

In Burgundy, one house grows by thinking small

Jon Bonné

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For a guy sitting on seven generations of family tradition, Erwan Faiveley seems pretty comfortable serving as the face of modern Burgundy.

Faiveley, 30, is the latest to helm his family's namesake firm, Domaine Faiveley, which dates back to 1825. No surprise that a winery with such a long run hasn't merely stuck to its own cellar. For decades, Faiveley was a reliable, prominent name in the Cote d'Or - dating back to a time when Burgundy was bought from negociants and brokers and sold on the reputation of each vineyard.

The balance of power has shifted in recent decades. Small domaines, run by individual growers toiling in their own slivers of premier cru and grand cru sites, have become the new stars. Negociants, the region's economic stalwarts, had access to these same sites and to solid winemaking, but their success became a bit of a liability. Their size - which in a region like Bordeaux would simply channel success - engendered a certain suspicion in a land where ancient iconoclasm reigns.

Then there are houses like Faiveley. It's not quite fair to call Faiveley a negociant: The firm supplies 80 percent of its own grapes for a production of 60,000 cases - a relative waterfall by Burgundy standards - across 100 different labels.

If its workaday Bourgogne Rouge encompasses 8,000 cases, Faiveley's reputation has been built on results from many of the finest sites in Burgundy - both shared sites like Mazis-Chambertin and its own self-held parcels like the

Clos de Corton Faiveley. Yet it retains that overtone of size, which sometimes still pushes it to the back of many wine buyers' minds in favor of the smaller and trendier.

That's a shame, because the Faiveley wines in the past few vintages have been getting ever better - showing clear, forward fruit and a light, skillful touch with winemaking. The wines are correct in their sense of place and often delicious - not only the fancy *grands crus* but also in Faiveley's lesser-known holdings, like the Clos des Myglands site in Mercurey, in southern Burgundy, and the workhorse village wines.

Thus Erwan has found his goal: to bet Faiveley's future not on the tidy profit of the bigger negociant trade, but on small projects from sites it owns and farms itself. The waves of Bourgogne rouge will give way to the puny 150-bottle annual production of Musigny.

"Our idea, in a perfect world would be that we're working only with our domaine," he says.

Though Erwan took over daily duties from his father Francois in 2004, he has skilled help. He and Francois convinced Bernard Herve, who had run the prominent house Bouchard Pere et Fils, to join them as general manager. This gave Erwan the flexibility to take a detour: He'll start business school at Columbia University in New York this summer, leaving Herve in charge. The generational torch-passing brought a broader round of change. In 2006 Faiveley dumped its longtime barrel maker in favor of fashionable coopers like Francois Freres. Winemaking has been broken into ever smaller lots. Grands crus are usually fermented in wood tanks, while lesser village wines are fermented in steel; those fermentations have grown slower and cooler to finesse the wines' finishes. Winemaking decisions are now shared between Faiveley father and son, Herve, technical director Jerome Flous and a cellar master. (Erwan claims the approach encourages more risk-taking.)

Crucially, Faiveley now places enormous focus on its vineyards. It has committed to using a native massale selection of vines for replanting rather than the usual approved clones. And while its holdings already stretched through most of Burgundy's top sites, Faiveley has been on a buying spree to grab a few more prime spots.

In 2008, the company purchased Domaine Monnot in Puligny-Montrachet, adding top white-wine sites, including Batard-Montrachet and Bienvenues-Batard-Montrachet. That followed a 2007 purchase of Domaine Annick Parent in the Cotes de Beaune, which provided access to two excellent sites: Pommard Rugiens and Volnay Fremiets. Properties in Chablis are likely to be next. All of which makes simply buying grapes ever less acceptable.

"If you don't own the land, you will never be able to make the best wines," Erwan says. "It's impossible to do it in the long run, it's very difficult to control the quality."

Perhaps most radically, Erwan shifted the way Faiveley's vineyard workers tend the land. Previously, teams of four or five would farm up to 20 hectares. Erwan assigned each worker about four hectares apiece, requiring them to take

responsibility for every aspect of farming.

"A vineyard is just like a car," he suggests. "If you own your car, you will be gentle with it. A rental car, you don't care."

These are tricky days to be selling Burgundy. Two difficult (and perhaps underrated, see sidebar) vintages have stopped up the pipeline, and even with some potentially glorious 2009s to perk up the market, there's a lot of wine to sell. So perhaps now is the time for the longtime negociant model to get an overhaul. The latest generation of Faiveley seems comfortable with going small and fragmented, focused on about 100 acres of top parcels; with the larger-volume wines, he insists, "in a certain way you kind of dilute the brand."

Which might be why one of his goals is to reduce by two-thirds the number of bottles on shelves adorned with his family name.

"I think it's going to be my job for the next 20 years," he says. "We're beginning to see much more clearly where we want to go."

A complex 2007 vintage in burgundy

The 2007 vintage in Burgundy is one of those fighting topics - a difficult, uneven year from a hot spring spike and then a wet August that left many vineyards with uneven clusters and rot.

After tasting 2007s through the past year, and one final chance to taste through some top wines at the recent La Paulee event in San Francisco, I came to a conclusion similar to others who prefer their Burgundy in subtle guises. The 2007s are compelling, complex, high-acid wines. The best are the essence of what makes Burgundy unique.

This is a departure from a year like 2005, when the wines were all about flesh. They were rewarded for approachable flavors and their big-tent approach to Burgundy. Not the 2007s: They will not charm all comers. They are more introvert wines.

The whites are full of energy and nerve. They hold forward mineral and floral accents that elevate white Burgundy from its Chardonnay source material. Chassagne-Montrachets are full of their signature crunchy stone presence; Meursaults are rich, but not lavish. Chablis is gorgeous.

The reds are more complicated, delicate creatures. If they lack obvious approachability, the best - especially from the Cotes de Nuits - have utter transparency and complexity, without sacrificing ample richness. These are thinking-man's Burgundy.

From the notebook

While the Faiveley wines from the 2007 vintage have been a hard sell in the market because of pricing, it's often possible to find some good deals. Here's a sampling, all of which are imported by Wilson Daniels:

2007 Domaine Faiveley Mercurey (\$27): A pitch-perfect expression of this Cote Chalonnaise village. Sage, peony, watermelon skin and bright red cherry highlights, with a chalky mineral undertone, light red berry fruit and subtle tannins. Or step up to the **Mercurey Clos des Myglands** (\$46), which is radiant and delicious now but will outperform as an age-worthy Burgundy.

2007 Domaine Faiveley Gevrey-Chambertin Les Cazetiers Premier Cru (\$105): From a white-marl parcel above the Gevrey castle, this is rich, leathery and already enjoyable, with lots of guts for a Gevrey, even in this lighter-weight vintage.

2007 Domaine Faiveley Corton-Charlemagne (\$305): One of the best white wines of the past year. Slightly tense to the taste right now, with lots of mineral power and not a drop of fat in the bright citrus and tree fruit flavors. Powerful, gorgeous white Burgundy. For a more modest option, the **2007 Montagny** (\$29) is juicy and quince-inflected.

Jon Bonné is The Chronicle's wine editor. Find him at jbonne@sfchronicle.com or twitter.com/jbonne.

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