

The Red Ahead

Winemaking's hottest new trends are old hat in Burgundy

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BY ERICA DUECY

➤ IN THE HISTORIC WINE REGION OF BURGUNDY, EVERYTHING old is new again. With its long-standing focus on small, artisanal winemakers and sustainable practices, the region now finds itself leading these trends in luxury wine; some of the most exhilarating, expressive pinot noirs in the world come from her organic and biodynamic vineyards.

Winter is an ideal time to visit, when snow frosts the vineyards and chateaux of the countryside, imparting a fairy-tale feel. A mere four-hour drive from Chamonix or Courchevel, it's worth extending a ski trip to drink red Burgundies at the source, sipped fireside and paired with rustic local dishes like bouef bourguignon.*

But with an astounding 4,000 producers in a relatively small region — it's comparable in size to Napa and Sonoma combined, which have fewer than 700 producers in total — it's hard to know where

A view of the Savigny "Lavières" 1^{er} Cru vineyards of Domaine Seguin-Manuel.

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to dive in. Daunting wine labels with terms like “premier cru” and “grand cru” can also intimidate buyers and sojourners in search of quality juice.* Truth be told, it’s hard to find a bad bottle of wine in Burgundy – but small variations can make all the difference.

Increasingly, it’s becoming clear that the winning sliver of difference is a natural, chemical-free approach to winegrowing and winemaking. Today, some 20 percent of winegrowers in Burgundy’s most prestigious Côte d’Or area are certified as organic growers, and scores more use organic practices without certification. “There’s a real trend toward organics, because it’s a style of viticulture that emphasizes individuality,” says Carel Voorhuis, winemaker at Domaine d’Ardhuy, a family-run domaine that produces about 170,000 bottles a year and expects to receive its biodynamic certification in 2012. In tastings, these wines show an energy and freshness that is hard to quantify but delightful to experience.

The organic and biodynamic philosophies view the whole vineyard as a living organism instead of as disparate elements like soil and vine – the health of one contributes to the health of the other, and so on. “The new generation is much more careful with the land,” says Charles Fatien, winemaker at Maison Fatien Père & Fils, a small organic domaine and négociant that produces 10,000 bottles a year. “We make judgments in the vineyard to have the best wine. If you do good in the vineyard, then you’ll have a good product.”

For many growers, this means forgoing chemical weed killers and pesticides. Bénigne Joliet, a sixth-generation winemaker, grows his vines on an isolated hillside above the village of Morey-St. Denis that practically buzzes with natural magnetism. Since Joliet switched to organic farming in 1998, he has noticed a difference in the quality of his wines, which are labeled as Domaine Joliet. “Now my wines have more complexity and the absence of a metallic taste,” Joliet says. He believes that barely (and formerly) perceptible off-flavor resulted from the use of chemical pesticides.

Biodynamic practices are even more rigorous than organic,



incorporating organic growing techniques along with rituals like sowing and harvesting by the moon cycle. The largest biodynamic estate in Burgundy, Maison Joseph Drouhin produces upwards of 1 million bottles a year from its vineyards. The domaine has been farming organically since 1990 and biodynamically since 1996. Veronique Drouhin, a fourth-generation winemaker, says that the changes to her family’s vineyards and grapes didn’t occur overnight, but that comparative tastings of similar vintages over time show real improvement. “We see more depth and aging potential, and very good harmony and balance,” Drouhin says.

More here than perhaps anywhere else in the world, winemakers are obsessed with terroir, or how elements like soil, climate, and sun exposure affect a wine’s flavor and style. In Burgundy alone, Drouhin makes 90 different types of wine, each designed to reflect the purest expression of a particular vineyard.

The natural, place-centric philosophy is a common refrain in the field and in the cellar. “I want to have a limited impact on my wines,” says Thibault Marion, the award-winning organic winemaker who owns Domaine Seguin-Manuel, which produces 70,000 bottles a year. “I want to taste the refreshing characteristics of the wine and the terroir.” He even limits the use of batonnage – stirring the grapes in the fermentation tank – to maximize the fresh flavors in his wines.

The Burgundian winemakers of today are more consumer-savvy than the chateaux of the past, welcoming wine enthusiasts for tastings and tours, especially in the quiet winter period when the year’s harvest is resting in barrels and bottles – and especially to those kind enough to book ahead.*

But even if you never make it to Burgundy this winter, you can still find plenty of its fabled pinot noirs at restaurants and shops – both stateside and in France’s ski villages – to quench your thirst.* For Seguin-Manuel’s winemaker Marion, elevation makes red Burgundies even more pleasurable. “Drinking these Burgundies at altitude is the best experience,” he says. “The dry air makes the wines much more aromatic.” The world’s most sensual pinot noirs, sipped slopeside? That’s the kind of dynamic that will change your life. ●

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