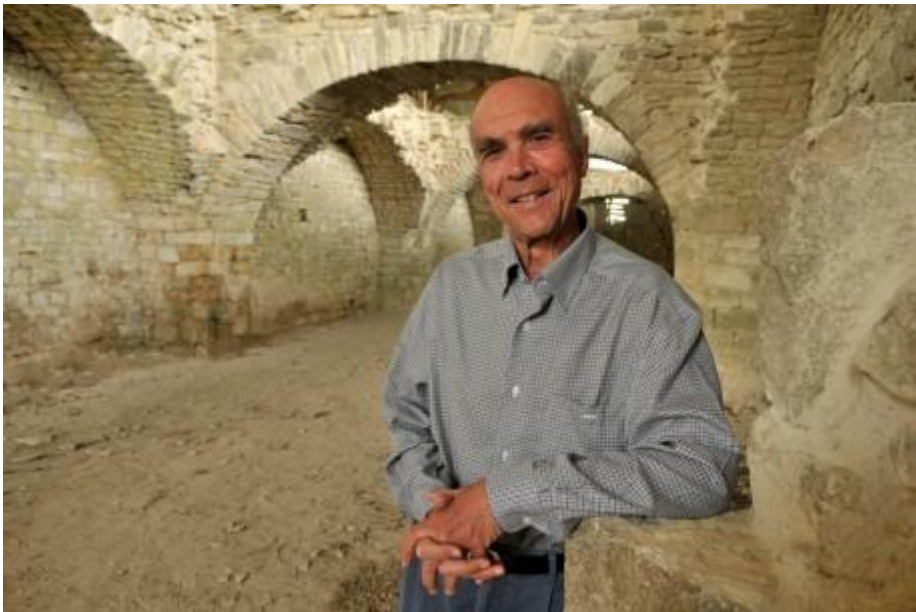


Aubert de Villaine has more in common with a prior of St-Vivant than with the Prince de Conti, who reserved all of the wine for himself. Claude Kolm charts the formation of Burgundy's most famous estate and explores the inspired and inspiring role of its *co-régisseur* there and beyond.

Of all the magical names in wine – and they are many – the most magical of all is Romanée-Conti. It is the name of a vineyard in Burgundy that has historically been considered the greatest in that region, if not of all wine. It is also the name of the domaine that owns the entirety of the Romanée-Conti vineyard and the entirety of the nearby and larger La Tâche vineyard, which is as unique and perhaps equal in quality to Romanée-Conti, though of an opposite temperament. In addition, the Domaine owns about 56 percent of Romanée-St-Vivant (more than five times as much as the next largest owner), 44 percent of Richebourg (more than four times as much as the next largest owner), 39 percent of Grands-Echézeaux (close to double the amount of the second largest owner), and 12 percent of Echézeaux (almost one and a quarter times the amount of the next largest owner, who leases off part of his holdings). Recently, in selected years such as 1999 and 2002, a Vosne-Romanée premier cru, cuvée Duvault-Bloch, made from younger vines of the six grands crus, has come to market. In white, the Domaine is quantitatively a smaller player at Montrachet, owning 8.5 percent of the appellation (but still the fourth-largest owner). Additionally, the Domaine has other holdings at Bâtard-Montrachet and Vosne-Romanée Premiers Crus Petits-Monts, Suchots, Gaudichots, and Reignots. Some of these holdings are farmed out to others; for the rest, the wines are either sold to négociants or kept for personal consumption.



All photography by Jon Wyand, from Bill Nanson, *The Finest Wines of Burgundy* (Fine Wine Editions / Aurum and University of California Press, 2012)

But it is not the holdings alone that make Romanée-Conti a magical name; it is the wines produced from those holdings. They have long been famed, but from the 1990s forward, they have continued to reach ever-new expressions of purity and race. The more one knows the great wines of Burgundy, the more one is awed by the achievements here. And therein lies the story -and the philosophy – underlying the Domaine and its wines.

Today, in the public eye it is one man, Aubert de Villaine, who is associated with the name Romanée-Conti and the tremendous quality of its wines. Moreover, as we shall see, both through the Domaine de la Romanée-Conti and Domaine Aubert et Pamela de Villaine in Bouzeron on the Côte Chalonnaise, Aubert de Villaine has been in the forefront of the renaissance of Burgundy, bringing it back from its somewhat degraded state in the 1970s to its current Golden Age, perhaps the greatest in the illustrious history of the region.

Jeremy Seysses of Domaine Dujac, whose family has long known Aubert well, summarizes his role in Burgundy as follows:

“Aubert and the Domaine de la Romanée-Conti have been true inspirations to us and no doubt to much of Burgundy. The perfectionism they display on a daily basis, in the vineyards as in the cellars, the imagination they display in finding small and subtle ways of ‘doing things better’ is incredible. No corners are cut. They are open to technological advances, yet they also show considerable judgment in not embracing modern technology for its own sake. The viticultural and winemaking approach are completely consistent with Aubert’s devotion to the great terroirs of Burgundy and especially those of the DRC. This devotion is uncompromising and knows no boundaries. What could be more inspirational?”

