How to buy older burgundy

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See my Collection Bellenum tasting notes.

So, it seems that the fine wine buyers of the world are not too interested in the latest vintage of bordeaux. The 2011 Bordeaux primeurs campaign is one of the most sluggish so far. So how about something entirely different? Not Bordeaux at the beginning of its long life but fine burgundy at the end of its majestic, if often unpredictable, graph of maturity.

Whereas most bordeaux is made in relatively vast quantities - there can be as many as 700 barrels of Château Lafite and more than 800 of Château Pontet-Canet in a good vintage - anyone who has visited a typical Burgundian domaine will know that cellars here may be counting their total number of barrels in dozens with, sometimes, just one or two barrels of a particular wine. Partly because of this, the secondary market for burgundy is effectively confined to a handful of famous names that sell at jaw-dropping prices. It is extremely difficult for us mere mortals to get their hands on mature burgundy unless we bought the wine young and did the maturing ourselves.

If we were to map the location of every case of fine burgundy over 10 years old, there would be a cluster of dots for various cellars in Switzerland, sizeable clusters on both coasts of the United States, isolated spots for particularly well-furnished private cellars in the UK, France and the Australian state of Victoria, but the biggest blob of all would be in Burgundy itself. Wine producers on the Côte d'Or, the heartland of Burgundy, tend to be hugely individualistic, often answerable only to themselves or perhaps one other sibling rather than having to answer to a slew of shareholders. Many have tended to view their mature wines as others view savings accounts, though have often been fiscally wily.

Put this together with the changing complexities of the French tax system - presumably currently undergoing a seismic Hollandean shift - and you have an intriguing if hugely complicated network of possibilities for supplying burgundy lovers around the world with bottles of mature wine that have been kept in perfect conditions and are of impeccable provenance.

But the typical Burgundian wine producer is not the sort who is likely to entrust precious old bottles to a slick outsider. And anyway an outsider would probably not know where to look for them. Intensive local knowledge and personal contacts are needed, which is where Nicolas Potel comes in. The son of the late Gérard Potel was raised on the family's property, the beautiful Domaine de la Pousse d'Or at the southern end of the village of Volnay, now in the hands of industrialist and inventor Patrick Landanger. With a popular and respected wine producer for a father and a notable taster for a mother, Nicolas grew up with a keen sensibility for wine and an enviable network of contacts the length of the Côte d'Or.

He makes his own négociant wine under the name Roche de Bellene, and has 15 hectares or so of organic vines which supply his own Domaine de Bellene wines, Bellene being an old name for the wine town of Beaune where he is now based. But his latest addition is the Collection Bellenum, a wonderful treasury of serious older burgundies selected by Potel on the basis of both availability and quality. (See 54 tasting notes on these wines in Collection Bellenum and Two related Burgundy names.)

In 2000 when he set up on his own he had no stock so he had to acquire some older wines for entertaining and so on. And the locals were perfectly happy to let him taste. This personable, hard-working 42-year-old reckons he has by now tasted a total of about 2,500 older burgundies of which he has bought about 160, in lots varying from perhaps only 12 cases of the rarest up to as many as 200 cases of a single wine.

He is just starting to sell the Collection Bellenum, in the US via importer Loosen, in the UK via Berry Bros, and also in Germany, Switzerland and Japan. None of the wines has been rebottled, nor recorked, so although all the wines in the Collection Bellenum look the same, and their original producer is not cited on the label, cork spotting will presumably be an intriguing activity for burgundy lovers who buy these wines.

In fact, it takes only a second's cross check between the list of wines and a decent guide to Burgundy to work out who, for instance, must have supplied the multiple vintages of the wonderfully-named Chambolle-Musigny, Derrière La Grange and therefore probably all of the Grands Crus Latricières-Chambertin and Clos de la Roche. (Clue: L***s R**y) Perhaps part of the charm of the Collection Bellenum will be the detective work.

Potel has assembled his collection from a total of 26 different domaines and is apparently in negotiation with a couple of négociants too over potential future acquisitions. 'We deliberately decided to have different styles of wine in the Collection. And we've bought magnums where possible to use for tastings and dinners.' In all, lucky Potel has apparently about 3,000 magnums but always tries to buy in bottle when he buys in magnum.

It is perhaps inaccurate to describe Potel as lucky. In theory, anyone with the right palate and connections could have assembled this collection and he is not unique. But it hasn't been done before because so much work is involved. The tasting must be fun; the administration much less so. Some producers are selling their wine to Potel over a number of years, presumably for carefully gauged fiscal reasons. 'Some domaines have traditionally held back stock. Some kept old stock as a sort of pension. Some have been told by the brokers not to ask high prices for it. Many of them have had no one knocking on their door for 10 years. Some just don't know what to do with it,' explains Potel.

Perhaps I'm the lucky one. I've now had two chances to taste wines from this unique collection of wines that have moved only once in their lives, from the original cellar to Potels. (All bottles are numbered and a back label spells out how many bottles there are in total and, in future, on which date they moved to Potel in Beaune.) I'd say they magnificently reflect the reality of Burgundy in that they are very varied, provide a thoroughly useful overview of how different vintages are developing, and include some completely stunning wines that are not Grands Crus, not even Premiers Crus but are simple village wines. A 1959 Meursault and 1999 Volnay spring particularly to mind.

The youngest wine I tasted was a stunningly pure 2005 Criots-Bâtard-Montrachet; the oldest that 1959 village Meursault, but most of the wines are red and from vintages in the 1990s and early years of this century - a real treasure trove for burgundy lovers without a well-stocked cellar of their own.

MY FAVOURITES
Prices below are per bottle from Berry Bros, currently the only UK importers.

1959 Meursault
1966 Volnay Santenots
1971 Volnay Santenots
1976 Latricières Chambertin
1989 Clos de la Roche
1990 Clos de la Roche (£285)
1993 Meursault Perrières
1993 Chambertin (£265)
1995 Clos de la Roche (£200)
1996 Latricières Chambertin (£225)
1997 Clos de la Roche (£180)
1997 Chambertin (£210)
1999 Chambertin
1999 Volnay Vieilles Vignes (£39 - a steal)
2002 Chambertin (£245)
2004 Bâtard-Montrachet
2005 Criots-Bâtard-Montrachet