

HISTORY

A journey through
the history
of Burgundy wines

www.burgundy-wines.fr



BOURGOGNES

Lâme des vins de la Terre





SUMMARY

I - 2000 years of wines from Burgundy

1. The longest reign in history p. 2
2. Contacts with Rome p. 2
3. The "Discourse" of Eumenes p. 3

II - 500 AD to the 15th century

1. A thousand years of monastic wine-growing p. 4
2. Wine of the Golden Fleece p. 5
3. Ducal Burgundy p. 6

III - 17th and 18th centuries

1. Doctor Fagon's prescription p. 7
2. The Enlightenment p. 8
3. Revolution and Romanée-Conti p. 8

IV - 19th and 20th centuries

1. A century of progress p. 9
2. Growth in importance of direct sales p. 10
3. "Climats" p. 11
4. The phylloxera crisis p. 12
5. The Co-operatives p. 13





I - 2000 years of wines from Bourgogne

1. The longest reign in history

"The wines of Burgundy have the longest history of any," says Raymond Dumay. The great wine-growing regions of the ancient world – Falernum, Askalon, Shiraz... where are they now? But Burgundy has held its place for twenty centuries.

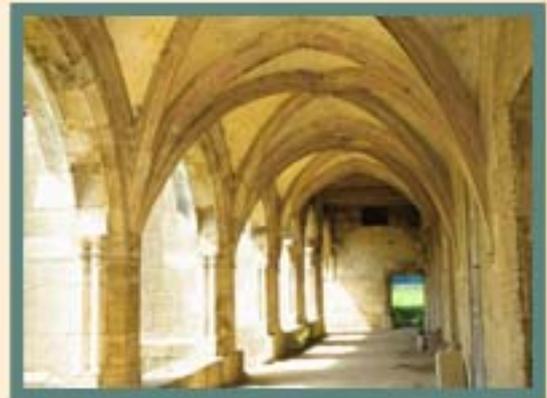


Much longer than that, in fact, because geology has its part to play. It has taken from 200 to 250 million years to shape the land and create its soils and sub-soils out of the floor of a shallow sea, scattered with many islands.

Even before the inhabitants of what is now Burgundy had learnt to drink wine, it played a part in their culture. One of the largest and finest Greek wine-vases ever found (though it never contained any wine) turned up in a princely grave at Vix, which lies on the tin-traders' route between Britain and the Mediterranean. Dating from the 6th century BC, it is now in the museum at Châtillon-sur-Seine.

2. Contacts with Rome

Vine and wine reached Burgundy from Italy. Early contacts between the Burgundy and Rome go back to around 400 BC when a surprise Gaulish attack on the Roman Capitol was thwarted by Rome's sacred geese acting as sentries. Some of the invaders later settled in the area between Milan and Lake Como, where they remained for several centuries before succumbing, one supposes, to home sickness and heading back to Gaul taking the vine and the secrets of its cultivation with them.



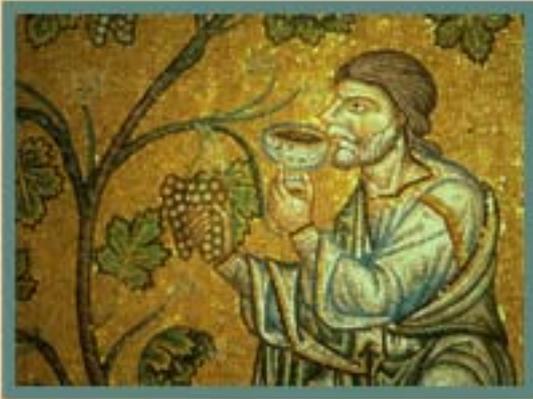
We don't know exactly when this happened. What we know for certain is that vineyards were in existence in Burgundy in the first half of the first century AD. Columella, a Roman writer on agriculture, and Strabo, the Greek geographer who died around 24 AD, both mention them. (Though often quoted, edicts by the Roman emperors Domitian in 92 AD and Probus in 281 AD aren't relevant to Burgundy. The first relates only to the Midi and the second to central Europe.)