With typical modesty, de Villaine points to others as instrumental in these achievements. The three great influences on Aubert in wine have been his grandfather, Edmond Gaudin de Villaine; Aubert’s father, Henri de Villaine; and Henri Leroy, who ran the Domaine de la Romanée-Conti jointly with the two aforementioned for a third of a century. Additionally, Aubert gives abundant praise to the team at the Domaine, today led in the cellar by Bernard Noblet, *chef de cave*, and in the vineyards by Gerard Marlot, *chef de culture*, who will shortly retire, and Philippe Fontaine, who is in charge of the experiments with biodynamics. Yet it is Aubert who makes the ultimate decisions, along with his *co-gérant* Henri Roch, and who has set the course of the Domaine during this phenomenal run.



## **The formation of the Domaine**

The de Villaine family's involvement with Romanée-Conti begins with Aubert de Villaine's great-great-great-grandfather, Jacques-Marie Duvault-Blochot, a négociant in Santenay. Clive Coates MW has described Duvault-Blochot as "perhaps the most important vineyard owner Burgundy has seen since the Revolution."<sup>1</sup> Duvault-Blochot put together the core of what is today the Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, with holdings at Gaudichots (today, part of La Tâche), Richebourg, Grands-Echézeaux, and Echézeaux. The holdings extended over an amazing 133 hectares of vines that today would classify as either grand or premier cru, including, among other properties, Clos de Tart in Morey-St-Denis and the Domaine de la Pousse d'Or in Volnay.<sup>2</sup> But Duvault-Blochot acquired the Romanée-Conti vineyard only at the age of 79, in 1869, five years before his death. Romanée-Conti had long been recognized as the greatest vineyard in Burgundy. The vineyard took its present name when the Prince de Conti, reputed to be the richest man in France in the 18th century, purchased at a fabulous price the vineyard then known as La Romanée, and before that as Le Cros (or Clos) de Clous. The prince kept the entire production for his personal use.

After Duvault-Blochot's death in 1874, the vineyards languished under his successors, as ownership was divided among various descendants. In 1911, with the vines in a "deplorable state," Edmond Gaudin de Villaine, aged 30 and husband of a granddaughter of Duvault-Blochot, became managing director (*gérant*) of the Domaine.<sup>3</sup> A year later, Gaudin de Villaine and his brother-in-law, Jacques Chambon, became its sole owners, purchasing the other half from three cousins. With this consolidation, Gaudin de Villaine was in a position to institute his vision for the Domaine. At the time, négociants owned most of the great vineyards of Burgundy, but Gaudin de Villaine believed in a private domaine of the greatest growths of Vosne-Romanée, long recognized as the crown jewel of the Côte d'Or's villages.

Already in 1911, Gaudin de Villaine had hired Louis Clin as the Domaine's *régisseur*, based on recommendations of Clin's managerial experience and integrity. Clin, aged 37 at the time and a retired army officer, had no background in viti- or viniculture. He quickly learned, however, and became recognized as an authority in both areas. He remained *régisseur* until his death in 1953. No one else has held the title of *régisseur* at the Domaine. Under Gaudin de Villaine and Clin, the Domaine began on its own to bottle Romanée-Conti, Les Gaudichots, and Richebourg, nearly two decades before another generation of pioneers, led by Henri Gouges, the Marquis d'Angerville, and Armand Rousseau, began a general movement for estate-bottling by top producers. (Romanée-Conti had been estate-bottled under Duvault-Blochot, but he, of course, was a négociant, as well as owner of the vineyard.)

In the early 1930s, the Liger-Belair family instituted legal action to prevent the Domaine from labeling its wine from the Gaudichots vineyard as La Tâche, the name of a neighboring vineyard that Liger-Belair owned. The Domaine prevailed by showing that there was a history of selling the wine as La Tâche, and demonstrating to the judges through an organized tasting of "les Tâches" that the wines were sufficiently similar to bear the same name. In the wake of the decision and due to various financial issues in the Liger-Belair family, in 1933 the Domaine acquired the Liger-Belair portion of La Tâche. In 1936, the combined holding of Les Gaudichots and La Tâche became the appellation La Tâche.

The Liger-Belair family was not alone in its financial difficulties in the 1930s. It was an extremely difficult period for anyone in the wine business, and the dizzying prices of land and bottles that we see today were unimaginable then. Jacques Chambon, Gaudin de Villaine's partner, found the expenses burdensome. As they mounted, it became clear that if a suitable replacement for Chambon could not be found, the alternative would be sale of the Domaine,

which would lead to division of the properties. Over the years, Gaudin de Villaine had become a close friend of Henri Leroy, a négociant in Auxey-Duresses. Leroy supported the concept of a domaine that owned great growths.

