being available to the entire world. Production is much lower in Burgundy than in Bordeaux, which accounts for the high price.

Other Considerations

After the producer, the origin of the wine (village, commune or vineyard) and the vintage are about equal. In both cases a good producer will produce good wine from a lesser village or poor vintage, but a less accomplished producer will never make a great wine. Of course, the best of all three means that you have a wine of truly exceptional character.

Price

While Burgundy can be among the most expensive wine, very good wines are also available for much less. This is especially true to the less trendy or famous communes. It is also important to realize that the distinction between a named vineyard, a premier cru and even a grand cru can be hard to tell. There is a lot of overlap between the *appellations d'origine contrôlée*, which are assigned by the French government. Some of these designations date from the latter 19th Century and are subject to political maneuvers by the various villages, which try to enhance the price their wine receives or to protect it from competition, as the case may be.

Burgundy, with its complex appellation system, and the extreme division of its vineyards (averaging a tenth the size of Bordeaux's) due to the French inheritance laws (which have continually divided them equally between all the heirs every generation since the Revolution) is a fascinating and ever-changing place. Coupled with the superb quality of its wine, it greatly repays the time spent studying it and sampling its wines.

Organization of the Card File

The cards are arranged mostly by region within Burgundy: Yonne (YON), Côte de Nuits (CDN), Côte de Beane (CDB), Côte Chalonnaise (CCH), Mâcon (MAC) and Beaujolais (BEA). Within each region they are listed alphabetically by village/commune or appellation. A village may be subdivided between grands and/or premiers cru vineyards and leading producers.

There are other entries for vintages, recommended serving (bottle) age, price range, etc.