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Sep 13 16:00 | by Adam Lechmere | [Add comment](#)

A Year in Burgundy: film review

I have to confess I didn't expect great things of A Year in Burgundy, chiefly because the director, David Kennard, told me the title was a deliberate nod to Peter Mayle's notorious A Year in Provence, that benchmark for patronising the French - garlic, berets and all.



So my worries seemed well-founded when Martine Saunier, the California-based importer who is the co-star of this rather sweet film (alongside Lalou Bize-Leroy, and more of her in a minute), rattled off in her 2CV to her first visit of the day. It seemed we were in for a comfortable, if ramshackle, ride through every cliché in the manual.

But then something happened. From the glorious aerial shots of the Côtes de Nuit to the extreme close-ups of American vinophiles chewing away at their wine, A Year in Burgundy is made with such genuine affection for - and knowledge of - its subject that all its foibles are forgotten.

The film follows the fortunes of seven winemaking families through the year's cycle, from bud-break in spring to pruning in autumn. There are two things that make it: the brilliant camerawork (Kennard himself is no slouch apparently, alongside his chief cameraman Jamie LeJeune), and the access.

As Kennard told the preview audience at Bafta in London last night, getting five minutes with Lalou Bize-Leroy, the formidable owner of Domaine Leroy and co-owner of Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, 'is like watching the Pope brushing his teeth.' And clipping his toenails, and hanging out the washing: Bize-Leroy, with her splendid aquiline features and hands as gnarled as the vines she adores, is hardly off the screen.

Kennard has Saunier to thank (and he did), as it was her contact book which got him and his crew not only into Bize-Leroy's chai (the old black vats marked in chalk: Richebourg, Romanée-Saint-Vivant, Chambertin) but

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into Sunday lunch with the Morey-Coffinets and a 500-seat Chevalier du Tastevin dinner at Clos de Vougeot, pickers' lunches and anarchic end-of-harvest horseplay

The film's triumph is to humanise everything it touches. When Michel Morey is staring in frustration at the computerised controls of the wine press, the Chardonnay heating up behind him, his son Thibault's expression is fathomless: respect and love and a hint of something which says, when I'm in charge things will be smoother.

But you know they won't be, and that's the beauty of it. The four generations sit down together for lunch and you can see how it all just goes on, the same yet different, decade after decade.

I've got cavils: the voiceover is inconsistent, gloopily sentimental one minute and uninformative the next. So we're told these are 'picture postcard communities full of real charm' as the helicopter shot swoops over the villages, then 'these grapes are grown for the ancient Hospices de Beaune', which will leave most audiences none the wiser.

But then you have Lalou rubbishing her neighbours ('it took them one hour to prune that vineyard. It takes me one day to do just one row'), and Christophe Perrot-Minot haranguing his pickers for putting rotted bunches in the buckets, and you feel you've had a glimpse behind the curtain.

Kennard had the good fortune to be in Burgundy during the nail-biting 2011 vintage, with its spring heatwaves and harvest storms, and when he films lowering black clouds just as the six rows of Bâtard vines are due to be picked, we're on the edge of our seats.

Gripping stuff, but will it make any money? It's bankrolled by Todd Ruppert, a Gatsbyish figure with 'diversified interests globally in the arts, film, clothing, luxury services, real estate, and private equity', as the film's website says. He's given the green light to A Year in Champagne and they're looking for a TV deal now, but I was told by a TV executive that there was 'no way' a terrestrial company would pick up on it.

More fool them. This is the sort of film they used to show in cinemas in the 1970s, before the main feature. It's a paean to an ancient craft without a hint of bombast or polemic, gentle and old-fashioned and at some moments, like the closing scenes of autumn smoke rising from the pruners' fires, it's lyrical.

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