

A SIMPLE EXPLANATION OF BURGUNDY

Over all of these years, the question I am most often asked is “Why is Burgundy so complicated?” The answer is, in fact, a bit complicated in the details. But, for the big picture it is really quite simple. Let me explain. Burgundy is an area in France. It is divided into two parts. The northern part, called Cote de Nuits, produces red wine with only a tiny amount of white wine produced. The southern part, called Cote de Beaune, produces both red and white wine, but is mostly known for its white wines. To be called Burgundy all red wine must be made from Pinot Noir and all white wine must be made from Chardonnay.

Within Burgundy, the greatest vineyard within each town gives its name to the town. For instance, in the Cotes de Nuits, the wine from the town of Gevrey is called Gevrey-Chambertin — Gevrey for the town and Chambertin for its greatest vineyard. Likewise in Chambolle, the area is Chambolle-Musigny – Chambolle for the town and Musigny for its greatest vineyard. And, so it goes for Morey-St-Denis, Vosne-Romanee, etc. The history of Burgundy goes back to Roman times and the establishment of the greatest vineyard sites are centuries old. The greatest vineyards Chambertin, Musigny, Romanee-Conti, etc., are designated Grand Crus and only the Grand Cru name is on the label. The next highest rated vineyards are Premier Crus and the name appears on the label with the name of the area and the notation Premier Cru. Examples being Chambolle-Musigny Les Amoureuses Premier Cru, Vosne-Romanee Les Suchots Premier Cru, etc. Occasionally, other non-rated vineyard names will appear on the label with the area name but they will not be noted as Premier Crus. These are quite rare since most of the wines from non-rated vineyards are blended into a wine of the designated area — Gevrey-Chambertin, Chambolle- Musigny, etc. These are called village wines. Lastly, wine from anywhere in the greater Burgundy region is called Bourgogne.

The same is true in the Cote de Beaune. Here the name of the greatest vineyard, Montrachet, was affixed to two villages as Montrachet lies on the border with a part in each village. So here we have the villages of Puligny and Chassagne, both using Montrachet to designate the area – Chassagne-Montrachet and Puligny-Montrachet. And the same rules apply here for Grand Cru vineyards, aside from Montrachet, all the other Grand Crus have Montrachet attached to their names -Chevalier-Montrachet, Batard-Montrachet, Criots-Batard-Montrachet, etc., and only bear the

name of the vineyard, while Premier Crus have the name of the area and the vineyard name with the designation Premier Cru. Examples would be Puligny-Montrachet Les Pucelles Premier Cru, Chassagne-Montrachet La Romanee Premier Cru, etc. And, again sometimes wine is made from non-rated vineyards so it would appear the name of the vineyard without the designation Premier Cru. Everything else appears as village wine and appears as Chassagne-Montrachet or Puligny-Montrachet. Interestingly, many years ago most of the area of Chassagne and Puligny was planted to Pinot Noir. Today most of that has been replaced or grafted to Chardonnay and only a small amount of red wine is now produced.

In the Cote de Beaune there are many different areas — Meursault, Volnay and Pommard have no Grand Crus. Hence, every thing here is either Premier Cru – Meursault Les Perrieres Premier Cru, Volnay Les Caillerets Premier Cru, Pommard Rugiens Premier Cru, etc. Occasionally there are wines bottled for vineyards not rated Premier Cru and they are bottled with the vineyard name, but without Premier Cru designation. These are quite rare. Everything else for the areas appears as Pommard, Meursault, Volnay, etc. The wine from Meursault is mostly white. The wine from Volnay and Pommard is mostly red.

Another area in the Cote de Beaune, however is a bit more complicated. It's Corton, the largest Grand Cru vineyard in Burgundy, where red and white wines are made. Corton-Charlemagne is the vineyard that makes only white wine. Corton is mostly red wine with a very small amount of white. The wines are Corton, Corton Bressandes, Corton Clos du Roi, etc.

Other areas of the Cote de Beaune include Beaune (with a large number of Premier Cru vineyards), Santenay, Saint Aubin, Ladoix-Serrigny, Aloxe-Corton, Pernand-Vergelesses, Savigny-Les-Beaune, Chorey-Les-Beaune, Monthelie, Auxey-Duresses and Saint-Romain. In these areas there are some Premier Cru vineyards, but most of the production is village wine. The wines tend to be elegant and finesseful and many of the best values in Burgundy are found here.

OK, that is a simple explanation on the areas of Burgundy. Next comes the matter of ownership and producers of Burgundy. Historically, vineyard areas sold all or a large portion of their grapes and/or wine to negociants who handle winemaking (in the case of purchased grapes), and elevation (take care of the wine in barrels before bottling), bottling and marketing. Some of the most well-known negociants include Bouchard Pere & Fils, Louis Jadot and Joseph Drouhin, but there are also dozens of other, such as Remoissenet Pere & Fils, Louis Latour, etc.

Most of these negociants also own vineyards and make and bottle these wines as domaine

bottlings versus the wine made from purchased grapes or wine which is negociant bottled. Vineyard owners also make wine and the percentage of domaine bottled wine has been increasing since the 1920s and 1930s when a handful of producers began to bottle their own wine. Some tend their own vineyards, some contract the work out, but the main point is ownership of the vineyard. These owners usually make, bottle and market the wine. Most vineyards in Burgundy have more than one owner. Hence there can be many producers of wine for the same vineyard in any given year. Clos Vougeot, for example, has more than 80 owners producing many different bottlings from different producers as well as wine and grapes sold to negociants which have their own bottlings. It is very important to know the producers as all producers are not created equal. There are differences including age of the vines, vine types, vineyard practices, situation within the vineyard, winemaking, etc. Over the years we have learned the wines we like the best and also the producers whom we feel produce the most consistently high quality wine despite the vintage. Those we have been visiting for nearly 30 years. Occasionally a new one appears. One of the most recent being Pierre Yves Colin-Morey in Chassagne. And occasionally an old one disappears. An example is Henri Mayer, whose wines we discovered in the 1978 vintage. His last vintage was 2001 and he passed away in 2006. His vineyards are now tended by his nephew, Emmanuel Rouget, who makes wine under his label.

So there it is in a nutshell. And, yes there are a few more small details and a few more minor exceptions. But this explains very simply the wines of Burgundy. In our tasting notes we will include the negociants and producers that we believe make the best and most consistent wines. Then it is up to you to try some and decide for yourself which you like the best. But in buying and drinking Burgundies, I never buy just the vintage. The highly touted vintages tend to be ones with ripe to very ripe grapes and more extraction, but the other vintages also can make wonderful, and many times as good or better wines in the hands of the right producers. So, I buy wines from the producers I like every year and in some other years, try wines from different producers. For me, the producer often wins over the vintage.