

## IT'S ONLY NATURAL

*Sometimes living in Burgundy is like being in a bubble. We're an hour from Paris by TGV, but insulated from the 'real world'. Our recent trip back to the US (it's now the 'old country') was the usual culture shock. While we still speak the lingo and look the part, our fumbling at the gas pump and jarring ignorance of Starbucks's jargon elicit sideways glances that say 'did these guys just get out of prison?'. It's been much the same with wine. The American wine world has changed dramatically since we left the States in 1983. And because of the Burgundy bubble, our perception of these changes is mostly intellectual: we read a lot, but rarely get a chance to taste. Besides, real Burgundians won't even drink Bordeaux, let alone Russian River! Anyway, we set off to sell wine in the US with the dollar as weak as it's been in a generation. A moratorium on euro-wine has left Burgundy stocks in most shops decimated. We were prepared for that, but shocked to see what's filled the void. Not only is there an unbelievable range of US wine, aisle after aisle, rack upon rack, there's also a mountain of stuff- with-logos, case-stacked head high on any remaining floor space. And the prices! We've been fighting for years to get the word out that good Burgundy doesn't need to be expensive. And here, even with an exchange rate that's killing us, we find a bottle from one of our producers, a Bourgogne Chardonnay 05 from Pascal Borgeot, simple white Burgundy, structured and elegant. \$14.99, it was. Across the aisle, dozens of wines at twice the price. You know the ones: same grape, over-oaked and too much California sun. Worse still, some special cuvée of Yellow Tail was going for \$17.99, and flying off the shelf. Then there was a Capitain-Gagnerot Bourgogne Pinot Noir 05, again a simple Burgundy from a great winemaker, deep and earthy, mouth-wateringly fresh. Twenty bucks. Across the way— on display, mind you — West Coast Pinots going for \$50 and up. Crafted, surely; but crafty too. And then there are those good value techno-reds coming up from the other hemisphere: correct, abundant and dead-end dull. But rather than bore you with more of our holiday snapshots, we'll let one image speak for all our rummaging and rumination. Simple Burgundy vs. Napa Valley ego-wine vs. yellow-whatever: the old, the new, and the Brave New Worlds. Now, we know what we like; and you know what you like. And obviously there's a wine for every palate (or is it a palate for every wine?) What direction is our precious wine culture headed? They say that wine is a natural product. We're not so sure what that means anymore.*

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### TECHNIQUE VS. TECO

It's easy to make wine. You pick the grapes, put them in a big container, crush them up a bit and let them ferment. When it all calms down, you get rid of the pulpy part. The liquid that remains is wine. Of course, it's never quite that simple. Winemakers always add something. And these days there are a lot of things that can be added... for better or worse. So what is 'good' wine? Should it be judged purely on how it tastes? If so, just how much manipulation are we willing to tolerate? What are these 'additives' and what are the benefits, if any, of these 'manipulations'? And if wine is not 'natural', at what point does it stop being wine? Most wine regions in the world have established rules that prescribe how wine is to be made. These controls open a window into the soul of that wine culture. Often these rules are based on local traditions and so are by nature conservative. Sometimes they have to do with specific climate conditions. Recently, many have come about simply as a response to market forces. As it stands now, winemaking regulations around the world differ across a spectrum of possibility from restrictive to laissez-faire. What we saw in the US this time fairly reflects this situation. There are two broad categories of wine being marketed today. The first is what we would generally call 'fine' wine, and includes any wine where technique plays a more important role than manipulation. By this we mean vineyard practices aimed at producing the best fruit possible, reasonable winemaking where this fruit is nurtured through fermentation with the least intervention, and, above all, a respect for the local wine

culture, be it ancient or nascent. The second category of wine that we see today is what we call 'commodity' wine. As the name implies, this is a product where, more often than not, grapes are seen as a raw material in a manufacturing process. These are wines produced in great volume, consistent in quality and style from year to year, and thus apt for branding. Technology plays a major role in every facet of production. Chemical additives enhance and stabilize the juice, yeast strains (genetically modified in some cases) ensure controlled fermentations; mechanical interventions allow specific targeted flavors to be extracted and blended. The list goes on, and the result is that these wines all end up tasting the same. But can we not abide two categories of wine in this age of expanding markets and greater appreciation? We've been accustomed to two categories here in France since forever. The second category here is called 'vin de table', and frankly, it can be pretty bad. Is it not better to have this category replaced by a techno-wine that may lack character but has no faults? Again, the question is not so simple. So let's try to infuse some inexorable logic into a particularly visceral subject.

