

Producer profile



DOMAINE DU CELLIER AUX MOINES

Wine lovers in search of good, affordable Burgundy should look outside the esteemed – and unarguably expensive – Côte d'Or to the region immediately to the south: the Côte Chalonnaise. **Michael Apstein** puts the spotlight on one of its key appellations, Givry, and highlights one of the area's top-performing producers

It's worth taking time to familiarise yourself with the Côte Chalonnaise. As in its more famous neighbouring region the Côte d'Or, Pinot Noir and Chardonnay reign supreme and, with some exceptions, are the mandated grapes for the wines. Major Côte Chalonnaise appellations, moving from north to south, include Rully and Mercurey, which produce both red and white wine; Givry, which produces mostly red wine (80%); and Montagny, which produces white wine exclusively.

Just over half of the 256ha in Givry devoted to red wine is classified as premier cru, divided among 38 vineyards. By comparison, 76% of Beaune's 364ha devoted to red wine is classified as premier cru.

The 12.9ha Clos du Cellier aux Moines is considered to be one of the best. Domaine du Cellier aux Moines, one of the top producers in

Givry, owns the largest piece. Its choice 5ha are planted to Pinot Noir in the mid- and upper slope of the vineyard, affording ideal exposure. Domaine Baron Thénard owns a little more than 4.4ha in the mid- and lower part of the vineyard, and Domaine Joblot has about 2.2ha in the lower part.

Natural progression

The Domaine du Cellier aux Moines traces its origins to the 12th century, when it was under the auspices of the Cistercian monks (*moines* in French), who also founded the famed Clos de Vougeot at about the same time.

Fast-forward to 2004, when Philippe and Catherine Pascal took over the domaine and built something unique in Burgundy – a fully gravity-flow winery. Initially they used the 12th-century building for the winery, which Philippe noted was 'great for pictures, but a



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nightmare for the winemaker'. The Pascals restored it so beautifully that now the French government lists it as one of the country's historic sites.

An abandoned quarry adjacent to the domaine allowed them to create a winery with three of its four levels underground. It took two years to design and another two to build, but was ready for the 2015 harvest.

The advantage of a purely gravity-flow winery, aside from its energy efficiency, is the ability to move the grapes, juice and wine from harvest, to fermentation, to barrel ageing without the use of pumps. Pumping potentially exposes the wine to oxidation and other stress.

In addition to controlling temperature naturally, the winery's underground positioning controls humidity, which reduces evaporation – the angels' share – during barrel ageing. Another plus: the configuration allows them to bottle the wine unfiltered, because of the natural sedimentation that occurs prior to bottling.

Dream to reality

Ever since their early days together, Philippe, an agronomist by education, and Catherine, a

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Philippe Pascal

lawyer from Beaune, dreamed of owning a small vineyard together 'somewhere, someday', remarks Philippe. He continues: 'We wanted to do it with our own hands... and get our feet wet.'

In his previous life, Philippe was with LVMH-Moët Hennessy as CEO of Veuve Clicquot Champagne and CEO of Moët Hennessy. Somewhat philosophically, he remarks how 'life sometimes gives us a wonderful opportunity to do different things'. So, at age 58 – he discreetly omits his wife's age – they purchased the domaine and embarked on a new career.

Looking back on the last 16 years, he says it turned out to be more complicated than ➤

Above: Philippe Pascal (left) with winemaker Guillaume Marko

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anticipated. 'Even in France, where everything is complicated, this was more complicated than we imagined.'

Again, with that Gallic philosophy, he observes that there was a beauty in the opportunity to learn something new. They took viticulture courses, learned from other vignerons and embraced the 'less is more' philosophy. With unbridled enthusiasm, he exclaims: 'It was a fascinating learning experience.'

Building a team

To guide the conversion to organic farming, they recruited Guillaume Marko, who had worked at Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, as well as Domaine Arnoux Lachaux in Vosne-Romanée and Domaine Frédéric Magnien in Morey-St-Denis. Eventually, with the 2017 vintage, they had converted the entire domaine to biodynamics, to which the Pascals are firmly committed. 'It forces us to be better viticulturists,' notes Philippe.

They fine-tuned the viticulture, replanting with a massal (field) selection of Pinot Noir vines that produced smaller bunches of grapes with smaller berries. With replanting, they embraced the parcellaire approach to the domaine, subdividing their 5ha into a half-dozen plots based on the soil's characteristics.

