



The Terroir of Burgundy

Where tradition reigns supreme

▲ Some vintages at the cellars at Bouchard Père & Fils date back to the nineteenth century.

While entire books have been devoted to the subject of terroir (terr-wah), a brief description for our purpose here will suffice. Terroir was originally a French term used to describe characteristics associated with wine and coffee. It refers not only to a specific geographic region, but also to the type of soil, drainage, altitude, weather conditions, sun exposure, the grapes, and the wine making itself.

Wine quality of the Burgundy region (about 200 miles northeast of Bordeaux, France) has been studied in unbroken succession since the twelfth century when Cistercian and Benedictine monks got to work in earnest. They understood how wines from different crus (both the land and the wine, defined as an entity distinct from the next cru on the hill) could differ dramatically even if those sites were separated only by a small dirt road. Later generations built on this legacy, and eventually the mosaic of Burgundy vineyards was codified in a hierarchy of designations known as appellations meant to indicate relative quality and, as it followed, price.

The Burgundy vineyards are divided into four classes: 1. grand cru; 2. premier cru; 3. village wines; and 4. regional appellations. The grand cru is comprised of the thirty-three top-flight vineyards. There are 584 premier crus vineyards. Together, these upper-tier vineyards account for two per cent and ten per cent respectively of the region's total output. Village wines and regional appellations make up the largest category. Each year, an army of producers (some 4,200) churns out thousands of different wines of the two main grape varieties—Pinot Noir for red wines and Chardonnay for whites.

The average grower owns a mere ten acres (four

hectares) and might have just a few rows of vines in a vineyard (enough to make a single barrel of wine), which translates to around 300 bottles. This wine will be bottled separately from other parcels in order to preserve the perceived characteristics of its specific terroir. A family domaine (producer) might make only a few thousand cases yet produce a dozen different wines. Monopoles (whole vineyards in the hands of one grower) are rare exceptions; the Clos de Vougeot has eighty growers in its 125 acres (50 hectares).

Not everyone can be bothered or can afford to learn the delicate distinctions in taste between one plot of vines and those in a neighbouring parcel, but for the adventurous taster there is no better place. Burgundy lovers are risk-takers who, once hooked, never let go. They believe that there is more to wine than blood

and guts and that fragrance, elegance, and subtlety are truly what wine is all about. The task of understanding Burgundy vineyards takes on added importance given today's prices (premier cru retails for \$60 to \$100 a bottle, and grand cru starts at \$100 a bottle). Rarely do you see a Burgundy vintage in which the reds and whites excel equally; the 2002 vintage, however, offers precisely that combination. Most experts concur that the 2002 ranks among the best vintages in the past thirty years and is a must-buy for wine collectors. Entry-level wines from 2003 are good value because they have achieved unusual levels of ripeness.

Burgundy drinkers, collectors, and investors all have plenty to celebrate and much to choose from. My advice is to buy the 2002 trophy wines: white - CSPC 709712 Olivier Leflaive Corton Charlemagne Grand Cru \$150; reds - CSPS 702732 Joseph Drouhin Clos de Vougeot Grand Cru \$160, CSPC 701983 Louis Jadot Corton Pougets Grand Cru \$100, and CSPC 715545 Nicolas Potel Bonnes Mares Grand Cru \$220. For everyday drinking choose from the 2003 village and regional appellations. —Peter Blattmann

Cellar Notes

Domaine Bouchard Père & Fils Le Corton Grand Cru 2002
CSPC 712518, \$110 GST incl.

Le Corton is one of the domaine's seven grand crus. Concentrated cherry and mineral notes are the main themes in this supple red whose lovely structure keeps all the elements focused and persistent into the long finish. Best from 2006 to 2010.