I - 2000 years of wines from Bourgogne

3. The "Discourse" of Eumenes

In the year 312, Eumenes, a member of the Gallo-Roman élite and President of the University of Autun (Augustodunum), addressed a petition concerning taxation to the Emperor Constantine. It contains the earliest description of the Beaune vineyards.



Though Autun was the principal town at the time, it is clear that its upper classes were more interested in the land around Beaune as a place to grow their vines rather than the nearby Morvan district. And at the end of the 6th century, the bishop-historian Gregory of Tours, describes Dijon surrounded by vineyards.

Wine amphorae from Italy and Spain, found in plenty at sites such as Alesia and Bibracte, are evidence that wine was supplanting beer among the Celts. Then a Gaulish invention displaced the amphora – wooden barrels filled with local (as opposed to imported) wine. And we have abundant archaeological evidence from the 11th century onwards of the importance of wine in the districts of Beaune, Nuits-Saint-Georges, Auxerre and Mâcon.



II - 500 AD to the 15th century

The middle ages

1. A thousand years of monastic wine-growing

Between the 6th and the 14th century the wines of Burgundy acquired a reputation throughout Christendom. In those warlike times, religious communities were to some extent protected. It was possible to pass on knowledge derived from experience down the generations. And the monasteries belonged to a Europe-wide network.

The abbeys of Cluny (founded 909) and Cîteaux (founded 1098) had thousands of offshoots. The wines of Cluny grown in the Mâconnais and Chalonnais and those of Cîteaux grown in the Côte d'Or, Chalonnais and Chablis districts demonstrate an astonishing continuity.

The Clos de Bèze, had only two owners between its founding in 640 and the Revolution in 1790. The Clos de la Chaînette at Auxerre is even older. The Clos de Vougeot, founded in 1115, had only one owner between then and 1790, and the Clos de Tart only three owners from 1140 to the present day. Meanwhile, it was the Cistercians of Pontigny who created the Chablis vineyards. In Burgundy, memories are long.

This period saw the emergence of the "clos" as units of property, of the notion of "terroir" and "cru", and the selection of grape varieties. Most existing appellations were already recognised and defined (as to area) in the Middle Ages and the "climat" nailed down to the nearest metre and its boundaries respected.

No wine-growing region in the world is more closely regulated, or bound by rules of greater antiquity.





II - 500 AD to the 15th century

The middle ages

2. Wine of the Golden Fleece

Historically, the recognition accorded to Burgundy wine and its acceptance as a marketable commodity is related to the fortunes of Burgundy itself. Thus it was in Burgundy's Golden Age under its independent dukes (14th and 15th centuries) that the wines of Burgundy began to make their mark in the wider world.

Feasting played its part in diplomacy. At the famous Pheasant Banquet in Lille (1454), Burgundy wines flowed freely among the assembled grandees - the same wines that were associated with the chivalric Order of the Golden Fleece, created by Burgundy's Duke Philip the Good in 1429.





II - 500 AD to the 15th century

The middle ages

3. Ducal Burgundy

The Dukes of Burgundy in the 14th and 15th centuries – offshoots of the French royal house of Valois – called themselves "Grand Dukes of the West and Lords of the finest wines in Christendom". They were arbiters of taste for the whole of Europe. Philip the Bold, John the Fearless, Philip the Good and Charles the Rash held sway in turn not only over Burgundy but over most of what is today Belgium (Antwerp, Bruges, Brussels, Ghent). But a large part of their fortunes came from their profits of their vineyards. (Hence the numerous "Clos des Ducs" we find today.)

No longer confined to Roman or monastic cellars, or even to the cellars of the Avignon Popes, the wines of Burgundy took hold over civil society, and the upper and middle classes of Flanders took their cue from the tastes of the ducal court. Thus an active trade in wine developed between Burgundy and the Low Countries.

The Dukes laid down a definite policy for wine-growing and wine-making, the first in history. The ordinance issued by Philip the Bold in 1395 was a model of its kind.