Philippe credits the help they received from Sylvain Pitiot, who used a similar technique with great success when he was in charge at grand cru monopole Clos de Tart, also in Morey-St-Denis. He thinks that embracing biodynamics 'sharpens the expression of each plot'.

Attention to detail

With a laugh, Philippe describes the parcellaire approach as a 'headache, but a great tool'. During the growing season, they follow each of the plots carefully to allow them to individualise the timing of the harvest, which, even with such a small domaine, can vary by up to a week.

Their primary concern is to wait for physiological ripeness – the ripeness of the tannins – rather than ripeness as measured by sugar level. He explains that since they perform whole-bunch fermentation, meaning the stems are included with the berries, the stems must be ripe and brown with fully mature tannins.

The Pascals have revived and replanted Pinot Noir in a tiny, 0.26ha walled plot, Clos Pascal, that had been abandoned after the phylloxera crisis in the late 19th century. Marko trained the vines on poles (*échalas*), using an old, traditional training system to limit yield and reduce stress on the vines. Though it had originally been classified as premier cru, French politics being what they



'Biodynamics forces us to be better viticulturists'

Philippe Pascal

are, it was declassified to and bottled as a village wine – under pressure from other Givry growers, according to Philippe.

They train their harvesters to pick only mature berries, leaving everything else for the birds. The serious sorting begins at the sorting table at the cuverie, under the guidance of Catherine. There, workers cull unripe or otherwise less-than-ideal berries to be used for a second wine: another idea they learned from Pitiot. Lots from barrels that don't measure up to their standards also find their way into the second wine, Le Petit Clos du Cellier, which they bottle under the Givry appellation, not Givry premier cru, and sell only within France. A third of their production typically winds up in Le Petit Clos, according to Pascal. He believes they've achieved a tremendous leap in quality by using the parcellaire approach in the vineyard and the introduction of a second wine in the winery.

Quality on show

Their incremental improvements in the vineyard, care with the yields and the unique winery together explain the dramatic increase in quality of the Cellier aux Moines wines since the Pascals took over. It's fascinating to see the impact of these changes on the wines.

Above: the walled Clos Pascal plot, which covers just 0.26ha



My own assessment was based on a vertical tasting of 12 vintages of Domaine du Cellier aux Moines' Clos du Cellier aux Moines from the 2006 to 2019, omitting the 2008 and 2011 vintages. Since Covid-19 prevented me from travelling to the estate, the estate sent me the wines, including an unfiltered, unsulphured barrel sample of the 2019. All the wines, even the barrel sample, arrived in excellent condition, no doubt because the Pascals' daughter Marguerite carried them personally to New York, where I collected them.

Overall, it was an impressive line-up of wines. In addition to those published here (*see p64*), full tasting notes for the whole selection can be found on [Decanter.com/Premium](https://www.decanter.com/Premium) – but first, an overview and some highlights...

Standout wines

The 2006, made early in the Pascals' ownership before they instituted many changes, showed the potential of the site. Fully mature when tasted, it conveys the magic of aged Burgundy with its combination of dried fruit and savoury elements.

The quality of the 2009 and 2010 vintages, a time before the changes the Pascals had instituted had their full impact, reinforces the concept that their terroir is exceptional and

Domaine du Cellier aux Moines: the whole-bunch method

Two major advantages of whole-bunch fermentation, according to owner Philippe Pascal, are having intact berries and using the stems as 'a sponge'.

Since there is little destemming after harvest, the majority of the berries are virtually intact prior to fermentation. When fermentation begins, it does so within the berry, and then they burst. Pascal believes that even this brief intra-berry fermentation captures aromas better and results in better extraction of flavours.

He adds that stems absorb unpleasant tannins like a sponge. In short, he's convinced that, if done properly, the wine will be more refined with a more elegant structure and better aromas.

reflected these two great vintages, especially for red Burgundy.

The 2012, from a difficult vintage, shows the value of their replanting and parcellaire approach. Philippe describes it as their 'first replanting harvest' because one third of the final blend came from those vines. Nearly mature, the 2012 is a real success, conveying a wonderful balance of concentration, complexity and freshness.

With its enormous leap in quality, the 2015 heralded the beginning of a new era at the ➤

Above from left: Marguerite, Camille and Alexis Pascal, children of Cellier aux Moines owners Philippe and Catherine

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domaine – the 2015 and all subsequent vintages were now on a higher plateau. The wines display a finer texture – cashmere rather than lambswool – compared to the previous vintages. Three changes, occurring simultaneously, explain the leap; 2015 was the first vintage to be vinified by Marko, confirming the value of a talented winemaker. It was also the first vintage vinified in the new winery, which seems to validate the importance of gravity flow. Thirdly, it was when the domaine started to bottle a second wine, which elevates the quality of the grand vin by eliminating lesser-quality lots.