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## INEXORABLE ?

Have you ever tasted a 'natural' wine? Not an 'organic' wine or a 'bio-dynamic' wine, but a wine made from nothing but grapes? Probably not. This is not to say that it can't be done, nor that it isn't. We have occasionally tasted 'experimental' wines that are totally without additives. And honestly, it makes you wonder why the ancient Greeks persisted. Without the addition of sulfur dioxide, wine is a fragile thing. SO<sub>2</sub> is an anaerobic agent, an antioxidant that also plays the role of inhibiting microbes and rogue yeasts. Most wines without it will fall apart either from oxidation or wacky twists in the fermentation chain. (Wine in ancient times was often doctored with honey and spice to cover these unpleasant results.) Obviously, there is some commercial production of wine without added sulfur, made mainly by winemakers looking to be as earthy as possible. But it should be pointed out that SO<sub>2</sub> is a by-product of fermentation anyway, hence it seems foolish not to add the tiny amounts necessary at the appropriate time to make sure the wine is stable. So should we, for the sake of this discussion, say that it's difficult if not impossible to make good-quality wine without any additives? If so, get ready; we'll be opening a sluice that will cut a chasm straight to 'commodity' wines. After all, if you don't want wine that tastes bad, why not use any means available to make it taste good? Not exactly what you would call 'inexorable logic' but it makes the point that all winemaking is manipulation. So where do you draw the line?

## NOT IN BURGUNDY!

So there we were, standing in that wine shop, feeling pretty smug about our little Burgundies' prestige and price points. We were there to sell wine, and felt that ours made a convincing argument for traditional, minimal-intervention winemaking. Then someone said, 'what about the added sugar?'. Good point. In Burgundy (as in many northerly wine climates, old world and new) the practice of adding sugar to the must during fermentation (called 'chaptalization') seems as old as the vineyards themselves. It dates, in fact, from the mid-nineteenth century influence of the forward-thinking Napoleon III. But it seems so traditional, so much a part of winemaking in Burgundy, that to call it anything other than 'a part of winemaking in Burgundy' rankles. But fair enough, it does seem strange for a region not to allow irrigation, but then to let sugar be added to under-ripe grape juice. And that's the way most people interpret the process: adding sugar simply to increase alcohol levels. Now there is no denying that chaptalization is manipulation. In fact, just as with some of the more recently developed methods of manipulating wine (like reverse osmosis or micro-oxygenation), chaptalization has often been viewed as interventionist and even discreditable. But let's be open-minded and say that all these various manipulations are merely tools that winemakers may use or not, needed or not, wisely or not. Sugar can be added abusively to cover bad farming practices, sure; but wisely used, small additions of sugar, even to ripe grapes, near to the end of fermentation can extend that fermentation up to two or three days. And these extra few days lead to better color and flavor... while the overall increase in alcohol is minimal (.3% maximum). It's meticulous work for the winemaker, precise and laborious. But it helps the extraction, and the result is palpable. It's true. The same tool that can make bad wine can also make great wine. Which brings us to oak.

## ZERO IN

Yes, oak. You may not have thought to include barrels in the category of 'additives and manipulations'. Their use is uncontroversial because it is traditional. For centuries they were the only means of transporting and storing wine, so the case can be made that in the

