C□te d'Or

19 Aug 2008 by Jancis Robinson

In a nutshell: Silky, long-lived reds and complex whites, if you're lucky.

Main grapes: Pinot Noir, Gamay (red); Chardonnay, Aligoté (white).

Côte d'Or is usually translated as 'golden slope', an association all too readily made in view of the high prices charged for its wines. But in fact the name of Burgundy's glamorous heartland is an abbreviation of Côte d'Orient or 'eastern slope'. The best vineyards here lie along a narrow band of limestone facing south east to maximise exposure to the sun. Lower-lying vineyards with more clay drain less well and tend to produce less exciting wine.

The Côte d'Or is divided into the Côte de Beaune in the south, where all great white burgundy and a great deal of very fine red burgundy is made, and the smaller Côte de Nuits (named after Nuits-St-Georges) in the north, which produces Burgundy's most concentrated, longest-living reds. Over the years the Côte d'Or's villages have tended to append the name of their most famous vineyard to the village name, so that Nuits became Nuits-St-Georges, Aloxe became Aloxe-Corton and both Puligny and Chassagne grabbed the world-famous suffix Montrachet.

There are four levels of appellation (AC) among the Côte d'Or's total of more than 60 (some producing only a few thousand bottles a year). The most basic are the **regional** ACs, the most common of which are Bourgogne (often supplementarily labelled Pinot Noir or Chardonnay in a nod to New World practice); Bourgogne Aligoté, a leaner dry white made from and named after Burgundy's second white grape; and its red counterpart Bourgogne Passetoutgrains, in which Pinot's purity is customarily smudged by blending with the Gamay grape of Beaujolais. Wines labelled AC Bourgogne can come from less exalted vineyards all over greater Burgundy and should be an easy, approachable expression of burgundian Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. Too often, however, they are made in the same way as much grander wines (whose concentration can stand long skin contact in the case of reds and high sulphur additions in the case of whites) and their message is the opposite of come-hither.

A distinct notch above these wines are **village** wines, carrying as their appellation the name of the commune in which they were made (eg simply Volnay or Meursault). They can provide some of Burgundy's most delicious drinking for the first three or four years after the harvest (especially in softer vintages) but should not be kept for much longer than this.

In each village, sites with the potential to make distinctly superior wine (almost invariably those with particularly favourable exposure and good drainage) were classified in the last century as **premiers crus** (Burgundy's answer to the Bordeaux 1855 classification) so that wines made from them inevitably carry a price premium which is sometimes, but not invariably, justified.

The 30 best of these are acknowledged **grands crus** and, in the right hands, make quite sumptuously concentrated wines which can benefit from many years' ageing in bottle. The reds can exhibit Pinot Noir's extraordinary range of textures as well as flavours, while the whites are the most savoury, full-bodied dry whites in the world - a world away from the simplistic appeal of a commercial Chardonnay. But a high proportion of the wines are disappointments, either because of the weather or, less often than in the past, poor winemaking.

Most appellations include both red and white wines, even if one colour almost invariably predominates. Red Puligny-Montrachet and white Vougeot, for example, do exist.

There are literally thousands of vine-growers on the Côte d'Or, most of whom nowadays sell some wine of their own, even if they hedge their bets by selling off the rest to the négociants. The average grower owns only 5ha (12.5 acres), but in nine different appellations (which may be only a few hundred yards apart). Each tiny cellar (usually notably low-tech) therefore harbours scores of different combinations of appellation and vintage, each in minuscule quantity. It is particularly difficult therefore in the Côte d'Or to give comprehensive buying advice. Thanks to deaths and marriages, the precise holdings of each vine-grower - even the name of each, often intermarried, domaine - can seem to be in a state of continual evolution. Please note that intermarrying is rife in a rural community such as this one and many similar but not identical names will be found on bottles from quite distinct domaines. Nothing in Burgundy is simple, and some producers have been known to put slightly different producer names on the same wine for tax reasons.

Some favourite growers for red wines: Marquis d'Angerville, Comte Armand, Arnoux-Lachaux, Denis Bachelet, Sylvain Cathiard, Robert Chevillon, Bruno Clair, Dujac, Fournier, Gérantet-Pansiot, various Gros, Dom Leroy, J-F Mugnier, Ponsot, Domaine de la Romanée-Conti (DRC), Emmanuel Rouget, Roumier, Armand Rousseau, Taupenot-Merme, Tollot-Beaut, de Vogüé.

Some favourite growers for white wines: Jean-Marc Boillot, Louis Carillon, Coche-Dury, Pierre-Yves Colin-Morey, Jean-Noël Gagnard, Patrick Javillier, François Jobard, Comtes Lafon, Dom Leflaive, Bernard Morey, Michel Niellon.

Some of the most quality-conscious négociants: Bouchard Père et Fils, Champy, Chanson, Faiveley,Louis Jadot, Dominique Laurent, Olivier Leflaive, Benjamin Leroux, Roche de Bellene, Verget (whites).

Some appellations generally offering better value than most: Beaune (has no grands crus but some very good wines), Chorey-lès-Beaune, Monthelie, Pernand-Vergelesses, St-Aubin (especially for whites), St-Romain (whites), Santenay and Savigny-lès-Beaune.

Appellations to be wary of (wines carrying these particularly well-known names can be absolutely marvellous but bottlers who care more about money than quality often bottle some of Burgundy's worst bargains under them): Meursault, Montrachet, Pommard, Puligny-Montrachet and Clos Vougeot.