Finally, in the summer of 1942, the Domaine became a *société* civile, composed of shares, and Chambon then sold his shares to Henri Leroy. This was not easily accomplished in wartime France. The German army had occupied the Gaudin de Villaine home in Moulins-sur-Allier (with one consequence being the destruction of historical records relating to the Domaine). Henri de Villaine, Edmond's elder son, was a prisoner of war at the time, so his wife represented him in the legal matters; Jean de Villaine, Edmond's other son, also could not attend and was represented by procuracy. Wartime restrictions on travel meant that the offices of the *société* were in St-Pourçain-sur-Siole, where the Gaudin de Villaine family had been displaced from Moulins. After the war, the offices moved to Moulins with the family and did not shift to Vosne until 1953. Fortunately for the Domaine, the *Kommandant* of the Côte d'Or during the period of German occupation was in civilian life a wine importer in Bremen, and he prevented the pillaging and destruction that was common in Bordeaux. (The Germans did use Richebourg, however, for shooting practice.)

Edmond Gaudin de Villaine maintained the office of *gérant* until his death in 1950. Following Edmond's death, his son, Henri de Villaine, succeeded him, and both he and Henri Leroy (as *co-gérants*) continued to work together in the same manner that Edmond and Leroy had.<sup>4</sup>

Henri Leroy's important contributions to the running of the Domaine included his recognition that the pre-*phylloxera* vines in Romanée-Conti and part of Richebourg had to be ripped up in 1945 and replaced with American rootstocks in 1947, the institution of a rotating replanting schedule (now about one third of a hectare per year, as well as any individual plants that need replacement), the agreement in 1966 to farm Marey-Monge's Romanée-St-Vivant, and the decision in 1963 to acquire the first of the Montrachet parcels.<sup>5</sup> (The Domaine subsequently acquired additional parcels of Montrachet in 1965 and 1980, and in 1988 it purchased the Marey-Monge Romanée-St-Vivant property that it had been farming.)

## **The Aubert era**

Henri de Villaine's first child, Aubert, was born on the eve of World War II, in 1939. Aubert's mother was born in Russia and fled the Revolution, first to Estonia, then to London, where she met her future husband – a distant cousin, who was working there for Crédit Foncier at the time. Aubert has no memory of it, but apparently when his father returned from captivity in 1944, Aubert spoke Russian, a skill he did not retain.

Aubert was raised in the family home in Moulins, about 200km (125 miles) from Vosne. His university training was in letters and the law. But he always had an interest in wine and in the Domaine. Following military service, he worked for nine months in the United States with Frederick Wildman & Co – at the time, the Domaine's US importer – and for the owners of Almadén Vineyards in a travel agency. He understood that he did not want to pursue a career in finance. He did take some courses related to his future avocation in wine, but he mostly learned at the Domaine. He also published articles in *La Revue du Vin de France* on California wines, probably the first post-Prohibition writings in France on the subject. In 1965, Aubert began working at the Domaine, and also for a period at Maison Leroy, Henri Leroy's négociant firm.

By the early 1970s, there was some criticism of the wines. Already in the first (1971) edition of *The World Atlas of Wine*, Hugh Johnson included some of the criticisms that one heard at the time, accusing the wines of a family resemblance and concluding, “Clearly one can look among their neighbours for wines of similar character at less stupendous prices.”<sup>6</sup>

It was time for a change, and in 1974, Aubert and Marcelle (Lalou) Bize-Leroy, younger daughter of Henri Leroy, succeeded their fathers as *co-gérants* of the Domaine. Controversy soon followed. Critics claimed that the 1975 vintage (very difficult in the Côte d’Or) was not of sufficient quality to be bottled under the Domaine’s name.

In 1977, with the appearance of his *Pocket encyclopedia of Wine*, Hugh Johnson was more acid than in the Wine atlas, describing Romanée-Conti as “the most expensive and celebrated red wine in the world, though seldom the best.”<sup>7</sup> Alexis Lichine, who had unstinting praise in early editions of his *Wines of France*,<sup>8</sup> subsequently wrote: “This fine domaine, which often succeeded in making surprisingly good wines in off vintages, has also sold rather deficient wines from lesser years at prices far beyond their value.”<sup>9</sup> As late as 1986, Serena Sutcliffe MW criticized the Domaine for sometimes making wines that were too alcoholic, for releasing the 1975s, and then wrote that, as a result of the perception of her “quasi-systematic” criticisms, she was temporarily denied access to the Domaine.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps the most stinging cut of all came from the most serious book devoted to Burgundy in many decades: the first edition of Anthony Hanson’s *Burgundy*.<sup>11</sup> Hanson (like Sutcliffe) was a Master of Wine in the Burgundy trade and certainly able to appreciate the great wines of the Domaine, yet his book also was renowned (notorious) for speaking some of the truths known to insiders. He declaimed against many of the Domaine’s wines of the late 1960s and early 1970s for lacking fresh acidity and for being overly alcoholic due to late picking or over chaptalization. (He also, however, indicated that the 1975s may not have deserved the criticism they had received, and reports of those who have tasted the wines recently indicate that he was correct.)

