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Burgundy: the wine that makes grown men cry

Even the hardest of hearts melt when the new burgundies are unveiled. But buying them can be a complicated business.



Domaine event: Château Pommard, one of the most prestigious burgundy producers Photo: Alamy



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Burgundy is the only wine I know that makes grown men cry. When I say cry, I really mean weep, overcome, as opera buffs might towards the end of Verdi's La Traviata. I sometimes see it in tasting rooms. The Domaine des Lambrays table is one to keep an eye on for spotting otherwise undemonstrative men discreetly tipping their heads back to keep the tears in, and I recently had an email from a seasoned trade suit confessing that on tasting DRC's La Tache, he'd had to stride off in a manly fashion for a private sniffle in a corner.

The closest it ever came to making me weep was about a decade ago, during the burgundy tasting week that happens in London every January. Here producers release samples of their baby wines and prices, so it can be bought before it is even bottled.

It was my first time. The tears were not so about much sensitivity as frustration: how was I ever going to get a grip on all these domaines, the vineyards endlessly fragmented and refragmented as they passed from one generation to the next? The cascade of appellations, nesting inside

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each other like Russian Matryoshka dolls, from regional to village level and then lieux-dits? What exactly was a lieu-dit anyway? And would it ever be possible to persuade myself, let alone a reader who strayed out of his or her comfort zone when they joined The Wine Society rather than buying all their wine from Tesco, that it might be worth harrying a wine merchant on the phone on order to beg to be allowed to splash a couple of hundred pounds (or more) on bottles they wouldn't see until the next year at least?

Ten years on, I'm feeling less lachrymose. I've got a part-finished case of Jean-Philippe Fichet's Bourgogne Vieilles Vignes 2009 under my bed (the 2011, sold by Goedhuis at £155 in bond, is also looking a good buy), and a new order in for some of the delicious 2010s tasted this time last year – as well as six special bottles of the 2011s tasted during the past frenzied fortnight.

The very thrill lies in the difficulty and the complexity.

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“There’s no magical way into burgundy,” says Gearoid Devaney (whose first burgundy epiphany was a taste of Dujac), a former sommelier now working at one of the most exciting burgundy dealers around, Flint Wines. “You’ve got to put some time in.”

That’s almost true. As with people, the more nuances you uncover, the more rewarding the relationship. But, also as with people, you can begin anywhere, and enjoy their company knowing next to nothing.

You start with a single case of wine or a fact, and amass knowledge piece by piece.

When it comes to appellations, the outliers (the ones that are most recognisable or most different from the others), are the simplest to get a hold of first: White Meursault (rich, buttery and nutty, in the wrong hands sometimes made to taste like a blunt instrument, oily and fat); red Volnay (light, with a very particular streamlined shape as the tannins seem to sit on top of each other like very fine, soft, thin layers of tissue paper); red Pommard (my image for this appellation is Conrad Black dressed as Cardinal Richelieu; plump and sturdy in a red velvet gown).

One by one you add the names of growers, cursing that no one will sell you the heart-leapingly fragrant wines of Domaine Fourrier (and wanting them even more because they are so difficult to obtain), while marvelling that Domaine Jean Grivot makes such architectural pinot noir and that Cathiard’s seem to be made of crushed velvet (and to have got awfully expensive).

Then, more dangerously, you find you have an affinity with the taste of a particular merchant and, before long, you are not just poring over their burgundy offer and putting in phone calls to your bank manager as you plan tasting adventures. You are also staying up all night to look at Allen Meadows’s site burghound.com, reading through the endless notes compiled on jancisrobinson.com (Robinson deploys a team of tasters to



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fan out, swirling and spitting through burgundy week tasting rooms) and downloading Tim Atkin's latest burgundy report. This is available from January 23; as well as putting in seven 10-hour tasting days in London, Atkin spends a further nine days in Burgundy, as well as goodness knows how long manipulating spreadsheets when he gets back.

My verdict after tasting my way through several hundred wines in the past couple of weeks is that, following on from the swooshy 2009 and the glitteringly impressive 2010, 2011 is another good vintage. This, in combination with the fact that the run of short harvests over the past three years – and a global increase in interest in burgundy – has the words "price rises" on everyone's lips, has prompted me to buy the occasional case.

If you're tempted to dip into these exciting waters, I would be after a case of the juicy Les Héritiers du Comte Lafon Bourgogne Blanc 2011 (Berry Bros & Rudd, £144/12 in bond) or one of the three Jean-Philippe Fichet Meursaults also offered by Berry Bros & Rudd.

You could also join me in cancelling gym membership (running outside is free), to help pay for six bottles of Domaine Duroché's Charmes-Chambertin 2011 (£275/6 in bond; Flint Wines). One day I'll be glad.

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