



Written by
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Where Burgundy meets New Zealand



Central Otago in the south of New Zealand's South Island is the only region in the world with which Burgundy has a formal vintner exchange programme, and the Central Otago Burgundy Exchange celebrated its 10-year anniversary with a three-day event in the heart of Burgundy in late October.

Sophie Confuron of Domaine Jean-Jacques Confuron and Nick Mills of Rippon started the exchange in 2006, establishing a formal work and education programme for vintners in the two regions. Each year, between two and six vintners per region travel across the planet for a week of education about the viticulture, growing conditions and wines of their counterparts, followed by five weeks of harvest work. For vintage in the southern hemisphere, participants travel from France to Central Otago in the first half of the year, then in the second half of the year, a new set go from Central Otago to France to work harvest in the northern hemisphere. In the last 11 years more than 80 *stagiaires* have participated in the exchange.

Confuron originated the idea of the exchange itself while visiting Nick Mills and his mother Lois at their home at Rippon. The two families had an ongoing friendship which formed the original connection. Confuron explains that the exchange has grown to mean more than just friendship. She says, 'I think it is very important to go to a young producing country because they have no rules. Here [in Burgundy] it is very strict. Everything is ruled, in ways you cannot change. Over there [in Central Otago] they are totally free to experiment, and not stuck in legislation, so that is very interesting.' As she explained, the opportunity to see a region that has such room to make wide-open decisions about winemaking and viticulture does not change the rules established in Burgundy, but does open up perspectives on how one might work with those rules differently. Additionally, she has been impressed with the level of experience and knowledge shown by those *stagiaires* traveling from New Zealand, saying that their know-how has helped provide another level of skill for those who host them in Burgundy.

Earlier this year, I spent harvest in Central Otago to study its unique vintage conditions and began my travels accompanying the French *stagiaires* during their education week. I was then able to check in on the progress of their harvest experience over the following five weeks. This year, six *stagiaires* from France participated in the exchange, all students early in their winemaking careers. Each student was placed individually with a winery, and lived with the winemaker's family. While many of Burgundy's top winemakers have spent time in Central Otago, the more central focus of the exchange on the French side has been to encourage a broader world view and winemaking education for young people who might not otherwise have that opportunity. The experience in Central Otago was not only of professional winemaking, but also of seeing everyday life lived with differing norms and habits. In the second half of the year, six students from Central Otago attended their portion of the exchange in Burgundy. Having followed the French set of *stagiaires* in this year's programme, I attended the recent celebrations in France in order to see the Central Otago experience there.

These celebration activities were suggested by Aubert de Villaine (shown above right with Nick and Lois Mills of Rippon) during his own travels to Central Otago as a way of recognising the unique relationship between the two regions. The first day of Burgundian activities began with a welcome lunch at Domaine de la Romanée-Conti hosted by de Villaine. Delegates from many of the Central Otago wineries that have previously participated plus the New Zealand deputy ambassador to France and other diplomatic staff were joined by select Burgundians. There de Villaine spoke of the cultural importance of the exchange and greeted the guests with a rare tasting of the 2014 vintage of the Domaine's Bâtard-Montrachet, a wine not shown outside the property in Vosne-Romanée.

As de Villaine explained, there are strong ties between the two regions even though they have such differing histories, landscapes and locales, and those connections are inspiring. He said, 'This idea of terroir, working together with soil, subsoil, climate and human effort, with the goal to make something great, this is what we have in common.' For de Villaine there is an important focus in Burgundy on the history of the region, and honouring the traditions created by 2,000 years of culture. As he describes it, the notion of terroir is 'a stubborn idea' born of generations committed to greatness. While in Central Otago, de Villaine says, he found it remarkable 'to see this stubborn idea at work here' in such a different landscape and culture.