Things seemed to right themselves by the late 1970s with highly acclaimed wines from 1978 and very positive reviews for wines from the next several vintages. Until the 1983 vintage appeared early in 1986, that is. When the wines were in bottle, the staff of *Wine Spectator* tasted the Domaine’s wines together with Steve Gilbertson, the head of a well-established San Francisco importer and retailer. As related by Gilbertson at the time, the *Spectator* staff admired the wines and their “typical Burgundian mushroominess,” until Gilbertson said, “Wait – these wines have rot in them!” The *Spectator* published poor reviews of the wines, stating that they tasted of rot, thereby setting off a major uproar. For a generation, the Domaine’s 1983s were tarnished. But as with the 1975s, one now sees glowing reports of the wines.

The truth was that all of Burgundy, not only the Domaine, from the late 1960s into the early 1980s, was in a low period. In the early 20th century, there had been the need to replant the vineyards onto grafted rootstocks because of phylloxera, and the accompanying expense. Then there were difficult economic conditions between the two world wars, exacerbated in the 1920s by the loss of the American market due to Prohibition. It was therefore understandable that in the 1950s and 1960s the producers reacted favorably to “progress” that would help them to produce more and make the wines more marketable: more productive clones (notably, the infamous Pinot Noir *droit*), chemical herbicides and fertilizers that would also help to increase yields, tractors that could replace the work of horses, and the advice of enologists who suggested, for example, shorter fermentation periods to make the wines more approachable. What the producers did not realize at the time was that beyond certain

production limits, the Pinot Noir grape fails to work its magic on the Burgundian terroirs; that chemical fertilizers and herbicides altered the balance of the soil and, consequently, of the grapes and resulting wines, and also killed organisms in the soil necessary for a sound ecological environment and therefore the healthiest development of the vines; that tractors compacted the soil, also altering the ecological environment; and that short fermentations resulted in wines without depth or character.

Already in the 1960s, while doing research in the national and departmental archives in connection with lawsuits against fake Domaine de la Romanée-Conti wines on the market, Aubert had begun to form an understanding of the history of the wines of Burgundy and of the idea of the monks in the Middle Ages of a *clos* or a *cru* – a special place with a single grape type that gave wines that were distinctive from wines from other *crus*.<sup>12</sup> This was a concept that had been largely forgotten and was of no interest to most Burgundy producers in the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, one searches in vain for the term in the books on Burgundy and on wine in general that date from the time.<sup>13</sup> Instead, although it was appreciated at the time that certain vineyards produced better wine than others, there was no fixation on the individual characteristics of each vineyard and on the purity of expression of those characteristics. It is for this reason that one often reads and hears of the wines of the Domaine and other top producers at this time bearing a “heavy house style” or “family resemblance.”<sup>14</sup> But it would become evident that the future of the Domaine – and of Burgundy in general – was to recover this notion of *terroir*.

In the 1970s, as the new *co-gérants*, Aubert and Lalou were thinking in the same direction, and improvements began under their joint administration. In 1977, the Domaine was a pioneer in Burgundy with the acquisition of a moving *table de trie* to allow the sorting out of substandard grapes. A few years later, both Aubert and Lalou began experimenting with organic cultivation at their own estates, at a time when there was still little interest in ecology or organic farming in France. In 1985, the Domaine began to convert to organic practices, and three years later it was fully organic. This came about from the experiences of Aubert and Lalou, and was furthered by a talk given by Claude Bourguignon, a soil scientist, to the Domaines Familiaux de Tradition (an association of top family-owned estates in Burgundy) in the early to mid-1980s. Bourguignon is famous for pointing out that because of the chemical treatments used in Burgundy, there was more life in the sands of the Sahara Desert than in the soils of Burgundy. Bourguignon became an important adviser to the Domaine.

From this time forward, the wines of the Domaine, as at other top estates in Burgundy, began to improve, year by year showing greater purity and greater fidelity to *terroir*.<sup>15</sup> This is not to denigrate the wines of the earlier period, for a great *terroir* can produce outstanding wine even in adverse conditions, but rather to say that the resulting wines went forth to even higher levels of potential.

In 1991, in conjunction with Richard Olney’s preparation of his monograph *Romanée-Conti*, the Domaine put on a tasting of Romanée-Contis back to 1918, attended by Aubert, Lalou, Olney, and writers Serena Sutcliffe, Michel Bettane, and Michel Dovaz. Aubert says that the experience of tasting at one time the Romanée-Contis of the 1920s and 1930s (still on ungrafted vines), especially 1924, 1926, 1934, and 1937, opened his eyes to the extraordinary finesse that the wine of a very noble *terroir* with bottle age can attain.<sup>16</sup> The 1999 vintage further augmented this understanding of the potential of the vineyards, because the year gave absolutely perfect conditions for the wines to express themselves (though Aubert admits also

to being very happy with the successes of 2001 and 2004, which were produced under less favorable conditions).

The most recent of the controversies concerning the Domaine occurred in 1992. Lalou Bize-Leroy left her position as *co-gérant* as a result of marketing issues. She was replaced first by her nephew Charles Roch then, upon his death, by his brother Henri. It was the last serious controversy surrounding the Domaine. Critical reviews have been nothing less than superlative in the ensuing time, as the wines continue to gain in purity and quality, achieving levels not previously imagined. <sup>17</sup>

## Reflections on terroir

Over time, Aubert has developed, refined, and elucidated a philosophy that underlies the approach of the Domaine (and of the other leading Burgundy producers) to their wines. This philosophy is put forth in an excellent article, “Reflections on Terroir,” published in 2001. <sup>18</sup> It sets out the principles that have guided the renaissance of the Domaine’s wines and of the wines of other leading producers over the past two decades.

