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Aubert de Villaine: Decanter Man of the Year

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Adam Lechmere

Decanter's Man of the Year 2010 is Aubert de Villaine, proprietor of one of the world's legendary wine estates.

Stephen Brook reports in the latest issue of Decanter magazine that the owner of Burgundy's Domaine de la Romanee-Conti's 'first impulse was to refuse' the award.

But after 'some arm-twisting' de Villaine (pictured above and below) changed his mind and has now become the first Burgundian to be named Man of the Year.

Brook does not overplay de Villaine's modesty: after all, he makes probably the most famous – and certainly the most expensive – wine in the world.

'He is not self-effacing,' Brook writes. He gladly fulfils his role as the public face of the domaine, and his humility rather lies in his insistence on the fact he is merely the custodian of the estate.

It took de Villaine some years to decide he wanted to follow in his father's footsteps and take over the Domaine. As a young man he studied literature and law and worked in New York for Burgundy importers the Wildman family.

He even worked as a journalist, interviewing the then-unknown Robert Mondavi in 1966.

It was around that time that his father took him on as an apprentice at the domaine, co-owned, as it still is, by the de Villaine and Leroy families.

'In 1964 I found myself pruning vines, driving tractors, sweeping the courtyard, racking the barrels...'

Now he also makes wines with Domaine Dujac in Provence, and under the HdV label with his cousin by marriage Larry Hyde in Carneros, Napa, as well as wine under his own name in 'the most modest' of appellations, Aligote de Bouzeron.

In a wide-ranging interview, which covers everything from the sometimes mediocre



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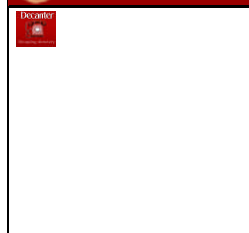
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reviews of DRC to the 'falling out' between de Villaine and Lalou Bize-Leroy, de Villaine demonstrates his dedication to his customers, both wealthy and otherwise, at a time when 'we could double the price of our Montrachet or La Tache and we would still sell out.'

But, as he says, 'We want at least some of our wines to be affordable to lovers of great Burgundy.'

The choice of de Villaine for Man of the Year, Brook says, is 'surely uncontroversial'.

'It is not only his achievement at the Domaine.. but his complete integrity, and his willingness to involve himself in the wider community.

'If the domaine's wines unavoidably slot into an elitist niche, de Villaine himself refuses to play the elitist game, and eagerly associates himself with other Burgundian producers, celebrated or obscure.'



Decanter Men (and Women) of the Year 1984-2009

- 2009 Nicolas Catena - Mendoza, Argentina
- 2008 Christian Mueix - Pomerol
- 2007 Anthony Barton - Bordeaux
- 2006 Marcel Guigal - Rhône
- 2005 Ernst Loosen - Mosel
- 2004 Brian Croser - Adelaide Hills
- 2003 Jean-Michel Cazes - Bordeaux
- 2002 Miguel Torres - Penedès
- 2001 Jean-Claude Rouzaud - Champagne
- 2000 Paul Draper - California
- 1999 Jancis Robinson MW - London
- 1998 Angelo Gaja - Piedmont
- 1997 Len Evans, OBE AO -Australia
- 1996 Georg Riedel - Austria
- 1995 Hugh Johnson - London
- 1994 May-Eliane de Lencquesaing - Bordeaux
- 1993 Michael Broadbent - London
- 1992 André Tchelistcheff - California
- 1991 José Ignacio Domecq - Jerez
- 1990 Prof Emile Peynaud - Bordeaux
- 1989 Robert Mondavi - California
- 1988 Max Schubert - Australia
- 1987 Alexis Lichine - Bordeaux
- 1986 Marchese Piero Antinori - Florence
- 1985 Laura and Corinne Mentzelopoulos - Bordeaux

Absolutely – nothing can match its haunting beauty

At its best, yes, but there's a lot of cross

No, Cabernet is King – think where we'd be without it

It's impossible to choose just one

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