beginning they were seen purely as recipients, and not as part of the winemaking. But imagine if they had never been used, and you were presented for the first time with a wine made in a new oak barrel. It would be a bit like that first taste of retsina ! After all, no matter what the initial intention was for their use, the fact is that they impart important flavor and structural components to wine that have changed the very notion of what wine is. So much so that what today we consider to be the 'greatest' wines (all of the red and, in many cases, the whites as well) are invariably oak-raised. This in turn, of course, leads lesser winemakers to abuse good techniques for the sake of style. So again, the same tool that can make great wine can also be used to make bad. Is it, then, hypocritical of us to say that our traditional methods are justifiable, but that newer techno manipulations are mere tampering? Let's take the example of micro-oxygenation, a controversial process that allows you to zero in on a particular blend of flavors and consistently repeat it— perfect for big volume, mass-market production. Developed in the Madiran region of France where the indigenous grape is 'tannat' (the name says it all), it involves injecting oxygen into wine through a porous ceramic stone. The exposure of wine to oxygen in limited quantities helps the polymerization of tannins into larger molecules, which are perceived as 'softer', 'finer'. In barrel aging, the natural properties of the wood allow for this aeration to occur over a prolonged period. Micro-oxygenation aims to mimic the effects of slow barrel maturation within a shorter period, without the time-consuming labor and the long-term costs of using oak. That's fine in principle. But as we've seen, there's good and bad in all of these innovations. We've tasted Madirans over the years, and the change has been remarkable. It used to be that you couldn't touch them for a decade; the tannins would dissolve your tongue. Today the wines are approachable young; dark, lush and juicy. Which is great; but then all of the sudden so are all those other tannic wines from the south. You can hardly tell one from the other. It reminds you of carbonic maceration (the Beaujolais Nouveau method) in that the process itself has a distinct taste. Is this for the better? It's at least ironic that a process created by winemakers in the south of France is being used by their Brave New competition to run them out of business. Some call it a noble effort to compete; others ask if it's not suicide to trade tradition for the shiny brass ring. The issue here is not 'good or bad' wine. The question is which category do you want to fall into? Machines don't make good wine. Good grapes make good wine. That much remains natural. Machines may make it possible to transform less-than-perfect fruit into something decent (just google 'reverse osmosis', or 'spinning cone extraction', or 'vacuum evaporation', or 'heavy-sulfur maceration'), but this is someone else's game. If all winemaking is manipulation, then obviously wine can only be as good as the manipulations. And there's no saying that some of these techno advances might not in some way be used to make 'fine' wine. So where do you draw the line? The world of wine is expanding to every continent and, of course, everybody wants 'the best'. But face it, there's not enough of the best to go around. What to do? We see two categories, and two solutions. Rather than looking for a deus ex machina to save their skin, bad producers of 'fine' wine should see this as an incentive to get their act together. And good producers of 'commodity' wines should see this as an opportunity to teach the great wide world the basics. It's logical; it's inexorable; and it's only natural.



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## RECENT ELDEN TASTINGS: THE NEW WAVE

Here comes the second wave of the 2006 reds...as always, some producers bottle their reds after 12 months and others prefer to wait 18 months. For Elden Selections this translates to the Spring and Fall issues; it's the rhythm of the seasons! As usual, we like to introduce producers we have 'found' over the past year. This time we have struck gold with two new (to Elden) domains. We present for the first time Nathalie and Gilles Fevre, a young couple making dream Chablis. And pay attention to Christian Menaut. He lives in the village of Nantoux, up above Pommard; and we met him thanks to an introduction by an oenologist friend. This guy is classic example of Elden inside information. He keeps a low profile; you would never come across him in the popular press. But he's one of the greats. There's some Champagne from our friends at Jean Vesselle. We also offer Domaine du Colombiers with an outstanding northern Rhone white. We have our yearly allotment of Vincent Rapet's Pinot production. And a clutch of Cotes de Nuits from Pierre Nageon. The Capitain-Gagnerot Corton-Charlemagne 06 won the gold medal at the Paris fair this year. We tasted it the week before the judging, and frankly, we're not surprised! Add to all this Gerard Mouton's paradigm Burgundy Givry 'Clos Jus', the Boillot's Volnay and Pommard and Pascal Prunier's masterful touch in both red and white, and we have a list that's well worth pondering. PLEASE NOTE: CUT-OFF DATE FOR ORDERS IS AUGUST 10th, 2008.

### CHAMPAGNE JEAN VESSELLE

Brut Reserve  
'Oeil de Perdrix'

It's been a frustrating wait, but the Vesselle folks finally have some wine to sell us! There has been such a demand for their production over the past few years that they have not been able to keep up. When we asked them if we could put these wines on the Spring list, there was none to be had. We were told we would have to wait until the Fall. So here they are: our two favorite cuvees, the Brut Reserve and their remarkable 'Oeil de Perdrix'. For us, the Brut Reserve is the image of Champagne, with a perfect balance of the elegance of Chardonnay and the suppleness of Pinot, with a subtle 'dosage' to bring the whole together. The 'Oeil de Perdrix' is a 'blanc de noirs', in other words a Champagne made from 100% Pinot Noir. Made in the traditional style, there's a hint of pink (the color of a 'partridge's eye', hence the name). You know you have a Pinot here; it's wine, not yeast and toast. This is a perfect Champagne for food.