The article begins by observing that the high prices for the wines of Burgundy are based on the reputation and image of a certain number of crus. It is the obligation of the vignerons, especially those with grand cru properties, to be in a perpetual search for the highest quality possible. In order to do this, the vigneron must adopt a philosophy for the production of wine. The moving force that underlies this philosophy is the notion of terroir, the source of the exceptional and particular genius of Burgundy. In other locations, terroir has often become an abuse of language. In Burgundy, however, the concept of a particular place that has an identity that a single type of grape is charged with interpreting is so fundamental to the concept of the wine that it is difficult to overestimate the importance of the concept. It is often difficult for outsiders to understand that, to a Burgundian, he or she does not make Pinot Noir, but rather makes a wine of whatever *climat* is under discussion; the Pinot Noir grape is just the means of interpreting that *climat* or terroir.

In order to bring forth this concept of terroir, the vigneron must be in a perpetual search for the expression of terroir and must not stick to a rigid set of methods inherited from a past that is more or less recent—since some of the methods said to be traditional are, in fact, of rather recent origin. Aubert observes that by the early 1970s the wines had strayed from the purest expression of terroir, but that by the early 1980s, science was able to show how this was happening and to provide the means for organic farming to go back to the more direct expression of the terroir.

Another element that cannot be ignored is the cultural environment in which the wines of Burgundy have developed and exist—“a culture that is not written down, but that is inscribed in the landscape” through, for example, the layout of the vines, the tradition across many centuries of those who worked the vines and those in the cellars. “Without man and the civilization that he perpetuates, there can be no great wines.”

The wines that made the reputation of Burgundy in the past were, of course, tended without today’s technology. This does not mean that all new technology and innovation must be discarded, but that each must be used only if it furthers the goals sought with the traditional approaches.

One begins with the soil itself and the vines. In order to allow a terroir to express itself, care must be taken not to muffle what the soil brings to the expression of terroir. Hence the aforementioned organic practices and the use of lighter tractors and horses in the vineyards in order not to compact the soil (7ha of the Domaine are farmed by horse). There is also the need for the application, in very small quantities, of fermented composts that return to the soil what the vine has produced; these are, therefore, made out of crushed pruning shoots, the seeds and stalks from the pressing, and a small amount of cattle manure to start the fermentation. Additionally, care must be taken not to alter the landscape by, for example, removing stones that make the soil more difficult to work, since that can alter the drainage in the vineyard. However, all this must not be done rigidly; each terroir has its own characteristics that requires adaptation. Thus, for example, the applications and treatment of the soil that the Domaine employs for its vines in Echézeaux is not the same as for its vines in Grands-Echézeaux, because the soils of these two contiguous vineyards are not the same.

A part of the cultivation is biodynamic as an experiment. This includes about two thirds of the vines currently producing at Romanée-Conti, more than half at La Tâche, and about 1ha of Grands-Echézeaux, making for about 5ha in total under biodynamic cultivation. Aubert says, however, that he sees little difference between the results from the organic and the biodynamic practices followed at the Domaine.

Turning to the vines, phylloxera has forced the abandonment of the native rootstocks and the associated tradition of *provignage*, the process of burying the vine with only selected tips of the year's growth protruding. *Provignage* resulted in a much denser plantation than today, plants that could be hundreds of years old, and great genetic diversity in the vineyard. Thus, the challenge today is to keep a diverse population of plants that present varied characteristics, while at the same time preserving the genetic heritage for the finest expression of Pinot Noir. Aubert estimates that today, about 70–80 percent of the Domaine's vineyards are planted with the best vegetal material, and the replacement process continues. Since the mid-1980s, the Domaine has been making clonal selections from its own plants, including descendants of the pre-phylloxera vines that populated Romanée-Conti through 1945, creating a "conservatory" of Pinot Noir *fin and très fin* for use in replanting the vineyards; this continues a tradition that goes back to earlier practices. He plans to go further and create a nursery that preserves the finest genetic heritage of vines from throughout the Côte d'Or that would be available for use by others. There have also been experiments with high-density plantation, begun in 1997, to see if the increased density (roughly double that of today) of the pre-phylloxera vines had a beneficial effect.

In the cellar, the search for the truest expression of terroir continues. The Domaine is in a small minority of Burgundy's top producers to use the stalks in fermentation. This process adds finesse to the wines but is not simple to do, which is why more do not adopt the procedure. The fermentation generally is in wood fermenters, but there have been many experiments with stainless steel. The latter has not been generally adopted because it does not seem to add anything. Since 1975, the Domaine has used only new barrels, and since 1979 it has aged the wood for the barrels itself. The use of new wood is not with the goal of imparting oak flavors and aromas, but rather to ensure that no off-flavors or aromas from the older wood carry over into the wine. An experiment in 1996 involved one *demi-muid* or *queue* of 456 litres (double the size of the normal cask) for each wine, and that experiment may be repeated in the future. The goal was to test slower oxygenation through the use of the larger containers. These are illustrative rather than exhaustive examples of the Domaine's continual search for new means to better express the terroirs of its wines.



