

Wines of France: Burgundy

Written by Terry Connor

Tuesday, 25 September 2012 10:29

It was a Saturday in Boston and I had just left my all-time favorite wine store. I had purchased two bottles of 1993 Meo-Camuzet Nuit-St.-George for a non-competitive high price. My fault! I knew ahead of time what I was in for. I wanted a treat and I had to pay the price. As I exited the store I ran into a very close friend. I informed him that I had just purchased some wine fit for a very special occasion. Did he have one in mind? He very excitedly exclaimed to me that his son had just been notified that he had passed the Bar Exam. The two of us immediately put together a special dinner and I donated my special wine purchase.

The short story that I have narrated to you is true. The young lad that passed the Bar Exam is now a successful attorney in Portland, Maine. However, whenever I think of that story I am reminded of the high regard that most Burgundy lovers have for the wine that is produced in the Burgundy region. The Burgundy story began at the same time as most European agricultural areas. 65,000,000 years ago the area was under water. Over time the water dissipated and what was left behind was soil enriched with nutrients. Fortunately for us the soil was perfect for growing grapes.

The Burgundy area started to take shape as a wine producing region approximately 12 centuries ago. Benedictine and Cistercian monks began to define the area and to give it an identity as one that was, and still is, superior for producing grapes. Countless tiny parcels of land ultimately became Burgundy's best vineyards, yielding its greatest wines.

In order to understand and appreciate Burgundy, it is imperative that you take the word "terroir" and really get inside the true meaning it, and determine how it applies to Burgundy. Terroir, for which there is no English word, points to the total effects of a vineyard's soil, slope, orientation to the sun, elevation, climate, rainfall, wind velocity, fog, rainfall, and high and low temperatures. That is quite a package for only a seven-letter word. Please allow me to illustrate. Burgundy wines are one of best examples of wines that express themselves in a unique way, i.e. terroir. Imagine looking over a vineyard in any area of Burgundy where you know that wine is produced in different levels of quality. As you study the land, it looks like any ordinary vineyard. And yet it is not. The wine produced from this particular domaine will probably have rather distinct differences from one lot to the other. How can this be? The wine came from the same vineyard, it was made by the same person, and in the same manner. The answer is Terroir. This is not the logistics nightmare that it appears to be because the vineyard will perform the same way the next growing season. (I picked this crazy, but true, fact up at a lecture in Beaune. While I was at the lecture I received a parking ticket, which I still have.) This phenomenon has existed in Burgundy since the Benedictine monks started to record history in 700 AD.

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The primary grapes used to produce wine from Burgundy are Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. A third grape is called Gamay. The breakdown is as follows: The Chablis Region is 100% Chardonnay. Chablis is located to the northwest of Burgundy. The grape thrives on the limestone soil in the Chablis area and to the south of the city of Beaune in the Cote Chalonnaise. It has long been said that White Burgundies are the standard of the world. This is a fact that has been unchallenged for centuries. As for the Lowcountry, there are some White Burgundies here. However the selection is better in Charleston and Savannah.

The second Grape is Pinot Noir. This is the most difficult grape from which to cultivate and produce wine. On the vine, during early budding, we find a very healthy plant. Later on in the growing season the grapes form with a very thin skin from which they will lose flavor if the temperature gets too hot. However, Hundreds of years of experience in producing red Burgundy Wine has enabled the producers to meet the challenge that Mother-Nature has presented. Once the product is bottled and sent to market it appears that all the effort was well-worth it. The top red Burgundies originate in Burgundy in a small area called the Cote de Nuits, which runs from the city of Lyon and south to the city of Beaune. These wines are available in the same quantities as White Burgundies. These wines can be expensive. But...you deserve a treat.

The third grape is Gamay. We are most familiar with this product when each year "Nouveau Beaujolais" comes to town to make a statement that celebrates the "New Harvest." Although it is the same grape that Beaujolais is made from, Nouveau is different from Beaujolais. Beaujolais is a very fruity wine and Nouveau is light and meant for only the one appearance.

Next stop is Bordeaux followed by a detour to California.

Cheers.

WINESPEAK

The most beautiful story to come out of Burgundy takes place in Beaune where Wine and

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Charity combine. Each year at the Hotel Dieu, (you know it from the photos that you have seen of the building with the decorative tile roof) a wine auction is held to benefit the Hospice de Beaune and other hospital charities. This event is well publicized and people from all over the globe attend and spend large amounts of money in support of the event. Many of the wines come from the acreage owned by the Hotel.

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