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EXPLORE THE CHARM OF BURGUNDY
WITHOUT THE HEFTY PRICE TAG

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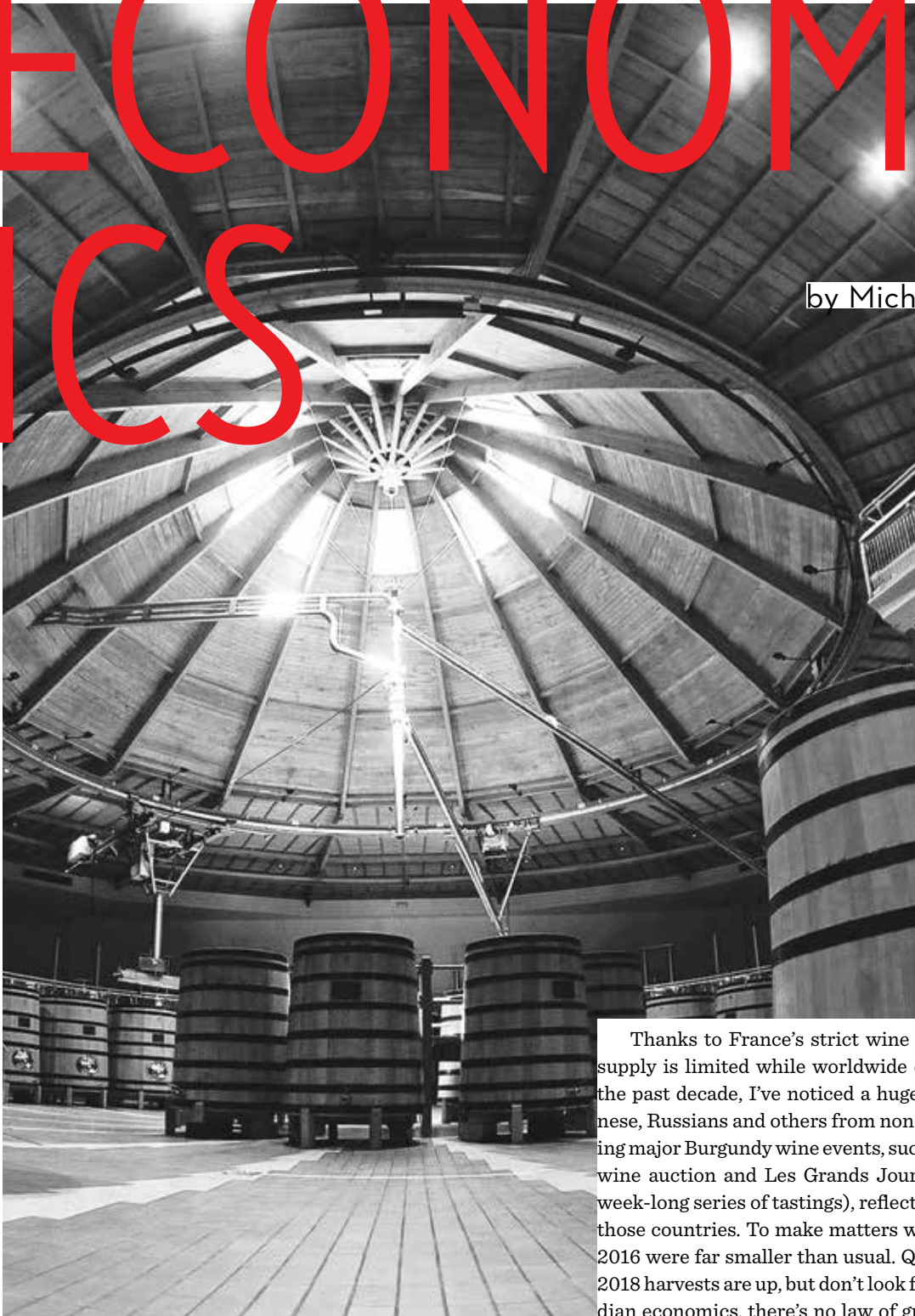
AWAY

WITH ME



ECONOMICS-

by Michael Apstein



Even casual wine drinkers know that Burgundy has become expensive. Supply and demand economics explain why.

Thanks to France's strict wine appellation regulations, the supply is limited while worldwide demand has exploded. Over the past decade, I've noticed a huge increase in Chinese, Japanese, Russians and others from non-traditional markets attending major Burgundy wine events, such as the Hospices de Beaune wine auction and Les Grands Jours de Bourgogne (a biennial week-long series of tastings), reflecting the increased interest in those countries. To make matters worse, harvests from 2010 to 2016 were far smaller than usual. Quantities from the 2017 and 2018 harvests are up, but don't look for prices to drop. In Burgundian economics, there's no law of gravity — what goes up, stays up. So, what's the solution? Win the lottery or, more practically, look to lesser-known regions slightly off the beaten track and find producers who have yet to become rock stars.

