



"I do as little as possible. The wine makes itself" – Aubert de Villaine

MASTER OF BURGUNDY

RORY ROSS asks *Aubert de Villaine of Romanée-Conti* what makes his wines so special

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he headquarters of Domaine de la Romanée-Conti are a profoundly understated affair. A dilapidated gate in the village of Vosne-Romanée in Burgundy inscribed 'DRC' opens onto a tiny courtyard surrounded on three sides by single-storey buildings. A parked Renault Laguna typifies the personal modesty of the owner. You can barely

believe you are at the headquarters of the finest red wine in Burgundy and arguably on Earth, the ultimate expression of the sublime Pinot Noir grape, and the pouring wine at the greatest state occasions.

A trap door leads to the maturation cellar where the wines of DRC, as it is known, are matured for between 16 and 20 months in new oak before being bottled and stored. Five per cent of each year's production is held over in the *vinothèque* for long-ageing. Even the most bored connoisseur would love to delve here.

'Bernard Noblet, *maitre de chai*, brought up this bottle,' recalls Adam Brett-Smith of Corney & Barrow which distributes DRC wines in Great Britain. 'It was dusty, unlabelled and had no capsule. It could have been anything. I tasted it blind, and –' his eyes mist over – 'I wondered how it was possible that something man-made can touch you so profoundly. It was simply not of this world. The wine was a '52 La Tâche.'

The man responsible for wine-making at DRC is Aubert de Villaine, whose family own the *domaine* jointly with the clans of Roch and Leroy. I met Villaine in London at the launch of the 2006 vintage, a tricky *millésime* saved by a late burst of sunshine. The heavyweights and grandees of the winorati had vacated their club chairs and hammocks to journey to Corney & Barrow's HQ, as in an annual pilgrimage. There was a hushed atmosphere in the tasting room, as thimblefuls of the ruby nectar were dispensed. Although fascinating and opulent, these wines really shouldn't be drunk for another 20 years.

In the room stood Villaine, tall with an aristocrat's physique. He wore a tweed jacket teamed with an expression of bemused detachment. He has the air of a scholarly senior gardener who has discovered a late clerical vocation, or in the words of Hugh Johnson the wine writer, 'the abbot of a rather austere godly establishment', which in a way is exactly what he is: part wizard, part high priest, part honest tiller

of the soil. The 2006 allocations were 'four to six times oversubscribed', with cases of six bottles of La Romanée-Conti opening at £7,795. One hates to think how many are snapped up purely for snob appeal.

Villaine produced for me an aerial photograph showing DRC's core holdings in the six grand-cru vineyards of Echézeaux, Grands Echézeaux, Romanée-St-Vivant, Richebourg, La Tâche and La Romanée-Conti. To connoisseurs, these names read like a pulse-quickenning drum roll. The extraordinary qualities and the precise perimeter of these notched and indented vineyards have been recorded for centuries. The present-day outline of the Romanée-Conti vineyard is recorded in a tax return of 1512.

Ownership of Burgundian vineyards can be migraine-inducingly complex. Vineyards are often split among multiple owners. The 12th-century Clos du Vougeot, for example, the largest grand cru vineyard in Burgundy, is diced and sliced among 80 owners, each producing on average 1,000 bottles – knowing one from another is part of what makes Burgundy such a minefield. DRC is sitting on the crown jewels. It owns the whole (*la monopole*) of Romanée-Conti and La Tâche; half of Richebourg, one-third of Grands Echézeaux, a seventh of Echézeaux and more than half of Romanée-St-Vivant. I asked Villaine how his family had come to acquire such dazzling assets. 'Ha-ha! They have been in my family for many years,' he smiled, staring at the images as if family photographs (he has no children).

The Domaine was founded in 1869 by Villaine's ancestor, Jacques-Marie Duvault-Bloch, who built up the core holdings. However, the present-day Domaine really only took shape in the 20th century. La Tâche was acquired outright in 1933, slices of Le Montrachet were picked up in 1963, 1965 and 1980, and just over half of the Romanée-St-Vivant vineyard was bought in 1988.