To share their perspective and progress with this 'stubborn idea', producers brought their wines from Central Otago. On the second day they presented select cuvées of their wine to many of the top producers of Burgundy in a walk-around tasting held in the Chambre du Roi of the Hospices de Beaune. It was the first viewing of the Chambre du Roi even for many of the French attendees as the room is not usually open to the public. Excitement about the tasting was

palpable as many attendees from Burgundy actually showed up early and the room was full until long after it finished.

The attendee list for the tasting was impressive and included the winemakers and proprietors of Dujac, Comte George de Vogüé, de l'Arlot, de Montille, Charles Audoin and Lucien Jacob, among others. Many of the former French *stagiaires* also attended in order to meet with their host wineries from Central Otago.

That evening the Jacob family hosted a mechoui (barbecued lamb) at the Petit Bois in Echevronne with even more producers and guests from Burgundy. Producers from each country selected a favourite bottle to share for the evening. Standout wines of the night included Comte George de Vogüé's 2002 Musigny and Bonnes Mares, Domaine de l'Arlot's 2001 Clos des Forêts St-Georges, Charles Audoin's 2009 Clos du Roy Marsannay (pictured below with Cyril Audoin), and Jean-Marc Millot's 2011 Échezeaux.



The Central Otago Pinot Noir Celebration had donated funds to assist in the restoration of the Abbaye de St-Vivant in the Côte de Nuits. The Central Otago Winegrowers Association also contributed a letter of support to the Burgundy application for UNESCO World Heritage status, and was the only region in the world to be asked by Burgundy for such a letter. As part of preserving that heritage, de Villaine and the Association de l'Abbaye de St-Vivant purchased the property and began its restoration in 1996. The historic order of the abbey helped establish what we understand today as the terroir and classifications of Burgundy – de Villaine's 'stubborn idea' – and prior to the French Revolution owned a significant portion of vineyards and winemaking facilities in the Vosne-Romanée area.

Although the abbey is not yet open to the public, de Villaine hosted the final day of the celebration with a ceremony there. The Central Otago delegates and various Burgundian producers were present. Burgundy anthropologist Marion Demossier spoke about the cultural importance of the exchange, highlighting how valuable it is for all of us to learn from other

cultures. She emphasised that she feels the solutions to much of today's challenging political climate can be found in programmes and practices like those involved in the exchange. The results of the exchange, she pointed out, are only partially for the sake of wine. More than that it is about what we learn from listening across cultures, and how that then influences the ways we interact with people in all other activities. Key supporters of the exchange were then presented with gifts of thanks, including a necklace of New Zealand's *pounamu*, or greenstone. Among them was Lois Mills of Rippon, who not only hosted that first discussion between Confuron and Lois's son Nick, but who has also served as the programme ambassador from its beginning, living in both France and New Zealand during the year.

Finally, de Villaine shared another rare taste, the Bourgogne Blanc made from the Curtil-Vergy hill, the vineyard directly beside the abbey. To add another layer of symbolic significance, we enjoyed the Chardonnay from Riedel's special Central Otago-shape wine glasses.



Planning for the three days was primarily orchestrated by Sophie Confuron and Florence Zito of Sarl Zito & Fils from France, and Nick Mills of Rippon and Lucie Lawrence of Aurum in Central Otago (pictured above on the right with Diana Snowden Seysses of Domaine Dujac). The exchange programme depends on collaboration between a winegrower association and an agricultural college in each country to establish the education week, and arrange for wineries to host the *stagiaires* during the harvest. Exchange participants must apply and be interviewed to be part of the programme. In both regions *stagiaires* have included a mix of top producers and students newer to the profession.

The 10 Central Otago wineries able to field a representative for the festivities in Burgundy, with their wines, were Aurum, Domaine Rewa, Domaine-Thomson, Felton Road, Gibbston Valley, Mt Difficulty, Prophet's Rock, Quartz Reef, Rippon and Wooing Tree. Alan Brady, who founded both Gibbston Valley and Mount Edward wineries, also attended as an additional Central Otago delegate. Below, Rudi Bauer of Quartz Reef (left) expresses his appreciation with Jean-Pierre de Smet of Clos de l'Arlot.