The 2017, the first year the domaine was fully biodynamic, makes a powerful argument for that technique. With silky tannins, it is a masterpiece of grace and power. Philippe emphasises that, since 2017 was a naturally

generous vintage, coming after the low-yielding 2016, controlling yields was key to quality.

Variable yields explain the Janus-like nature of the 2017 vintage for red Burgundies in general – some are forward and charming, while others are structured and concentrated. He feels their yields – at about 40hl/ha, well below the maximum allowed of 52hl/ha for Givry premier cru – resulted in the ‘right balance between concentration, backbone and fruit’.

Lastly, from this tasting, I estimate the peak window for drinking Domaine du Cellier aux Moines to be about 12-15 years for wines from the best vintages and six to eight years for wines from lighter years.

More than 800 years after its founding, the Domaine du Cellier aux Moines has become a rediscovered star in the constellation of Burgundy wines. **D**

Burgundian delights: Apstein’s pick of the Domaine du Cellier aux Moines vintages

Cellier aux Moines, Givry 1er Cru Clos du Cellier aux Moines 2017 96

£39.17-£42.75 Haynes Hanson & Clark, Millésima
In Burgundy’s Janus-like 2017 vintage, this wine has the requisite substance, structure and balance for the long haul. This was the first year the domaine was almost fully biodynamic, and that perhaps explains the wine’s brilliance. Immediately expressive, this grabs your attention. Aromas leap from the glass. On the palate, it combines firm mineral qualities with a Bing cherry-like fruitiness in a suave and elegant package. Fractionally less ripe compared to the 2015, its minerality shines. A hint of bitterness on the finish adds to its appeal. Supple yet firm tannins provide perfect support. **Drink** 2026-2030 **Alcohol** 13.5%



Cellier aux Moines, Givry 1er Cru Clos du Cellier aux Moines 2015 96

N/A UK www.cellierauxmoines.com
The grandeur of the 2015 comes from a combination of a new winery, a new winemaker and the introduction of a second wine, all in that year. With succulent, dark cherry-like fruit, this is concentrated, yet not over-the-top. Great acidity keeps it fresh and amplifies its charms. It’s paradoxically both suave and firm, and supported by fine-grained tannins, combining the power of 2009 with the sleekness of 2010. **Drink** 2025-2030 **Alc** 13%

Cellier aux Moines, Givry 1er Cru Clos du Cellier aux Moines 2010 95

N/A UK www.cellierauxmoines.com
The 2010 is positively gorgeous. Less dense than the 2009, it nevertheless displays excellent concentration and an invigorating tension, delivering a balanced mixture of cherry-like fruitiness and minerals. A streak of crystalline purity holds it all together. Though it has a lovely austerity compared to the 2009, it is by no means an austere wine. Fresh and energetic, it dances on the palate. For me, it’s classic Burgundy, delivering what I call flavour without weight. **Drink** 2023-2027 **Alc** 13%

Cellier aux Moines, Givry 1er Cru Clos du Cellier aux Moines 2019 93

£31 (ib) Millésima
It can be difficult to predict how a completed wine will eventually compare to a barrel sample. But this unsulphured, unfiltered barrel sample showed great potential when tasted in September 2020. Less ripe than the 2018, it already hinted at the tantalising combination of savoury minerality and cherry-like flavours. Its glossy texture came as no surprise, with bright acidity enlivening the palate. I can’t wait to taste it after bottling. **Drink** 2027-2033 **Alc** 13%

Cellier aux Moines, Givry 1er Cru Clos du Cellier aux Moines 2018 92

£38.33-£43.90 Haynes Hanson & Clark, Millésima
Unsurprisingly, given the warmth of the vintage, the 2018 leads with a pristine and dark cherry-like power that overshadows the mineral aspect hiding underneath. Though lacking the tensile nature of the 2017, it displays uplifting acidity, especially on the finish, that offsets the ripeness. Appropriately reticent given its youthfulness, it blossoms when given some air. The cashmere-like texture and harmony already on display at this stage suggests it will develop well. It’s scheduled for release in the autumn of 2021. **Drink** 2025-2030 **Alc** 14%

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