It not only came down on the side of the Pinot Noir as opposed to the Gamay grape, it also set out the ecological principles on which high-quality wine-growing could be based, and it took into account the health of the consumer.

The contest between the Gamay and the Pinot Noir is an old one. The upper classes favoured the Pinot in the interests of high quality, low yields, and its ability to travel (which made it exportable). The lower orders grew the higher-yielding Gamay which gave a ready-to-drink wine for a local market and quick returns to the producer. This division persisted into the 20th century.



III - 17th and 18th centuries

1. *Doctor Fagon's prescription*

Only the wines of Champagne (which were as yet without bubbles) rivalled those of Burgundy. In 1693, Louis XIV's court physician Dr Fagon prescribed "old Burgundy wine" as part of his patient's regime. The effects were salutary. Straight away the court gave up Champagne and took to Burgundy.



It was at this time that a certain Claude Brosse, a Mâconnais wine-grower, loaded up some barrels and took them to Versailles – the pioneer of direct selling!

The eighteenth century, the "Age of Reason", was an age of science. Efforts were made to understand just what made the wines of Burgundy so good – soil? sub-soil? climate? grape variety? or human intervention?



III - 17th and 18th centuries

2. *The Enlightenment*

The first book ever devoted to the wines of Burgundy was written by a monk named Claude Arnoux and published in London in 1728. Not content with merely describing the vineyards, he detailed the best crus of each wine-growing village (already being sold under the name of their appellation).



Wine-tasting began to develop its own vocabulary. Descriptions of colour, aroma and taste became increasingly precise. And now the négociant-éleveur comes on the scene. The first one we know of is Champy in 1720 but many others followed in his footsteps, active especially on the far side of the Rhine. Now the upper classes of Burgundy began to take a serious interest in wine-growing and, as the influence of the monasteries declined, so they increasingly took up the baton.

3. *Revolution and Romanée-Conti*

In 1760, Louis-François de Bourbon, Prince of Conti, acquired a "clos" (walled vineyard) belonging to the Abbey of St. Vivant at Vosne. Its name was La Romanée and he made a brilliant success of it. Then a tourist, and a notable one, came on the scene: in 1787 Thomas Jefferson visited the Burgundy vineyards and wrote the first account of them by an outsider.

Two centuries later, the hierarchy of wines laid down by Jefferson remains valid and it was he who installed the first bottles of burgundy in the cellars of the White House.

Then came the revolution of 1789, a time of general upheaval.



Clerical possessions were confiscated, as were those of some of the nobility. They became "national" property and were quickly sold at auction. Vineyards were included in this large-scale redistribution of wealth. Many of the best crus went to the Burgundian middle-class or to Parisian speculators. But even revolutionaries have a feeling for publicity. So La Romanée became Romanée-Conti. The Prince was no longer the owner, but his name still lent a certain glamour.



IV - 19th and 20th centuries

1. *A century of progress*

The only wine Napoleon allowed at his table was Chambertin. He too was following doctor's orders.

The 19th century saw the wines of Burgundy build an identity. Their image was of highly coloured red wines, opulent and robust, lordly wines which bespoke good living. It was only later that that Burgundy's white wines achieved their glorious peak.

Virtually the whole of the wine trade was now in the hands of the négociants and the practice developed of selling wines in bottle rather than in barrels. A glass factory was established at Epinac to supply the trade.

Burgundy's export trade developed enormously. Her wines reached Russia and America.

When Jules Verne's heroes reached the neighbourhood of the Moon, they toasted their success in a bottle of Nuits.





IV - 19th and 20th centuries

2. *Growth in importance of direct sales*

The period immediately following the Great War saw families dispersed and inheritances partitioned. Wine was hard to sell. Small-time growers began buying up plots of vines.



The growers gradually became serious players. Many of today's important domaines trace their origins to the period 1920-1930. And in the next decade, faced with economic difficulties, their owners started selling direct instead of through the négociants. This form of trading – in wines which carried the name of the domaine which produced them – gradually acquired more economic weight and a growing market share.