The patchwork of vineyard ownership makes Burgundy confusing. There are scores of wines labelled Corton-Charlemagne from multiple producers — some growers, some négociants. How to choose? The single most important element in buying

Burgundy is the producer's name, which trumps appellation and vintage. Talented producers can make excellent wine from the least well-endowed land in the most difficult vintage. If the mantra for buying real estate is location, location, location, for Burgundy, it's producer, producer, producer. Find producers whose wines you like and stick with them.

Burgundy is in such high demand because not only are the wines delicious, they are also unique. Though regulations require the exclusive use of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay for the vast majority of the wines, they are not just another predictable Pinot Noir or Chardonnay. Indeed, Jacques Lardière, the former and legendary winemaker at Maison Louis Jadot, once told me, "If you taste Chardonnay in my wines, I've made a mistake." He was, of course, referring to the concept of terroir, the French idea now championed around the globe that the grape is merely a vehicle for bringing the unique "taste" of the vineyard to its wine. In Burgundy, two wines made by the same winemaking team in the same year from the same grape grown literally yards apart can, and often will, taste remarkably different.

Though its vineyards have been classified as a UNESCO World Heritage site because of their expression of terroir, Burgundy does not have a monopoly on the concept. Just taste the Meyer Family Vineyards' 2015 Pinot Noir from the Reimer Vineyard along with its 2015 from the McLean Creek Road Vineyard and you'll see that the concept is also alive and well in the Okanagan. What's unique about Burgundy, and why it's ground zero for terroir, is the ease with which consumers can discover it. Because of French inheritance laws, the region's winegrowers typically wind up owning small portions of multiple vineyards. What's more, Burgundy — unlike Barolo (another region where terroir reigns) — has a long tradition of *négociants*, wine merchants who buy grapes or unfinished wines and then make wine or complete the winemaking process themselves. Virtually all of the most important *négociants* are, in fact, major winegrowers themselves. Indeed, the line between "grower" and "*négociant*" is becoming increasingly blurred as growers expand their businesses by becoming small *négociants*, while the important *négociants*, such as Jadot and Faiveley, have continued to buy more vineyards. Tasting a range of wines either from *négociants* or smaller growers shows the difference the vineyard makes. All else is the same: regulations determine that the grape and the winemaking practice will be more or less consistent across the range of a producer's wines.

The near-magic of terroir is fortunately not limited to the famous villages of the Côte-d'Or, the heart and most expensive part of Burgundy. (The locals will tell you that the origin of the term Côte-d'Or is from the slope's eastern face — towards the Orient — but actually, it's the price of the wines. "Or" is French for "gold.") The other sections of Burgundy — Chablis to the north and the Côte Chalonnaise and the Mâconnais to the south — transmit perfect examples of terroir at more reasonable prices. The best red wines of Beaujolais are among the greatest bargains in the fine wine world, reflecting their origins every bit as well as the more expensive reds from other parts of Burgundy.

To me, the fundamental character of red and white Burgundy is what I call flavour without weight. The reds are packed

with flavour but, unlike Cabernet Sauvignon-based wines, they have little weight. Savoury and earthy notes, rather than overtly fruity ones, explode and then dance gracefully across the palate. They don't hit you over the head with power. Instead, their elegance seizes your attention. Indeed, the difference among the wines as you move up the so-called prestige ladder from Village to Premier and Grand Cru bottlings is not so much greater power or concentration as textural elegance — think lamb's wool versus cashmere — and persistence.

THIS CHARACTER MAKES RED BURGUNDY PERFECT FOR A WIDE VARIETY OF FOOD, FROM CHICKEN IN A MUSHROOM SAUCE TO ROASTED SALMON TO GRILLED DUCK BREAST.

Despite their lightness, they also go well with beef, as in Boeuf Bourgogne. White Burgundies convey the same paradox of lightness and power. They, too, shun fruitiness in favour of mineral flavours. White Burgundies, especially Chablis, are ideal with simply prepared seafood. Chablis' palate-cleansing citrus acidity is the ideal foil for fish or shellfish. The richness and depth of flavour in white Burgundy also make it a good match for chicken, or veal in a cream sauce, since the creamy minerality of the wine amplifies the sauce while the acidity cuts the richness.

