

Tasting Wine & High Life In Burgundy

The 3-Day Liquid Lunch to Mark the Vineyards' Bounty

By Michael Dobbs
Washington Post Foreign Service

MEURSAULT, France—Like his father and grandfather before him, Jean Prieur rounded together “a few friends” last week to celebrate a bountiful Burgundian wine harvest.

There were roughly 600 people crammed into the banquet hall of the Château de Meursault, one of France’s leading wine houses. The tables were strewn with empty wine bottles, mementos of great vintages. Photographers and television crews circulated around the room as the aristocracy of the French wine trade—growers, merchants, connoisseurs and the odd countess—belled out “Burgundy’s Marseillaise.”

“Joyeux enfants de la Bourgogne (Happy children of Burgundy),” sounded the tipsy refrain, a crude parody of the real thing. “When I see my cheeks redden, I am proud to be a Burgundian.”

Then came the “Burgundy clap”—a kind of mass exorcising of the spirits after six continuous hours of eating and drinking. Taking their cue from a choir of master vigneron in long black aprons, Prieur and his guests wriggled their hands above their heads and then clapped rhythmically to the music. It presented a curious sight, but was an effective way of digesting the “longest lunch” of the year.

See WINE, B4, Col. 1

Wine Barons of Burgundy

WINE, From B1

In the cloakroom, well-groomed women stood in line to retrieve their minks and astrakhans. Outside the chateau, next to the immaculately kept vineyards, were parked BMWs, Mercedes and Maseratis.

The ostentatious display of wealth and bonhomie is a reminder of just how much Burgundy has changed in the past half century. In the early '30s, life was pretty desperate. Wine prices had collapsed with the great crash of 1929—and *viticulteurs* were paying out more for the oak barrels in which they stored their wine than they earned for their final product. Great wine families went bankrupt one after the other.

In order to buck the recession, men like Jacques Prieur (Jean Prieur's father) founded an exclusive society to promote Burgundy wines. Members of the society—known as the *Clos de Vougeot*—are scattered around the world. They gather every year in Burgundy for *Les Trois Glorieuses*, three glorious days of partying that end with the feast at Meursault.

These days, a different kind of crisis has hit Burgundy. Fine Burgundy wines have become so expensive that few people can afford them. There is still a good market for the most prestigious *appellations contrôlées*, the *grand cru* and *premier cru* wines with pedigrees to match thoroughbred racehorses. But the small producer is finding it increasingly difficult to sell his wine.

"Burgundy wines are no longer unique," said Jacob Berkman, a British wine merchant who makes an annual pilgrimage to Meursault. Shouting to make himself heard above the "Burgundy clap," he added: "The greatest Burgundy wines may be the best in the world, but there's an awful lot of tough competition."

What is at stake here is more than simply the future of a strangely colored beverage. For wine makers like Prieur, a bottle of Burgundy is an integral part of the French *art de vivre*, the art of living.

The dominant impression left with an outsider attending *Les Trois Glorieuses* is that wine is almost a religion in these parts. It has its own temples (the great chateaux), high priests (the leading wine connoisseurs) and pantheon of deities (Bacchus, St. Vincent and Noah).

The first day of *Les Trois Glorieuses* is devoted to ritual. It takes place in the splendid surroundings of Château de Clos de Vougeot, a castle that could have come straight out of a fairy tale. Here, in the 16th-century wine cellars, gather the "Knights of the Brotherhood of the Tastevin," a purely hedonistic order devoted to the production and consumption of fine wine.

"There is no shorter way to paradise than the staircase down to a cellar," declared Bernard Barbier, the barrel-shaped mayor of Nuits-Saint-Georges, in a speech of welcome that set the tone for the evening. Other orators competed with each other in telling dubious jokes, along the lines of "my opinion of the common market of wine is that there is too much common wine on the market."

The "knights" take themselves seriously. Members of the brotherhood are easily distinguishable by the red and gold ribbons attached to silver *tastevins*, or tasting cups, which they wear around their necks. A fanfare of trumpets greets the arrival of the master and high officers of the order, who are decked out in magnificent red and gold cloaks.

This year's banquet was presided over by "His Imperial and Royal Highness" Christian of Austria, an engaging 32-year-old banker in real life. He was duly admitted to the order after swearing, by Bacchus, to join a 20th-century "crusade" on behalf of the civilizing influence of Burgundy wine. That his Hapsburg ancestors were booted out of Austria after World War I was conveniently forgotten.