## The crus and the wines

What is the bottom line of these great vineyards and all the care that has gone into the production of the wines?

First, there is a purity and finesse that runs through all of the wines, as well as great precision and clarity to the fruit. These qualities have continued to increase in each vintage as the results of vineyard and cellar improvements take effect. Even when young, there is enormous complexity to the wines, yet that is only a hint of what is to come.

The Echézeaux is the least of the growths and the one that has the most competition in the sense that there is a good number of other fine and outstanding producers of Echézeaux. Most of the holdings are in the Poulailleures *lieu-dit*, considered one of the finest in the mixed Echézeaux appellation. It borders Les Grands-Echézeaux to the east and Les Echézeaux du Dessus to the south. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the Echézeaux often seemed to be a relatively weak link in the Domaine's offering of wines, but since then there can be no doubt of its quality. When young, the wines can seem relatively simple (not just compared to the Domaine's other wines, but to other Echézeaux), but they often evolve into something more than had been foreseen. At a recent dinner, four Echézeaux from 1995 were served blind to seven diners experienced in and passionate about Burgundy. The wines were all from top producers (Faiveley, Mugneret-Gibourg, and Rouget, as well as the Domaine), and all four wines were excellent. Nevertheless, there was rare unanimity among the seven diners that the Domaine's example was head and shoulders above the others because of its extra dimensions of complexity on the nose and palate. Even in less famous vintages (for example, 1967 and 1953), the wines can show stunning quality many decades after the vintage.

The **Grands-Echézeaux** shows greater refinement, depth, and sensuality than the Echézeaux, and it frequently shows a meaty, animal, sandalwood or graphite element on the nose that is typical of its appellation but not of Echézeaux. It, along with La Tâche, is one of the two wines of the Domaine that most consistently show well young; but like the Echézeaux, and indeed all the Domaine wines, it is capable of many decades of aging, even in less favorable years.

The following wines are from a core of vineyards that, but for La Grande Rue's separation of La Tâche from Romanée-Conti and an island of Richebourg at the northern end of the appellation, are contiguous, yet demonstrate the differences of terroir that small distances can make.

The **Romanée-St-Vivant** is from the part of the appellation below **Richebourg**. Like the Echézeaux, it was once a relatively weak link in the Domaine's lineup of wines. Following the purchase of the vines from Marey-Monge in 1988, however, an upgrade began, and in recent years the wine has seriously vied with the Richebourg for the third greatest of the Domaine's red-wine offerings. Spiced dark fruits with great finesse and a bewitching perfume characterize this wine.

The Domaine's Richebourg comes from three separate parcels, two of which are above the Romanée-St-Vivant. It is an archetype of the appellation, suggesting a flamboyant Gothic style (think King's College Chapel at Cambridge), with explosive, exotic, spiced dark-plum and red fruits in myriad combinations that are soaring with elegance while at the same time showing great strength.

**La Tâche** is the furthest south of the various vineyards and extends from the bottom of the hill to roughly 985ft (300m) in altitude, a gain of approximately 165ft (50m) from the bottom. The wine goes beyond the Richebourg in explosiveness, with fireworks almost literally going off in the mouth; it is overwhelmingly sensual, yet it possesses a great nobility and rigor at the same time. Richebourg certainly is nobility, despite the bourgeois implication of its name, yet La Tâche is nobility of a different order. Along with Romanée-Conti, it is one of the most memorable and irreproducible experiences in wine. If one sips the wine but once in a lifetime, it is nevertheless an experience to be savored for the rest of one's days.

**Romanée-Conti** adjoins one of the Domaine's Richebourg parcels (and a small part of it even lies across the path that generally separates Richebourg from Romanée-Conti). Because Romanée-Conti is considerably rarer and even more collectible than La Tâche, many fewer people have experienced it. The yin and yang of Romanée-Conti and La Tâche is fascinating. It has long been said that the perfection of Romanée-Conti is not perceptible until the wine has been in bottle for some years, but that certainly is not the case with recent vintages. The wine is less extrovert and more inclined to red fruit than La Tâche, and certainly the spice is less exuberant; the texture tends to silk in contrast to La Tâche's velvet. And yet for the attentive taster, even from barrel – unbelievable as it may seem – Romanée-Conti shows still greater finesse than La Tâche, with a great core of concentration.

The **Montrachet**, the rarest of the Domaine's wines, comes from the Chassagne side of the vineyard, with only Lafon's parcel being farther to the south. Annual production is but a few hundred cases. In the context of Montrachet, the Domaine's is exceptionally full and rich, in part because the Domaine often harvests last in the vineyard. In some years, 1998 being a recent example, the wine contains some botrytis, which only adds to the richness, creaminess, and concentration.<sup>19</sup> Regardless of one's stylistic preference in Montrachet, one cannot deny the extraordinary quality of this wine.