Chablis, though certainly not off the beaten track, gets my vote as the best-value white wine appellation in the world. Like the rest of Burgundy, there's a prestige hierarchy that goes from Chablis (Village) to Premier and Grand Cru Chablis. Additionally, there's Petit Chablis, which sits below Chablis and, in the right hands, offers fabulous value. Overall, Chablis, Burgundy's lightest expression of Chardonnay, are flinty and elegant, delivering citrus raciness. As you go up the prestige ladder, the wines become fuller-bodied with more complexity and a longer finish. Petit Chablis and Chablis are ready to drink upon release, though the best village Chablis will develop more complexity after a few years in the bottle. They can easily last and even improve for a decade, as Drouhin's decade-old 2008 Domaine Vaudon Chablis Réserve de Vaudon reminded me recently. Premier and Grand Cru Chablis, on the other hand, need a minimum of five to 10 years, respectively, to show their potential.

In the Côte Chalonnaise region, Mercurey and Rully offer good-value reds and whites. Both colours from both villages convey a firm, stony character, with the wines from Rully being more than a touch lighter. The reds from Mercurey, especially, and Rully take a few years of bottle age to round out, whereas the whites are ready to drink upon release, but do develop engaging complexity with a few years of bottle age. The other major village, Montagny, is home exclusively to whites, which are often slightly more full bodied. Bouzeron, a village which also produces only white wines, is unique in mandating the Aligoté grape instead of Chardonnay. Its wines, though lighter, display an alluring spiciness and bracing acidity.

Mâconnais wines, almost exclusively white, vary from innocuous to stunning. Those labelled Mâcon-Villages can come from anywhere in the appellation. If the grapes come exclusively from a particular village, the wine could carry the village's name, such as Mâcon-Lugny, but the producer's name is still the most important information on the label. The most

**MAISON LOUIS JADOT DOMAINE GAGEY 2017,
BOUZERON (\$35)**

Jadot acquired 5 ha (12.5 acres) in Bouzeron in 2011 from Aubert de Villaine, the most prominent vineyard owner in that village. From it, they made a beautiful example of Bouzeron in 2017. Minerally and fresh, it conveys good depth, especially for Aligoté, with enlivening, but not aggressive, acidity. A long, focused finish adds to its appeal. A great choice for this summer's drinking.

**DOMAINE ROGER LASSARAT POUILLY-FUISSÉ 2016,
CLOS DE FRANCE (\$50)**

Roger Lassarat, one of the top growers in the Mâconnais, is a star at expressing the unique terroir of the plots in Pouilly-Fuissé, such as Clos de France, and in Saint-Véran. The Clos de France vineyard, located in Vergisson between the church and the castle, is on the list for promotion to Premier Cru status. So, combine a great site with a great producer and, unsurprisingly, you get a great wine. Showing the heights to which Pouilly-Fuissé can rise, this one is energetic and stone-y. It has wonderful depth, expressing minerals balanced by a creamy richness. Though easy to enjoy now, my experience with Lassarat's wines is that they develop beautifully over 5 to 10 years.

PERNOT-BELICARD BOURGOGNE BLANC 2016 (\$35)

The Pernot part is Philippe Pernot, who learned winemaking at the side of his grandfather, the famed Paul Pernot, one of the leading producers in Puligny-Montrachet. When Philippe married, his wife brought with her the family's vineyards, the grapes from which were up until that point sold to négociants. Though the Pernot-Belicard domaine was founded less than a decade ago, the vineyards had been in the Belicard family for generations so there are plenty of old vines. This 2016 clearly demonstrates the value of buying wines from down-market appellations made by talented producers. Coming from vineyards just outside of the confines of Meursault and Puligny-Montrachet, it delivers far more than the price suggests. Purity, a hint of creaminess, a touch of spice and vivacity all come together here. Ideal for drinking now, but I suspect this "simple" Bourgogne Blanc will develop nicely over the next few years given its balance.

**MAISON SIMONNET-FEBVRE CHABLIS 1ER CRU
2016, VAILLONS (\$45)**

The weather in Chablis and the rest of Burgundy in 2016 was atrocious, with widespread frost and capricious hail. Though yields were down and quality was more variable than usual, some producers, such as Simonnet-Febvre, made exceptional wines. Their laser-like style, readily apparent in this Vaillons, suited the 2016 vintage well. Its Premier Cru stature is evident in its elegance and length. Tightly wound now, so give it a few years in the cellar.

**ISABELLE ET DENIS POMMIER CHABLIS 2016,
CROIX AUX MOINES (\$30)**

This village Chablis shows the wonderful values available from the appellation, as produced by a selection of old vines from various plots within Croix aux Moines. Pommier vinified the grapes partially in older oak vats and partially in stainless-steel tanks. It's a long and graceful wine. You feel the effect of the oak without it interfering with the wine's minerality. It demonstrates that oak is not necessarily a problem — more often it's how it's used. This Chablis is an exceptional choice for current drinking.

