



La Vendange (the grape harvest, they said)

Vosne-Romanée, a small village nestled among vineyards in Burgundy, is arguably the most famous wine village in the whole world. The Grand Cru vineyards (a designation that follows the soil, not the producer) of Vosne-Romanée create some of the most expensive wines on the planet, sought-after for their grace and complexity.

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Our friend Jean-Pierre working as a porter

When our friend from Dijon, Jean-Pierre, asked us a couple months ago if we would be interested in assisting with the autumn grape harvest, we had no idea he would be asking us to join him in Vosne-Romanée. But last Sunday we, along with about 45 other workers, walked through the gates of the Château de Vosne-Romanée, ready for harvest at the [Domaine du Comte Liger-Belair](#). Due to our lack of a French work visa, we could not cut or port grapes for the *vendange* (harvest) itself, but instead accompanied the workers (all there at the *personal invitation* of the owner) in the fields, and joined them along with the Liger-Belair family for the traditional post-harvest lunch at the château. We arranged to spend the day taking photos, then join in the big meal, and give the photos to the domaine; a very nice trade if you ask us! This is the big surprise hinted at on this website for the past few weeks.

As has been done for centuries, the workers start with an early breakfast at the winery. As the grey mists swirl around the stone walls, the gates to the château swing open and the workers, laughing and singing and joking with one another, head for the fields.

Grapes grow at shin height, so workers delicately extract each bunch while crouched among the vines or bent-double at the waist. I imagine that harvesting grapes is a romantic task for about the first 10 minutes; after that, it's just pure, backbreaking labor, although a labor of great love. Porters move up and down the rows, collecting grapes from the workers and hauling the fruit on their backs to the trucks waiting to haul the harvest back to the château. Occasionally, as a picker stands and stretches an aching back, a clump of very expensive grapes flies from behind another row of vines, aimed at the tired worker.

After several hours of labor, the women of the château bring a snack to edge of the field. Workers take a short break and enjoy water, wine or a hot drink along with cheese, bread, hearty dried sausages, and chocolate. Barely taller than the sea of muddy boots and legs surrounding them, the owner's young girls bring out tiny baskets of snacks, following in the steps of their ancestors who have owned this land since their great-great-great-great grandfather, Count Louis Liger-Belair (one of Napoleon's top generals), acquired it in 1815.

(use arrow keys or click the photos to advance slideshow)

THE ART OF THE VACATION LIFESTYLE

This chronicle tracks the adventures of Kent and Heather as they take an Unexcused Absence.

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Harvesting along the row of vines

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Work continues until, row by row, the hand harvesting of the Grand Cru fields finishes. Workers return to the château in small groups where they hose down their boots, enjoy a snack or two, and gather for lunch. When the last workers have returned, the final grapes of the day processed, and the machinery carefully cleaned, the workers gather under a large tree next to the château and Louis-Michel, heir to the property and head *vigneron* (wine-maker), leads a toast to thank all those who have helped with the harvest.

Then, the workers gather in the château's *orangerie* (loosely translated as "winter greenhouse") for a sumptuous meal featuring beef bourgogne made by the current Count Liger-Belair who, probably in his late seventies, still insists on annually preparing his special recipe for the harvest workers. His wife bakes hundreds of *gougère* (a cheese pastry) which come hot from the oven into the workers' hands. Constance, Louis-Michel's wife, organizes the kitchen and sees to it that no worker goes hungry.

Oh, and the family also serves some of the domaine's wine along with the meal! The 2009 wine tastes rich, with a texture simultaneously like satin and velvet. I can taste the *terroir* of soil of Vosne-Romanée along with spices and a slight sense of picante pepperiness on my tongue. The wine finishes cleanly and offers an amazing sensation of holding multiple flavors in my mouth simultaneously. It's by far the nicest wine I've ever tasted — and this is just the table wine of the Domaine du Comte Liger-Belair.

The Grand Cru wines from Domaine du Comte Liger-Belair retail for around \$4,000. No, that's not per case. That's \$4k for *one bottle*. Clearly, the Count and his family could organize caterers to make and serve the food. Instead, they prepare food themselves, bring it to the fields, and serve it to the workers before joining them for a meal. There seems to be great respect and genuine affection both by the workers for the family and by the family for the workers, many of whom return year after year. We imagine that centuries ago in this part of France, harvest felt much like the vendange of Domaine du Comte Liger-Belair in 2012.



Big lunch celebrating the end of the harvest



Just something they brought out for lunch; the 2009 Domaine du Comte Liger-Belair

Our visit to Domaine du Comte Liger-Belair during the harvest offers us a fantastic chance to see the true heartbeat of France. The French, and this family in particular, hold tightly to their traditions, trust the wisdom of the past, and work very hard in order to craft something quite extraordinary.

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2 Responses to “La Vendange (the grape harvest, they said)”



Barbie says:

October 2, 2012 at 5:04 pm

Wow- you guys! I could almost smell the grapes and feel the early morning mist on my face reading this entry. What a special addition to your Fall 2012 excursion! That gougere sounds divine- par it with bierre et sucre pastry (or crepe) from Brittany and I'd call that heaven on earth!! Miss you both! A Bientot, Barbie

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Mom says:

October 2, 2012 at 6:48 pm

Your pics and story gave me a new perspective of the land owner and the workers. I felt a pride and warmth among all involved. Great pics as usual!

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