A sideline of these wines is that some years ago, the Domaine purchased the barrel cellar of the priory of St-Vivant (a dependency of Cluny in the Mâconnais) – the monks who originally cultivated most of the great vineyards of the Domaine and of Vosne-Romanée. This cellar is used to age every other vintage's wines from the Domaine, adding a fitting bit of history. (Aubert also heads a society that has purchased and is restoring the Priory of St-Vivant, not far from Vosne in the Hautes-Côtes de Nuits.)

## **Domaine A&P de Villaine**

Of course, few wine lovers can afford the wines of Romanée-Conti; and even if they can afford them, demand is very much greater than the supply. For all but a very privileged few, the wines will be read about but never tasted or will be experienced only on very special occasions.<sup>20</sup> Aubert and his wife Pamela also have, however, an estate on the Côte Chalonnaise in Bouzeron, where they live. There they produce wines that are also extraordinary, especially given their origin. At a modest price (especially for Burgundy), they provide much of the same purity and rigor as the wines of Romanée-Conti, albeit applied to lesser terroirs.

Pamela is an art historian originally from California. She and Aubert met in New York while both were working there. They married in 1971 and lived the first two years in Beaune. The de Villaines bought their own estate in 1973 on a tip from Henri Leroy's secretary that it was on the market. The estate had previously been owned by a **piéd noir** refugee from Algeria,

and its condition was run down. During the next seven or eight years, it was necessary to replant almost the entire estate. Recently, Aubert's nephew Pierre Benoît has been working at the estate and would appear to be the eventual successor.

Domaine A&P de Villaine is best known for its Aligoté, which is now sold as appellation Bouzeron (the appellation was awarded in 1999, due largely to de Villaine's efforts). A friend found 19th-century sources that spoke of Aligoté of Bouzeron as being among the best. Additionally, among négociants, it had long been known that Bouzeron, with its hillsides and limestone soils, was a good source of Aligoté. When replanting the vineyards in the 1970s, for the Aligoté, de Villaine used cuttings from old vines at Bouzeron – a type known as the Aligoté *doré*, which makes the best Aligoté. (For Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, the clones chosen were nothing special, and the vineyards are now again being replanted with finer clones.) De Villaine's Bouzeron is generally considered the benchmark for what Aligoté can do, inspiring unstinting praise from other producers. Aubert modestly says that Aligoté is not a great wine, but instead a wine that can be very good. It lacks the creaminess of Chardonnay but is notable for its minerality in a somewhat rustic frame. Nevertheless, he has been known to mistake his own Aligoté with some age for Chablis or Meursault, and indeed there is a fine race to the wine.<sup>21</sup> The thought that the wine is best used to make Kir is ludicrous.

The estate produces two wines from Chardonnay: the Bourgogne Les Clous and the village Rully Les Saint Jacques. The Bourgogne is very good Bourgogne, occasionally a little rustic, but still satisfying and generally far better quality than its appellation implies. It can take, and often needs, a few years' aging after bottling. The Rully is a different matter. Even though not a premier cru, it may well be the finest white wine from the Côte Chalonnaise, year in, year out. It is pure and racy, not heavy in body, but with great definition. The wine is generally impossible to resist young but is also capable of taking some age.

Currently, the estate produces three red wines, too. The Bourgogne La Fortune is made from vines currently about eight years old. It shows lovely purity of fruit, but is a little short on the finish, betraying the young vines. Although the vegetal material for the Bourgogne La Digoine is less fine than that for La Fortune, the age of the vines makes a difference, and this is a deeper, fuller wine with the same purity of red fruits. Last is a village Mercurey, Les Montots, from a vineyard obtained in an exchange with Faiveley. This wine shows greater finesse and purity than other Mercureys. A bottle of the 1991, the first vintage produced at de Villaine, drunk in Bouzeron last November, was open and astonishingly complex, with the promise of another 10–20 years of life remaining.

## **Reflections in wine**

A curiosity of wines, when properly made, is that not only are they an expression of terroir, but they are also an expression of the people who produce them – and they frequently reflect those people. That most certainly is the case with the wines from the Domaine de la Romanée-Conti and Domaine A&P de Villaine: Aubert's passionate and knowledgeable appreciation of culture – history, architecture, music, poetry, and more – has its important place in the wines. But these two domaines do not go about trumpeting their triumphs. Instead, there is an attempt to modestly create the best and purest form of expression – an attempt that succeeds as well as is humanly possible.