### NATHALIE AND GILLES FEVRE

Chablis 06  
Chablis 1er Cru 'Fourchaumes' 07  
Chablis Grand Cru 'Les Preuses' 06

Nathalie Fevre used to be the oenologist at the Chablisienne, the highly reputable 'cave coop' in Chablis, where she built a reputation for keeping the varied and various Chablis 'terroirs' distinct. Together with her husband Gilles, they have recently set off on their own, and are building a state-of-the-art winery in a vale behind their Fourchaumes vines. The idea is to do it right: pure fruit, pure Chablis; no concession to fashion. We have tasted their first few vintages, and the results are remarkable. Their 2006 Chablis 'tout-court' is a faceted gem. The harvest was perfect: mature, healthy, great balance in sugar and acidity. The result is round, juicy, deep fruit, balanced with a 'rive gauche' (left bank) minerality, severe, almost dusty. It's a beautiful example of Chablis from a ripe year. The first growth 'Fourchaume' is from the 2007 harvest, which gives us a different style altogether. The wine is young, but even in these early stages, there is the classic 'Fourchaumes' charm (here we're definitely in the 'rive droite' style, rounder, softer minerality). These are vines that are the continuation of the 'grand cru' vineyards, and they consistently yield wines that are similar in many ways to the big guns. And speaking of which, their Grand Cru 'Preuses' will be one for the annals. The perfection of the 2006 harvest has given us perfection in grand cru Chablis.

### PASCAL PRUNIER-BONHEUR

St. Romain 06 Blanc  
Auxey-Duresses Blanc 'Vieilles Vignes' 06  
Meursault 'Les Charrons' 06  
St. Romain Rouge 'Sous le Château' 06  
Auxey-Duresses 1<sup>er</sup> Cru 'Les Duresses' 06  
Monthelie 1<sup>er</sup> Cru 'Les Vignes Rondes' 06

There are very few winemakers who produce both Pinot Noir and Chardonnay at these levels of excellence. In all the time we have known Pascal, he has nailed every wine and every vintage. That's a rare winemaker. Looking at his list, you might think that he's working in the backwaters of Burgundy; but look closer. He has carefully crafted a domain that reflects the perfection he strives to achieve. The St Romain 'Sous le Chateau' red, for example, is quite simply the best vineyard in the appellation. Many say it should be the first 'premier cru' in St. Romain. The same is true of the Monthelie 1er Cru 'Vignes Rondes': in Monthelie 'above the village' and 'below the village' makes all the difference. Pascal's vines are in the heart of 'above'. And then just look at the Auxey-Duresses' 1er Cru .....it's called 'Les Duresses': the village took its name from the vineyard (much like Puligny-Montrachet and Gevrey-Chambertin). Those of you who know these Selections know that we think Pascal is one of the best winemakers of his generation. It's no accident; you need great vines to make great wine.

### MAISON CAPITAIN-GAGNEROT

Ladoix 1er Cru 'Grechons' 07  
Corton-Charlemagne Grand Cru 06  
(Gold Medal Paris)

We took a Master of Wine friend to a tasting with Patrice Capitain the week before the Paris wine fair this year. Their Corton Charlemagne is a local legend, of course. And with the 2006 vintage being so promising, we were eager to see what would be forthcoming from Capitain. As you might imagine, our MW friend knows his Burgundy, and gets to taste the 'crème de la crème', so we were curious to see his reaction to the Charlemagne. It was a sip, and a glance back our way across the cellar. He simply said: 'that's grown-up wine'. Even in its youth, this grand cru was showing its pedigree. It was one of those moments. The following week, this Capitain-Gagnerot Corton Charlemagne won the gold medal at the Paris fair.

DOMAINE DU COLOMBIER  
Crozes Hermitage Blanc 06

GERARD MOUTON  
Givry 1er Cru 'Clos Jus' 06

CHRISTIAN MENAUT  
Beaune 06  
Pommard 06

ALBERT AND LOUIS BOILLOT  
Volnay 1er cru 'Carelle sous Chapelle' 06  
Pommard 1<sup>er</sup> Cru 'en Largillere' 06

RAPET PERE ET FILS  
Pernand-Vergelesses 06  
Pernand-Vergelesses 1er Cru 'Ile de Vergelesses' 06  
Savigny-les Beaune 06  
Aloxe-Corton 06  
Beaune 1<sup>er</sup> Cru 'Greves' 06  
Corton Pougets Grand Cru 06

