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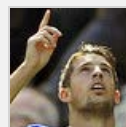
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ON WINE | October 3, 2012

## A New Player Comes to Charlemagne's Hill

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By JAY MCINERNEY

A A



Michel Joly for The Wall Street Journal

AROUND CORTON | Jean-Charles le Bault de la Morinière

WHEN DOMAINE de la Romanée-Conti announced that it would be adding a wine from Corton to its lineup, I was reminded of the moment when Heath Ledger and Michelle Williams set up house in Brooklyn. Longtime residents felt validated by the injection of celebrity, and outsiders were intrigued by this Hollywood endorsement of a region that not long before had seemed glamour-challenged. True, Corton had a resident aristocrat, Bonneau du Martray, and an indie cult hero, Coche-Dury (just as Brooklyn had Norman Mailer and Steve Buscemi), but both of these producers were known for their whites, whereas DRC was going to make a red wine, a cousin to its noble Romanée-Conti and La Tâche.

The hill of Corton is the most striking geographical feature in Burgundy's Côte d'Or, a thousand-foot-high dome of vines topped with a tuft of forest, which marks the boundary between the Côte de Beaune and the Côte de Nuits. It looks much grander than the other grand crus

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A New Player Comes to Charlemagne's Hill



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Michel Joly for The Wall Street Journal

Aubert de Villaine

and has long been regarded as a privileged site; the emperor Charlemagne owned part of the hill, and the precedent for planting white grapes allegedly originates with him, or rather, with his wife, Liutgarde, who supposedly hated the way that red wine stained his beard.

White wines grown here are designated as Corton Charlemagne. More Pinot Noir is planted here than Chardonnay, although in recent years the whites, made from vines planted on the lighter, chalkier soils, have been more highly regarded.

Most of the hill, more than 400 acres,

was awarded grand cru status in 1936, though not all of it seems to merit this rank.

According to historian Camille Rodier, the portion of the hill claimed by Charlemagne corresponds to present-day Domaine Bonneau du Martray, which has been the standard-bearer of Corton Charlemagne for many years. The domain is presided over by the elegant and articulate Jean-Charles le Bault de Morinière, a *comte* who—as Charlemagne once did—towers over most of his visitors. Jean-Charles took charge of the estate after his mother's death in 1994, abandoning a successful architectural practice in Paris to move to the tiny town of Pernand-Vergelesses, on the west side of the hill of Corton.

### Oenophile: Some of Corton's Finest



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Devon Jarvis for The Wall Street Journal

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The 11 hectares of vineyards he took over were beautifully situated but, he says, "the soils were dead, completely barren of life after years of chemical treatments." Like many of his generation, he became interested in organic farming, and later, following the example of the Domaine Romanée-Conti and Domaine Leflaive, in the extreme form of it known as biodynamics, based on the teachings of Rudolf Steiner. "We banished chemicals in 1997," he told me when I visited the domain this spring, "and we replaced the tractors with horses."

He was unable in the long run to find someone to care for the horses, switching to a lightweight tractor, but he has converted the domain to biodynamic agriculture. He also hired a geologist to map out the different blocks, based on soil types. All of these measures seem to have resulted in increasingly fine whites, although it will be years before the wines made under the new regimen will reveal their full potential; Corton Charlemagne is

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### About Jay McInerney



Jay McInerney, the author of seven novels, including "Bright Lights, Big City," is one of the country's best-known contemporary fiction writers. He has also emerged as one of the freshest voices in the wine-writing field. His monthly wine columns for House & Garden magazine are collected in two books, "Bacchus and Me" and "A Hedonist in the Cellar." In 2006, he was the recipient of the James Beard Foundation's M.F.K. Fisher Distinguished Writing Award. A collection of his short stories, "How It Ended," was published in 2009.

### About Lettie Teague



Before joining The Wall Street Journal in 2010, Lettie Teague was the executive wine editor at Food & Wine magazine, where she wrote the monthly column Wine Matters. She received the James Beard Foundation's M.F.K. Fisher

Distinguished Writing Award in 2003, won a 2005 James Beard Award for magazine columns and a 2012 James Beard Award for this On Wine column. She is the author of "Educating Peter: How Anybody Can Become an (Almost) Instant Wine Expert" published by Scribner in 2007, and the illustrator and co-author of "Fear of Wine: An Introductory Guide to the Grape," published by Bantam in 1995.

Email Mr. McInerney and Ms. Teague at [wine@wsj.com](mailto:wine@wsj.com).

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Michel Joly for The Wall Street Journal

A view of Pernand-Vergelesses.



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Michel Joly for The Wall Street Journal

Grapes at Domaine de la Romanée-Conti-Richebourg

reticent and tightly wound in its youth. It often takes 10 years to really open up, at which point it has a voluptuous texture and stony intensity that make it the rival of Grand Cru Chablis and the various Montrachets. If Chablis was made for oysters, Corton Charlie is made for lobster.

