

Hospices 2006 - reds static, whites soar

22 Nov 2006 by Julia Harding MW

My first experience of the Hospices de Beaune charity auction exceeded my expectations: the atmosphere in the room was tense, though surprisingly noisy with people coming and going and conferring with more or less discretion, and public standing room only at the back. There was superb coordination among the auctioneers, the twitchers (there's probably a technical term for these auctioneer's assistants but the alert ornithologist seems an appropriate analogy for those keeping their eyes peeled for bidders) and the remarkably calm people taking phone bids. Mind you, I was there from about 3pm until 5.30pm but I gather that the final lot was not sold until much later so perhaps you have to persevere if you want a bargain.

The sense of anticipation was increased by crowds of people outside in the rain peering through the floor-to-ceiling windows of the sale room and avidly following the bids via the external loud speakers. (It used to be said that the prices set at the auction would largely determine the prices for the vintage in general, but several people I spoke to did not think this was still true.) In the streets and squares of Beaune, stalls selling food - and just about anything else - created a feeling of premature Christmas celebrations. But that may just have been the roasted chestnuts and mulled wine and the rain on the cobbled streets.

The charity employs local growers to farm the vineyard holdings that have been received as donations since the foundation of the Hospices in 1443. Today these make up a total of 61 hectares (146 acres) in mainly premier and grand cru sites. The wines are made at the Hospices' own winery but the ageing process or *élevage* is generally undertaken in the cellars of the Burgundy négociant selected by the successful bidder. It is quite likely that the same négociant will have been bidding on behalf of the buyer. For a fee, they look after ('raise') the wines from the January after the auction until the time of bottling, up to about two years' later. Some may well buy wines for themselves. The bottles are labelled as Hospices de Beaune wines but buyers may personalise their own labels.

Funded by a variety of donations as well as vineyard bequests, the charity originally set up their *hospices*, or hospital, in the Hôtel-Dieu in the centre of Beaune. The funds now provide about 10 per cent of the budget of the modern public hospital in Beaune, ominously sited opposite the cemetery. Legally the charity may pay for facilities and equipment only, not for staff. This applies to the winery employees too, who are effectively civil servants and have very strange titles such as 'senior nurse!' I also heard a rumour that this led to the arrival of an ultra-modern scanner without anyone trained to operate it.

This is the second year that Christie's has organised the auction on behalf of the Hospices, and the organisation was very slick, the set-up somewhat complicated. Two entire pages at the front of the catalogue are dedicated to explaining the system and how to fill out the gaps in the book for prices, number of barrels purchased and name of purchaser.

There were 41 different wines or cuvées, all 2006s. These were available for tasting from barrel in the two days prior to the sale as long as you were willing to queue in the rain for half an hour before the bouncers let you in to the Hospices cellar. Tasting these wines was quite a challenge since none had gone through malolactic fermentation. Colin Ware, a winemaker for négociant Albert Bichot, explained that he generally looked for depth and persistence of fruit plus quality of tannin and/or acid structure. We tasted the whites after the reds and they were clearly of a generally much higher standard. My favourites were the Meursault-Porusots Humblot, the Meursault-Genevrières Philippe Le Bon and the Corton-Charlemagne Charlotte Dumay. Among the reds, no one appellation stood out as superior but I particularly liked the Beaune Nicolas Rolin and the unfortunately named Corton Docteur Peste (that really was his name).

This year the number of *pièces* (Burgundian barrel, containing 228 litres) for each wine ranged from a pair of Clos de la Roche, Cuvée Georges Ritter, to up to 36 barrels of Corton Grand Cru, Cuvée Charlotte Dumay. Each wine is divided into several lots, or *tranches*. For example, two barrels of this Clos de la Roche were sold in two separate lots of one barrel each but the 36 barrels of Corton Grand Cru Cuvée Charlotte Dumay were divided into five lots of seven or eight barrels. (Each cuvée is named after a benefactor of the Hospices charity, ie someone who has donated vineyards to the charity.)

The first successful bidder for any particular lot may choose to buy just one barrel or any number up to the total in the lot. If he or she buys just one, then the rest of the lot is auctioned again, and this time the successful bidder must take the rest of the barrels. Prices for the remainder of the lot may of course be the same, more, or less than the price for the first, but it seemed you were more likely to get a better price if you were willing to buy in bulk. Some things never change.

The quaint *chandelle* system has been retained only for the special single-barrel Pièce du Président, from which all profits go to the charity or charities chosen for that particular year. This year the proceeds of the special president's barrel, a Beaune premier cru, were divided between the charity set up by Princess Margarita of Romania and a second charity involved in helping children with cancer.

This inflammatory timing system is a little block of wood with a row of short tapers protruding. One of the tapers is lit and a bid must be made before it burns down. As soon as a fresh bid is made, a new taper is lit. There appeared to be a little manual wind-up mechanism so that a taper reappeared where one had been extinguished. The tapers used to be used for all the lots, which must have extended the bidding time considerably and singed a few fingers.

One particularly democratic innovation made by Christie's is that now private individuals are allowed to bid. In the past, the bidding was done by négociants, and in practice this is still mostly the case as individuals or companies get a négociant to bid on their behalf. Bidders may remain anonymous but for the majority who rather enjoy the publicity, there is a screen that shows who has bid and on whose behalf.

Potential bidders beware: the hammer price of a barrel is not the final cost of the wine. In addition, you must expect to pay:

- 6% buyer's premium
- the price of the barrel (480 Euros + tax for new barrels, which the majority are, and 330 for barrels that have been used for one previous vintage)
- the fees paid to the négociant for 'tending' the wine between the auction and bottling (either a fixed fee or a negotiable percentage of around 30% of the hammer price)

Even so, the prices did not generally seem exorbitant, and the bottled wines certainly carry a scarcity premium.

For a complete list of prices, click [here](#).