As the evening wore on, and more wine was consumed, the high-society atmosphere degenerated somewhat. By the end of the sixth course, the tuxedo-clad knights had joined hands with ladies in evening dress and were swaying happily back and

forth. Strains of "it's a long, long way to Tipperary" floated across the gentle Burgundy countryside.

The serious business of *Les Trois Glorieuses* is conducted on the second day at the annual auction of wines belonging to the Hospice de Beaune, a privately run hospital. The sale is traditionally viewed as the first real indication of the prices Burgundy wines are likely to fetch over the coming year.

This year, the prices (expressed in French francs) tumbled by roughly 40 percent, the first significant drop in several decades. Prices had gone through the roof in 1985, so the drop was widely expected. Wine makers and merchants said they hoped it would strengthen demand in the depressed market.

It remains to be seen, however, whether the lower prices will be sufficient to rekindle the interest of American buyers making their calcu-

lations not in francs, but in devalued dollars. The 30 percent devaluation of the dollar against the franc over the past year means that the lower prices at this year's auction will not be automatically passed on to the American consumer. Unlike 1985, which was proclaimed one of the "vintages of the century" along with 1929 and 1959, this year's vintage is not considered particularly outstanding.

As usual, lot No. 1 (nine barrels of Volnay-Santenot) went to the dean of the local wine merchants, Andre Boisseaux. For three decades now, this sprightly looking 77-year-old has made it a point of honor to buy the first barrel of wine sold in Beaune. The Volnay, an elegant red wine from the Côte de Beaune, cost him around 90 francs (\$13) a bottle compared with 155 francs last year.

The sale was conducted according to the traditional candle procedure, which is so complicated that even native Burgundians have trouble un-

derstanding how it works. Basically, the auctioneer plays around with six candles. For each new bid, a candle is either lit or snuffed out. If it goes out between bids, the lot is declared sold.

Asked to explain the reasons for this ritual, auctioneer Jean Brunelli shrugged his shoulders. "How should I know why we do it this way? It's the law, that's all."

The wine sold at the Beaune auction comes from vineyards bequeathed to the hospice over the centuries by wealthy benefactors. Founded in 1443 by Nicolas Rolin, chancellor to Philip the Good, the hospice has become one of the largest wine producers in France.

Burgundy's political importance may have declined since the reign of Philip the Good, but the region has remained a gastronomic superpower. The word "Burgundian" has almost become synonymous with the good things of life: rich food, good wine, a fertile imagination.

"Wine is more than just a drink," insisted Jean Prieur, surveying the animated banquet hall on the last day of the *Les Trois Glorieuses*. "It's a kind of

civilization. In order to appreciate wine, you have to have the right environment, the right education."

Guests at the Paulée de Meursault are expected to bring along their best bottles of wine. The bottles—ranging from a 1920 Pommard to a 1947 Montrachet—are produced like rabbits from under the table at appropriate points in the meal. Oohs and aahs echo around the hall as particularly fine bottles are uncorked.

Most of the *viticulteurs* attending the banquet have roots in Burgundy that go back centuries. One typical grower, Bernard Basson-Vadot, said that his family had been producing wine for 10 generations. Each generation tries to add some land to the family holdings, which now consists of 12 acres divided into tiny and widely scattered plots.

"The other day I purchased a tiny piece of land here in Meursault. It cost me all my savings and in the short term it is hardly profitable. I bought it for my 4-year-old son," Basson-Vadot said proudly.

Stretching from Chablis in the north to Beaujolais in the south, the Burgundy wine-producing region includes some of the most expensive

real estate in the world. It is impossible, for example, to estimate the value of the two-acre Romanée-Conti vineyard. Like the "Mona Lisa," it is beyond price.

A civilization for some, a religion to others, a great bottle of Burgundy has also been compared to an infinitely desirable woman. Adjectives like "lissome," "very pretty," "voluptuous" and "animal" were used to describe bottles produced at this year's Paulée.

Like a woman, some say, wine can also disappoint.

"The perfect Burgundy is like the perfect wife," said Berkman, the British wine merchant. "It's a dream. But you keep on searching in the hope that one day you will find her. But you never do."

Asked how many times he had been married, Berkman modified this bleak prognosis. He said that after two earlier marriages he had finally found "a perfect wife." And occasionally, just occasionally, he admits to coming across a wine that is "a perfection in harmony and balance with a fine structure, a soft body and a long finish."

In short, the "perfect Burgundy."