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An American in Burgundy Is Feeling the Squeeze

By Lou Marmon
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These are tough times to be a winemaker. Consumers are buying but overall sales are down, and the demand for the higher-priced wines has nearly evaporated. The larger producers are better positioned to withstand the economic downturn, but even the giant wine conglomerates are laying off employees. For smaller producers who make limited amounts of the world's finest wines, these conditions are potentially disastrous.

This is not what Blair Pethel bargained for when he uprooted his wife and two young sons from

Washington in 2003 to fulfill his dreams in the Burgundian vineyards. Making wine is a perilous, capital-intensive enterprise completely at the mercy of capricious weather, global economic upheavals and unpredictable consumer preferences. It is especially difficult for an American within the heavily regulated French wine industry, with its layers of bureaucracy and inherent prejudices against outsiders.

There are nearly 4,300 producers in Burgundy, and these "domaines" are mostly small, family-run affairs. The region's emphasis on quality and the rural lifestyle are among the factors that prompted Pethel to give up his career and a house in Potomac to move his family to France and become a winemaker, even though he didn't speak French at the time.

The financial environment has hit Pethel hard. The Burgundy Wine Board reported that exports, a mainstay of the region's economy, were down by nearly 30 percent in the last quarter of 2008. Almost the entire decline is attributed to decreased demand in the United States and the United Kingdom, two of Pethel's primary markets. Combined with a less than stellar 2007 growing season in Burgundy and despite critical acclaim for his Domaine Dublere wines, the current release is selling at a snail's pace.

"I am really struggling," he said recently. "I easily sold out all of my wines in '04, '05 and '06. But with the downturn the '07s are not selling well. Cash flow is killing me. My livelihood and that of my family are being threatened." He has the capacity to produce about 30,000 bottles annually; he filled 22,000 bottles in '07.

Three domaines are owned by Americans; Pethel is the only one who personally handles every aspect of his. Tall, trim, with silver-flecked brown hair and a wide smile, the 52-year-old is charmingly articulate. Growing up in North Carolina did not give him much exposure to wine. He pursued an acting career during college but ultimately returned home, eventually landing a position at the Greensboro News & Record and completing his journalism degree. A scholarship led to piano study and a doctorate at the Peabody Institute. He mastered polo because he got a job at the Polo Magazine. He declined a career in music or polo and returned to the News & Record. He tried out for the TV game show "Jeopardy!," which he won twice.

Advertisement In 1987, Pethel followed his girlfriend to England. Three weeks later, they split up and Pethel found himself in London "with nothing, knowing no one and no

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Blair Pethel, who moved from Potomac to France in 2003, learned to speak French and endured hostility toward Americans in his efforts to become a Burgundian winemaker. His Domaine Dublere has received critical acclaim. (Photos By Eric Schatzker)

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prospects." He decided that "since I was in Europe, I'd try to learn about wine." After tasting some Burgundies, he started to routinely visit the region and brought back prodigious amounts of wine stashed in every conceivable crevice of his car.

He met his future wife, Fran, at a London ballet; the new couple vacationed frequently in Burgundy. They moved to Washington during the Clinton years, when Pethel worked for Knight Ridder as an economic correspondent. A timely inheritance allowed them to buy a home in

Potomac. Both of their sons were born in Maryland, and the family became submerged in a life of carpools and school activities.

Despite their suburban success, or perhaps because of it, Fran and Blair continued to strive to return to France. "We suffered terrific culture shock on coming back to the U.S. in 1994," Pethel said. "We felt that the value system in the U.S., which places emphasis on work, income and consumption more than on relationships and happiness, did not agree with our own."

In 2002, they bought and renovated a 410-year-old house in Beaune, the medieval walled city that is the capital of the Burgundian wine industry. The following year was not the best time for an American to move to France. The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq began in March, and Europeans' anti-American sentiment was almost palpable. Despite the tensions between America and France, Pethel and his family were welcomed in Beaune. Fran got a job as a teacher, and their neighbors were friendly.

Pethel answered an ad for a field hand and met Burgundy producer Jean-Marc Pillot, who recalls that "a short phone interview left me somewhat suspicious of his accent, which was -- how to put it -- not typically Burgundian. You'll understand my surprise when, at the time we'd arranged for a personal interview, I heard the roar of a Mercedes convertible arriving in the courtyard. A couple of seconds later, a tall man extricated himself from the car, typically American, with an earring but with, at the same time, an air of dynamism and kindness. After several questions, I immediately saw that Pethel was passionate about Burgundy, and in this profession, it's passion that drives everything."

He worked for other winemakers until he could buy his own vineyards and renovate a former tractor shed into a winery. Pethel had to become fluent in French in order to complete a rigorous 10-month course at the Lycee Viticole de Beaune. Known as Burgundy School, it is where the local winemaking regulations are taught along with organic chemistry and tax law, all in French. Some of his classmates were less than enthusiastic about an American joining their ranks. "Good-natured teasing I can stand," Pethel said. "This was not. I had to threaten to punch one guy to get him to back off."

Despite the hostility and other obstacles, his Domaine Dublere began to thrive. But, as it has elsewhere, the downturn has reversed Pethel's fortunes. Yet to be a winemaker is to be an optimist. While Pethel doesn't expect any financial help from what he calls "the socialist French government," the Burgundy Wine Board sees potential growth in nontraditional markets and is promoting the region's wines aggressively. There is hope that the economy will recover and that the 2009 vintage will live up to expectations.

However, Fran notes that her husband doesn't play the piano much anymore. One evening, as he waited for their kids to get settled before the couple went out for dinner, he sat at his grand piano and played a Schumann concerto. Pethel was so absorbed that he didn't hear anyone walk in the room. After a few minutes, he noticed Fran and a visitor listening in a corner.

"We should get going," he said with a grin. "I have to be back in the vineyards early in the morning."

Lou Marmon is a doctor and freelance wine writer. He can be reached through his Web site at <http://www.grapelines.com>.

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