## **Aubert de Villaine in his own words**

We are at least as much the keepers as the owners of our terroirs (since they possess us as much as we possess them). [22](#)

My certainty is that it is in trying to be as simple as possible in approaches to the soil, to the vine, and to the wine, that one will maximize the potential of the terroir. [23](#)

One must be demanding and rigorous, allowing no special dispensations, not even the slightest, to this rule of which the keywords are contrition, selection, attention to detail, mastery of methods, meticulousness, patience, and – perhaps above all – humility. [...] Nothing great can be achieved in Burgundy without such exactitude. [24](#)

I think it is very important that in our modern perception of the historical dimension that surrounds the crus, we take into account the idea of those who “invented” the Burgundian philosophy of terroir and of a single grape type – that is to say, the monks. For the monks of Cluny, who were in the Middle Ages owners of most of the “grands crus” of the Domaine and of Vosne in general, *ars* (only roughly translatable as art) had as a function and as a goal not the creation of a product that would have a market value, but rather the restoration of harmony to the world through the high quality of the work. The role of the vigneron, as artisan and artist, is to make visible in the wines that he produces the harmonious structure of the world, that is to say the harmonious structure as revealed by the terroir. Man remains the essential, indispensable translator, the humble interpreter of a harmony that fills, if one knows how to listen to it, the world created (at least for the monks and for many others still today) by God. [25](#)



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Notes:

1. Clive Coates, *Côte d'Or: A Celebration of the Wines of Burgundy* (University of California Press, Berkeley; 1997), p.599. [↵](#)

2. By comparison, Bouchard Père & Fils, today the largest vineyard owner in the Côte d'Or, controls 130ha in total, of which 86ha are either premier cru (74ha) or grand cru (12ha). [↵](#)
3. Richard Olney, *Romanée-Conti: The World's Most Fabled Wine* (Rizzoli, New York; 1995; originally published in French by Flammarion, Paris; 1991), p.49. [↵](#)
4. *Ibid* [↵](#)
5. *Ibid* [↵](#)
6. Hugh Johnson, *The World atlas of Wine* (Simon & Schuster, New York; 1971), p.63. [↵](#)
7. Hugh Johnson, *Hugh Johnson's Pocket Encyclopedia of Wine* (Mitchell Beazley, London; 1977), p.53. [↵](#)
8. For example, Alexis Lichine in collaboration with William E Masee, *Wines of France* (Cassell & Co, London; sixth edition, 1963), pp.134–36. [↵](#)
9. Alexis Lichine in collaboration with Samuel Perkins, *Alexis Lichine's Guide to the Wines and Vineyards of France* (Alfred A Knopf, Inc, New York; 1982), p.150. [↵](#)
10. Serena Sutcliffe, *The Simon & Schuster Pocket Guide to the Wines of Burgundy* (Simon & Schuster, New York; 1986), p. 111. [↵](#)
11. Anthony Hanson, *Burgundy* (Faber & Faber, London; 1982), pp.217–18. [↵](#)
12. Hugh Johnson has called the idea of the cru the Cistercians' greatest contribution to wine. Hugh Johnson's *Story of Wine* (Mitchell Beazley, London; 1989), p.131. [↵](#)
13. The term, as it is understood today, began to be bandied about in wine circles in the early 1980s. The earliest modern usages of the term that the author was able to locate were in newsletters of the American importer Kermit Lynch (who imports Domaine A&P de Villaine). See the extracts from his newsletters of the early 1980s in *Inspiring Thirst* (Ten Speed Press, Berkeley, California; 2004) – for example, 1980 newsletter discussing the wines of Henri Mayer, p.52; and 1982 newsletter discussing the wines of Domaine Zind-Humbrecht, p.92. Matt Kramer's *Making Sense of Burgundy* (William Morrow & Co, New York; 1990) seems to be the first modern book to discuss the term in detail and to view the wines of Burgundy from the now generally accepted perspective of terroir. [↵](#)
14. For example, Johnson, *World Atlas of Wine*, p.63. [↵](#)
15. This change is recognized in subsequent editions of works by authors who had previously been critical of the Domaine, such as Johnson's *Wine Atlas* and *Pocket Encyclopedia* and Hanson's *Burgundy*, where unqualified praise replaces the earlier criticism. [↵](#)
16. Such tastings today, while not common, do occur, but this tasting was unprecedented at the time. [↵](#)
17. From time to time, individual writers generally considered marginal on the subject of Burgundy have tried to raise an issue here or there with, for example, the wines of the 1992 or 2000 vintage, but these writers have been outliers who departed from the overwhelming body of critical opinion. [↵](#)
18. Jacky Rigaux, ed., *Terroir and the Winegrowers* (Terres en Vues, St-Etienne; 2006; trans. Catherine du Toit), originally published in French as *Terroir et le Vigneron*. [↵](#)
19. For a comparison of the Domaine's Montrachet with those of several other top Montrachet producers, see the review by Jasper Morris MW in *The World of Fine Wine* 8 (2005), pp.26–31. [↵](#)
20. Alternatively, as an unfortunate consequence of being one of the luxury products most in demand, many will taste only from bottles that have been frequently resold and have not been properly stored, or from bottles that are fakes. [↵](#)

21. Kermit Lynch, *Adventures on the Wine Route: A Wine Buyer's Tour of France* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York; 1988), p.223. [↵](#)
22. Aubert de Villaine, "Reflections on Terroir," *op. cit.*, p.115 [↵](#)
23. Letter to the author; author's translation. [↵](#)
24. Aubert de Villaine, "Reflections on Terroir," p.116. [↵](#)
25. Letter to the author; author's translation. [↵](#)