

The Scent of Burgundy

- By WILL LYONS



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A few years ago it was reported that the Bureau Interprofessionnel des Vins de Bourgogne had developed a "web parfumé" project which enabled users of the Internet, via a hand-held diffuser, to physically smell the aromas of Burgundy's wine domaines from the comfort of their home computer. I'm not sure if it would ever replace a trip to the Côte d'Or or whether the gadget ever took off but I can only assume that the inventors hadn't read Anthony Hanson's seminal book on the region.

At this point the Burgundy trainspotters among you will roar with laughter. For the rest of us, let me explain. In 1982, Mr. Hanson, then head of Christie's wine department, caused a bit of a stir when he wrote in his book "Burgundy" that "great burgundy smells of s -- ." With a few years bottle maturity, great red Burgundy can indeed take on a vegetal, gamey odor, a smell I associate with decay or in some circumstances the vegetal character of the forest floor. I often find myself writing "farmyardy" although having grown up on a pig farm I am referring to the more delicate end of the agricultural spectrum.

The point is the scent of pinot noir, without question the most evocative of grape varieties, can take on a myriad of smells from cherry, violet and rose petal to black olive, leather and oak. These wines, compared with their cousins in Bordeaux, are light in texture, and can dance down the palate with their scintillating acidity.

I was reminded just how ubiquitous this grape can be at a recent tasting of the wines of Bruno Clair. I have been buying Bruno's wines since the mid-'90s and although they are by no means inexpensive given the quality, his prices haven't disappeared off into the stratosphere either.

Bruno typifies the type of vigneron still plying their trade in Burgundy. While the appellations surrounding Bordeaux are peppered with grand Palladian-style châteaux frequented by absent, in many cases foreign owners, in Burgundy the contrast couldn't

be more pronounced. There's no smooth sales patter, there's no crisply ironed shirt, newly pressed blazer or corporate presentation.

On the day we meet, Bruno had brought over the wines for his tasting in a suitcase from Burgundy. He is first and foremost a farmer, never happier when he's getting his hands dirty tending his vines. His approach is twofold: intense work in the vineyard and minimal intervention in the winemaking process. From pruning, to looking after the vines during the summer, to making decisions such as whether to green harvest (the practice of removing unripe bunches of grapes to reduce the yield, thus increasing the concentration of the wine) to making decisions in the cellar with his winemaker Philippe Brun, everything is done by Bruno, the man whose name is on the label.

It is this authenticity that pulls me back time and time again to the thin 48-kilometer strip of land that begins just south of Dijon and ends in Chalon-sur-Saône and is no more than 1,500 meters wide at any given point. In an age where winemaking is neatly, if somewhat simplistically, divided into two camps -- those that shape the character of a wine using technology and those that see wine as a reflection of terroir. Burgundy falls into the later every time.

Part of its appeal lies with its rich history. Vines have been tended in this region for more than 2,000 years. Wine was grown here during the Roman republic and later cultivated by nobles, peasants and monks under the rule of Charlemagne. It thrived during the Medieval period when the Benedictine and Cistercian monks established large vineyard holdings. Indeed, driving down the route 74 toward the Medieval town of Beaune is to cut through a landscape that to a large extent hasn't changed for 400 years. But it wasn't until the 17th and 18th centuries when the church started selling off land to the local bourgeois, a process accelerated by the French Revolution, that its wines began to attract international acclaim. More than any other historical figure it was Napoleon -- and in particular his laws of equal inheritance -- who did more than anyone to shape today's character of the region. Such is the complexity that a 40 acre vineyard can be owned by as many as 15 different vigneron. Within these multiple owned vineyards each wine can taste differently. If ever there was a convincing argument for the expression of terroir, this is where it can be found.

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