PIERRE NAIGEON  
Fixin 1er Cru 'Les Hervelets' 06  
Gevrey-Chambertin 'Echezeaux' 06  
Gevrey-Chambertin 1<sup>er</sup> Cru 'Lavaux St. Jacques' 06  
Chambolle- Musigny 06  
Chambolle-Mysigny 1<sup>er</sup> Cru 'Les Sentiers' 06  
Morey-St Denis 1<sup>er</sup> Cru 'Les Riottes' 06  
Vosne-Romanee 'Pres de la Folie' 06  
Bonnes Mares Grand Cru 06

*We presented Florent Viale's Crozes Hermitage and Hermitage reds last time to much acclaim. We're very pleased that he is willing to work with us. He's another perfectionist, a perfect addition to the Elden group of winemakers. Here we offer his white Crozes Hermitage. The grape variety is Marsanne, and the style is honey and mineral with a long finish in the fruit, making you think you just bit into a bunch of grapes. These are the last of his 2006 whites, but after our most recent tasting with him in the middle of March, we reserved a dozen cases for this issue of Selections.*

*Gerard Mouton makes several premier crus, each a distinct expression of a part of that complex Cote Chalonnaise slope that runs above the village of Givry. While we have always had some of each of his wines in our cellar, we have to admit to a preference for the 'Clos Jus'. The name says it all, this wine is juicy. Year in, year out, there is deep black cherry fruit and a volume of wine that fills your mouth with everything you expect in Pinot Noir. It's much in the style of one of the more elegant Cotes de Nuits (like a Chambolle-Musigny or some of the more southern Morey-St Denis) but with even more mineral. For us, it's one of the wines that we count on to be a snapshot of the vintage.*

*We met Christian Menaut at the yearly medal-competition tasting in Chablis. He was a long way from his home in Nantoux above Pommard. But he's a passionate taster, and the chance to sample the best that Chablis produced in 2006 was reason enough for him to make the trip. The following week we went to visit his cellars, not knowing quite what to expect, but having been given a glowing recommendation from an oenologist friend. What a great surprise; this guy is the real thing. He makes mostly Hautes Cotes de Beaune (two different cuvees) as well as some white and these village wines from Beaune and Pommard. Small production, modest holdings; but what great wine! There is a purity and elegance in everything he touches. He's a very humble man, and keeps a low profile. Most of his sales are out the door to people who know him personally. So allow us to blow the horn for him. We have met many great winemakers over the years. Christian Menaut ranks right up there with the best of them. Great wine.*

*The Boillot cousins have two distinct domains, but they have a singular style. They are based in Volnay, and that style is very much home-grown. The wines are floral and fine. But at the same time, we see clearly the vast differences in the neighboring villages. The Volnay is lacy and (as the Burgundians say) feminine. Pommard, on the other hand, has a depth like deep soil; earthy and dense. This is one of the most interesting zones in the Cotes de Beaune because of the stark contrast in vineyards that are within shouting distance one from the other. But the cousins were born here; and these nuances have been passed down through the generations. This is traditional Burgundy at its best.*

*We wait every year for this moment. Vincent Rapet always bottles his generic 'Bourgogne' much sooner than his other, more 'noble' appellations, so we locals get an advance taste of what is to come. And every year it gets harder to be patient. If we had to choose just one producer in the world that we could never be without, Rapet would be on the short list. These wines are finely and subtly crafted, and are seamless from attack, through the mid-palate and onto the finish. The production zone on and around the Corton mountain is arguably the best in Burgundy for finesse and elegance. These are wines in a class by themselves. If anything, Vincent Rapet has taken the reins of the production as his father retires, and forged ahead with a confident, world-class style, and with professionalism rarely seen.*

*Quite a little presentation of Cotes de Nuits, eh? As those of you who read our write up of the Nageon wines last year know, this is a very old 'new' domain based in Gevrey-Chambertin. Pierre's forebears were negociants in the village, and owned some prestigious old vine grand cru parcels. At one point, the nego part of the business was sold off, and the vineyards were rented out to the Burgundian equivalent of sharecroppers. When Pierre decided to return to Burgundy (he's one of those 'flying winemakers' who travel the world tending vineyards), he re-established the negociant house centered on the family vines, and began to capitalize on the old family contacts. He now has an impressive—amazing, really—list of appellations. In a sense he is a micro-negociant, in that each of his wines is produced in tiny quantities. But then again, that's how Burgundy works best. He's yet another perfectionist, and only accepts to work with the very best, well-maintained vines. And the results are palpable. These are the great names in Cotes de Nuits. And almost without exception, they are wines issued from old-vine plantations. (The Bonnes Mares vines are something like 80 years old!) This is a production that will be famous soon! Remember that you saw it here first!*