

In the Côte d'Or, the typically diminutive size of the most important villages belies the magnificence of the resulting wines from their vineyards, in this case, Meursault

Decanting the boutique domains of the Côte d'Or

Although the film *Sideways* cannot totally explain America's newfound love affair with Pinot Noir, it did give both the wine and the grape an unprecedented Hollywood endorsement that subsequently sent sales and plantings soaring in the United States soon after its 2005 release. This heightened interest in Pinot Noir, made from one of the world's most temperamental and difficult grapes, has also revived American interest in wines from Burgundy, the undisputed kingdom of Pinot Noir and the grape's original home.

That the film's release and subsequent rave reviews coincided with intense media hype over Burgundy's celebrated 2005 harvest, hailed as one of the greatest vintages in recent memory (and now widely available stateside), further fueled excitement. The 2005s are fantastic, right down to the villages level, making the latter no-brainer bargains, despite the weakened dollar. The *grand* and *premier* cru bottlings from the vintage are some of the most cellar-worthy wines ever produced from the region and have stirred a global buying frenzy among collectors. According to the BIVB, the Burgundy Wine Council, not only is demand soaring in the States, the No. 2 market for the region's wines behind the United Kingdom, but globally 2007 exports are up 34 percent over 2005 levels.

Apart from the obvious benefits of a hit movie and a stellar vintage, coupled with the anticipation of the soon-to-be-released 2006s that are starting to show classic finesse and expressiveness, the re-awakened appreciation for Burgundy is, above all, a direct result of improved quality across the region. In addition to a new generation of ambitious winemakers who have the advantage of better knowledge in the vineyard and the cellar, Burgundy has noticeably benefited from the effects of global warming. Recent studies, including one released in 2006 by the University of Southern Oregon, demonstrate that average temperatures in Burgundy have risen two degrees Fahrenheit in the last 50 years and that spring frosts are less frequent. According to most producers, the higher average temperatures mean that ripening has become more consistent and, many winemakers say, as a result of the warmer climate, they have not had to resort to chaptalization, the addition of sugar to increase alcohol content, in the last few years.

Because pinot noir is uncommonly site sensitive, and therefore not suited to mass production, it is little wonder that Burgundy's boutique grower-producers are suddenly in the spotlight. The majority share a collective determination to exalt the region's famed terroirs through scrupulous, yet natural, methods in both the cellar and vineyard. These revitalized domaines are winning back savvy connoisseurs, as well as seducing new consumers who are eager to discover Pinots from some of the world's most celebrated appellations. Burgundy's Chardonnays, considered by many to be the greatest dry white wines on earth, are also benefiting from the renewed interest in the region.

Even if across-the-board quality is steadier than ever, discovering the best wines in Burgundy remains a daunting task, specifically in the Côte d'Or, the heart of Burgundy winemaking and the *département* most wine lovers readily associate with the region. Individual holdings of domaines and large houses are small and intensely fragmented due to archaic Napoleonic inheritance laws, and result in a

multitude of hyphenated labels reflecting village and vineyard names. To complicate things even more, producers with less than 20 acres often make nearly as many wines from tiny parcels dispersed among various villages and have seemingly infinite portfolios. Buying from a reliable producer, however, is still the best guarantee.

Fortunately for enophiles, there are more serious-minded producers than ever making wine along Burgundy's Golden Slope, which is made up of two distinct areas: the Côte de Nuits in the north and the Côte de Beaune in the south. Of Burgundy's 4,600 domaines, 1,500 are located along this 30-mile-long strip of land. And the majority of Burgundy's 113 *négociants* (the large firms that buy grapes and/or wine from smaller growers and bottle them under their own name, sometimes in conjunction with their private domaine bottlings if the *négociant* happens to own vineyards) are also found in the Côte d'Or.

The Côte de Nuits is famed for its complex red wines of impressive structure, while the Côte de Beaune is known for more sumptuously structured reds and its regal, age-worthy whites. Because both areas have predominantly east and southeast facing slopes, local winegrowers note that the main difference lies in the soils. While both are chiefly composed of limestone and clay, the Côte de Nuits is dominated by limestone, while the Côte de Beaune has more clay and calcareous soils.

How much bedrock lies beneath the vines, and at what depth, also proves crucial to a wine's identity, as does a seemingly infinite amount of other variables. For example, one row of vines can separate a *grand cru* from a *premier cru* or a *villages* or regional wine. These unaccountable and innumerable differences are what make Burgundy so fascinating as well as bewildering.

Among a plethora of mind-numbing Burgundy statistics, two best illustrate the Côte d'Or's lofty status: of Burgundy's 33 *grands crus*, 32 blanket the Golden Slope (the other is in Chablis); equally telling, the majority of Burgundy's 570 registered *climats*, or important vineyard names, are sited here, underscoring an obsessive attachment to *terroir*.

Shockingly, despite this strong tradition of expressing a wine's individuality, much of Burgundy's famed *terroir* had been victimized by aggressive cellar practices, and even more significantly, by abrasive vineyard applications. While many other highly lauded Old World appellations had also been jeopardized by similarly intrusive tactics, the consequences in Burgundy, and particularly in the Côte d'Or, where even subtle differences between soil and, hence, wine, are fundamental to the region's overall identity, were potentially devastating.

[...]

The young trailblazer is part of a growing group of environmentally sensitive viticulturists who shun the inhospitable vineyard tactics that, for a time, were widely practiced. "We embrace the '*lutte raisonnée*' idea of agriculture," says Chantal Tortochot, who, in 1993, left a career as a finance officer for a large petrol company to study enology. She has run the eponymous family firm since the late 1990s when her father handed her the reins. "This means that we only use treatments in reaction to a specific problem, when and if something occurs, but we don't bombard the vineyards constantly as prevention," explains Tortochot, whose 20 acres are mostly in the Côte de Nuits village of Gevrey-Chambertin with one holding in nearby Morey-Saint-Denis. "In 2003, we began a move towards organic viticulture, and are conducting studies in a test vineyard where we try to utilize only

chemical-free products in order to protect the natural eco-system. The resulting soil will be more natural and more representative of the vineyard's unique soil type," she emphasizes.

The domaine's holdings include some of the most sought-after *grand* and *premier cru* sites, such as Charmes-Chambertin, Lavaux Saint-Jacques and a small but valuable parcel in Clos de Vougeot. "The soil in Gevrey-Chambertin is, overall, a mixture of chalk and clay, and very arid and thin; perfect for pinot noir. It is what gives the wines from here their complexity and ample aromas," Tortochot says. She is select with new wood, and utilizes 100 percent for her *grands crus*, 50 percent for the *premiers crus* and 25 percent for the *villages* wines. "We prefer medium toast so that the wood doesn't dominate the wine," she notes. Full-bodied and refined wines are the result, and while wood is evident in the young *grands crus*, none are overwhelmed, and toasty sensations enhance the *premiers crus*, proving that there is no golden rule for the use of new oak. Instead, the choice of wood aging depends on the particular provenance and merits of specific wines, but the main goal is always to help achieve the right balance.

[...]

Domaine Tortochot

2005 Gevrey-Chambertin Premier Cru Champeaux - \$85: Heady perfume of roses, blackberry and underbrush. Flavors of ripe black fruit, plum and spice. Refined yet still tight and tannic; needs time to mellow to develop the vineyard's trademark elegance. *Score: 91 - KO*