IV - 19th and 20th centuries

3. "Climats"

Early attempts to classify "climats" (named and delimited plots of wine-growing land) according to the quality of the wines grown on them were made in 1827, again in 1831, and, more especially by Dr. Lavalley in 1855. In 1893 Danguy and Vermorel published the first complete description and classification of the wines of the Beaujolais, Mâconnais and Chalonais.

In 1847, Gevrey obtained the right to call itself Gevrey-Chambertin. This crafty way of adding value was imitated by a number of Burgundian wine villages, thus Chambolle-Musigny, Puligny-Montrachet, and even Solutré-Pouilly and Romanèche-Thorins.





IV - 19th and 20th centuries

4. *The phylloxera crisis*

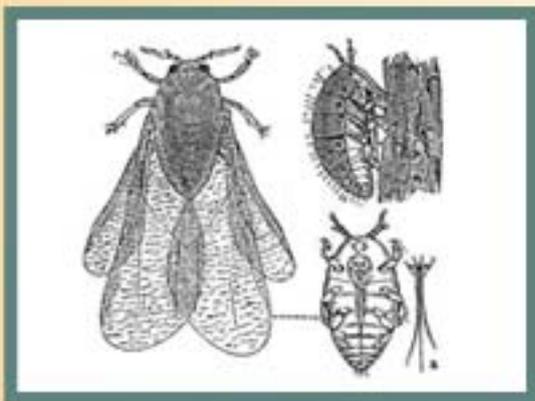
An aphid crossed the Atlantic and started killing our vine-stocks wherever it met them.

It was active in Burgundy in the 1870s and 1880s. Most of the vineyards were destroyed. People called it "the black disease". Attempts to combat it with carbon disulphide made some headway. But it was the United States, which, having sent us the disease, sent us the cure. The vine-stocks were replaced with naturally resistant American stocks and these were then grafted with scions of traditional French grape varieties.

There was no loss of quality. Within thirty years, re-planting was complete. But now everything had changed.

The vines had formerly been planted in disorganised clusters and annual regrowth was done by layering of suckers ("marcottage"). The introduction of vines planted in orderly rows and trained to wires radically altered the landscape while permitting the use of horse-drawn (and later motor-driven) machinery.

Though vines will grow anywhere in Burgundy, only the best terroirs were replanted. So the foundations were laid for quality-driven viticulture. Vins de table virtually disappeared and order was instilled into the selection of grape varieties and the choice of appropriate sites.





IV - 19th and 20th centuries

5. *The Co-operatives*

The co-operative wineries were a response to a period of economic slump. After a number of regroupings, they are mainly sited in the Chalonais and Mâconnais districts but in the Côte d'Or we find the Cave des Hautes-Côtes and the La Chablisienne winery in the Chablis district. Together, they account for 12% of all sales, of which 64% are retailed through the négoce sector and 24% by the producers themselves.

In 1975, the sparkling Crémant de Bourgogne was officially recognised as a controlled appellation (AOC).

The legal limits of "wine-growing Burgundy", first set by Charles VI in 1416 as extending from the bridge of Sens to the Mâconnais were formally defined in 1930: it took in the three departments of Côte d'Or, Yonne and Saône-et-Loire plus the area around Villefranche-Sur-Saône in the department of Rhône. The Beaujolais district has been autonomous since 1989, but a prestigious section of it (Moulin à Vent and Saint-Amour) lies geographically within the confines of Burgundy.

The most important event in the 20th century was the official recognition, classification and regulation of controlled appellations of origin (AOCs), starting in 1930. It brought order and fair-dealing to the market and extended real protection to the consumer.

1934 saw the creation of the Confrérie des Chevaliers du Tastevin, a wine society designed to promote the wines of Burgundy and which supports or organises a number of important annual events. Its example has been widely copied.

Another annual event, and one of world importance, is the Hospices de Beaune wine auction. This, together with festivities such as the Paulée de Meursault and the Saint-Vincent Tournante, prove that Burgundy has no lack of creative energy.