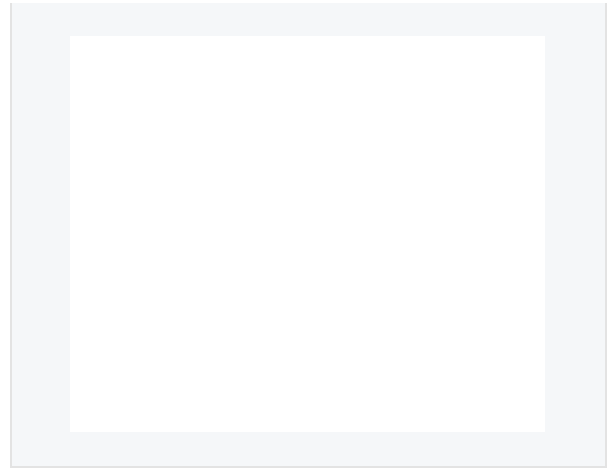
I recently drank a 1971 and 1978, made by Jean-Charles's father, which were incredibly fresh for their age and extraordinarily complex and satisfying. The new wines, particularly since 2005, are some of the most piercing and focused young Chardonnays I have ever tasted. "While all vigneronns talk about soil," he says, "we don't talk enough about light." His west/southwest facing vineyards aren't the warmest, but they are bathed in sunlight from 7 a.m. until 9:30 a.m. in June. And the wines do seem luminous.

The second-largest producer of Corton Charlemagne is the negotiant house of Louis Latour, which owns more vineyard land than anyone in Corton. The whites are very good in most vintages; their reds less highly regarded, in part because of a controversial practice of flash pasteurizing them, which some insist robs them of character. The rarest Corton Charlies are from Domaine Coche-Dury, based in Meursault, which owns a mere third of a hectare of Corton Charlemagne vines and makes fewer than 4,000 bottles in an average year. It's a truly great wine, and ridiculously expensive—at \$1,500-plus, probably the world's second-priciest white, after DRC's \$2,500-plus Montrachet. Almost as good, at a 10th the price, is the Corton Charlemagne from Simon Bize.

**“ Like Heath Ledger and Michelle Williams moving to Brooklyn, Romanée-Conti adds a Corton wine.**

**”**

Although they enjoyed a certain historical regard, the reds of Corton have haven't in recent years been as prized as the other grand crus of the Côtes de Nuits. They are fairly big and powerful, but they take a long time to come around and can seem rustic compared with wines from Chambolles Musigny or Vosne-Romanée. So it was very big news when Vosne's, and the world's, most famous domain announced in 2008 that it had entered a long-term lease agreement with Domaine Prince Florent de Merode for 2.27 hectares of Corton. The courtly co-owner Aubert de Villaine, undoubtedly the best-



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dressed and tweediest man in Burgundy, told me, "The appellation of Corton is one of the greatest in Burgundy, even if its reputation is not quite the same as it was in the 19th century." DRC got lucky with its first vintage, the incredibly clement 2009, which produced wines of great ripeness up and down the Côtes.



Enlarge Image

Michel Joly for The Wall Street Journal

The hill of Corton

I tasted the 2011 in barrel when I visited the domain this spring, and it was a rich and powerful wine, notably more earthy and brawny than its cousins from Vosne—the famous grand crus Échézeaux, Grand Échézeaux, Richebourg, Romanée St. Vivant, La Tâche and Romanée-Conti. Mr. de Villaine says, "we like the tannic concentration which makes it a very different wine from the more aerial and feminine Vosne-Romanée wines." (A very apt and elegant description.) The wine is a blend of three different Grand Cru Vineyards—Clos du Roi, Bressandes and Renard, arguably the three best. "The reason why we did not bottle the three 'climats' separately," Mr. de Villaine says, "is that we wanted to work only with the old vines, the young vines in each vineyard being too young, in our philosophy. If we had 'vinified' separately the old vines of Clos du Roi, for instance,

the production would have been so small that it wouldn't have been merchandisable. So, we decided to make one Corton, each parcel bringing its own qualities and I believe the result is a great Corton with its earthy character and deep concentration." The 2009 is trading for around \$900, less expensive than DRC's other wines but way more than any other Corton, except that of Domaine Leroy.

For now, it's possible to find bargains in Corton rouge (compared with other grand crus, that is) from the larger negotiants like Faiveley, Drouhin and Bouchard Père et Fils, as well as smaller domains like Chandon de Briailles, Dubreuil-Fontaine and Edmond Cornu. It's also possible to get some really mediocre juice, so caveat emptor. But this rustic appellation seems likely to undergo gentrification with the arrival of its glamorous new star.

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