**DOMAINE JESSIAUME SANTENAY 2016, CLOS DU
CLOS GENET (\$45)**

Domaine Jessiaume is one of those estates whose wines have catapulted in quality because of a new general manager and winemaker. Fortunately for us, the prices have yet to catch up. Within the Clos Genet, a vineyard with "only" a village appellation, is a true clos (a walled vineyard), owned by Jessiaume. Always one of their best wines, the 2016 Clos du Clos Genet fits that mould. It has remarkable elegance, with spicy red-fruit-like flavours and an alluring hint of charming rusticity for which the wines of Santenay are known. It would be lovely now with a roast chicken in a mushroom sauce. An extraordinary buy.

MAISON LOUIS LATOUR MERCUREY 2015 (\$35)

Louis Latour, like the other excellent Beaune-based négociants, makes wines from all over Burgundy, not just the Côte-d'Or. Their 2015 Mercurey delivers bright cherry-like flavours atop a firm, stony base. A hint of cherry-pit-like bitterness in the finish balances the ripeness of the vintage. Brilliant acidity, a hallmark of Latour's wines, keeps it fresh. It's a great choice for current drinking with grilled salmon.

**MAISON LOUIS JADOT MONTHÉLIE 1ER CRU 2015,
CHAMPS FULLIOT (\$60)**

The Champs Fulliot vineyard in Monthélie is basically an extension of Volnay's Clos des Chênes vineyard to its north. Not surprisingly, Jadot's Champs Fulliot, with its suave texture, is, indeed, reminiscent of Volnay. It leads with gorgeous floral aromas and it finishes with freshness. In between, there's an explosive combination of red-fruit-like and savoury flavours. It's a junior varsity Volnay at a very attractive price.



FREDERIC AND PHILIPPE DROUHIN WITH OENOLOGIST
VERONIQUE BOSS-DROUHIN AND LAURENT DROUHIN

renowned appellation here is Pouilly-Fuissé, whose wines also vary from mundane to magical. Recently, Pouilly-Fuissé growers convinced French wine regulators to identify Premier Cru vineyards. So, consumers will start to see that distinction on labels beginning with the 2019 vintage.

Quality-wise, between Mâcon-Villages and Pouilly-Fuissé are a number of smaller, less well-known appellations, which can represent great value because they lack the name recognition of Pouilly-Fuissé, and the terroir is, in general, better than that of Mâcon-Villages. Look for wines from Saint-Véran, Viré-Clessé, Pouilly-Vinzelles and Pouilly-Loché. Broadly speaking, the wines from the Mâconnais display an appealingly straight-forward combination of fruitiness — though not as overt as in California Chardonnay — and minerality. The minerality can be especially pronounced in the wines from the more prestigious sites. These wines offer immediate enjoyment upon release, but the wines from the top sites and the best Pouilly-Fuissé growers develop unimaginable complexity after a decade of bottle age.

Even in the Côte-d'Or, consumers can get a taste of this hallowed ground without breaking the bank. In the Côte de Nuits, the northern half and more prestigious area for reds, look to Marsannay, a village abutting Gevrey-Chambertin to its north. The wines here have skyrocketed in quality over the last decade, so much so that the French wine bureaucracy has started identifying Premier Cru vineyards in the village.

For now, though, all the wines of Marsannay are still classified as village wine — which, fortunately, has, so far, kept the prices down. Mere village wines though they may be, Marsan-

nay reds nevertheless still transmit the earthy and savoury notes for which the Côte de Nuits is famous. They also have the advantage of developing beautifully after only a few years in the bottle. Red wines from the Côte de Beaune, the southern half of the Côte-d'Or, are generally lighter than those from the Côte de Nuits, yet still transmit the glorious “flavour without weight” quality. Here, consumers should look to Santenay and Maranges, two villages at the very southern end of the Côte, where the prices of their red wines, which deliver a charming rusticity, have not yet caught up to their quality.

Finding affordable white wines from the Côte-d'Or presents more of a problem. Premier and Grand Cru whites are out of the question. It's even hard to find reasonably priced white village wines except for the occasional Auxey-Duresses, Saint-Aubin or Santenay. My advice: search for Bourgogne Blanc, which by regulation is still made from Chardonnay, but grown anywhere in Burgundy. A grower's Bourgogne Blanc will usually come from the family's vineyards, likely located near their cellars. For example, Domaine Paul Pernot's consistently fine Bourgogne Blanc comes from vineyards they own just outside of the limits of Puligny-Montrachet, not far from their cellars. Though large négociants, such as Drouhin, Jadot and Latour, can source their Chardonnay for Bourgogne Blanc from anywhere in Burgundy, their wines should definitely not be shunned — indeed, they should be embraced — because they offer tremendous value.

So, instead of shunning Burgundy, embrace its outer reaches and get to know its multiple gifted producers, both small and large. You, too, will be charmed by its wines. ✦