The hectares are laughably small: Echézeaux, 4.7; Grands Echézeaux, 3.5; Romanée-St-Vivant, 5.3; Richebourg, 3.5; La Tâche, 6.1; La Romanée-Conti, 1.8; and Le Montrachet, 0.7 hectares. Production is hilariously tiny. La Tâche, the largest hectareage, produces on average just 1,870 cases a year; La Romanée-Conti trickles out just 450 cases; and Le Montrachet dries up after only 250. Put into context, the first growths of Bordeaux – Latour, Lafite, Mouton, Haut-Brion and Margaux – produce on average 100,000 cases annually, whereas La Tâche yields less than half the volume of Pétrus, the famous wine from Pomerol in Bordeaux, which itself is considered tiny. Production of La Romanée-Conti is therefore less than one-eighth that of Pétrus.



The cellars of Romanée-Conti shelter historic wines including a Richebourg 1911 from the very first harvest reaped by Villaine's grandfather

Until 1991, Villaine ran DRC with Lalou Bize-Leroy, variously described as 'a force of nature', a 'mountaineer' and a 'formidable wine taster'. A series of disagreements, including Bize-Leroy's displeasure at Villaine's involvement in a famous France vs California wine tasting in 1976 named the Judgment of Paris, and disputes over wine distribution, led to her being toppled by her sister in 1992. Bize-Leroy has retreated to run her own Domaine d'Auvenay and Domaine Leroy where, a leading biodynamicist, she manages her wines according to horoscopes. At present, Villaine's family owns 50 per cent of DRC, while the Roch family, of which Bize-Leroy is a member, owns the other half. The families have settled their differences: Lalou's daughter sits on DRC's advisory board.

'Aubert isn't the easiest man to get to know,' says Hugh Johnson. 'He is personally modest but totally convinced about the Domaine de la Romanée-Conti. He admires scholarship and precision – and probably has to put up with a lot of the opposite to both, seeing who it is that can afford his wines.'

'He has the hallmark of great men in wine,' says Brett-Smith, 'humility allied to absolute self-belief. One is taught these qualities by nature, because you are dealing with forces of nature that are beyond control. You can finesse your position, but you are only ever playing at the margins. All you can do is set the scene.'

Villaine's work is concentrated in the vineyards and in the nursery. 'I am a supporter of extremely simple vinification,' he says. 'It should last just as long as nature thinks it should last. It is the vineyard and the quality of the vines that show us their talent. We are only midwives. I do as little as possible. The wine makes itself.'

This, of course, is palpably untrue. No part of the viticultural process has not been subjected to the most intense scrutiny in order to realise the qualities of each vineyard. Villaine has reintroduced horses – Mickey and Luciole – to plough the *domaine* in preference to tractors whose compacting weight kills the soil. In 1992, he introduced Claude Bourguignon, France's most celebrated soil guru to intensify the microbiological life of the soil. To you and me, a bug is a bug, but in Burgundy there are grand cru bugs and premier cru bugs, and if you are a spider or ant living in DRC, you are in bug heaven.

Having embraced organic husbandry years ago, Villaine has experimented with biodynamics ever since 1996, using plant-based sprays and treating individual vines according to phases of the Moon. In the cellar, no barrel can be touched without the cosmic calendar being consulted. 'I am not interested in defending a particular philosophy,' he says, 'but in developing a philosophy of my own that allows the *terroir* to be best expressed in the wine. To me it is all a matter of common sense.'

In fact, Villaine spends so much time poring over viticultural minutiae that, a keen tennis fan, he has yet to take up his annual invitation to the French Open at Roland Garros. He has also given up the mayoralty of Bouzeron, the village where he lives, and where A & P Villaine, his personal *domaine*, is based. He has plenty of other projects on the go. Echoing Louis François de Bourbon, Prince de Conti, the most illustrious owner of La Romanée-Conti, who in the 18th century famously hogged all the production for himself and guests and who bequeathed the vineyard his name, DRC owns a small acreage in the Bâtard-Montrachet grand cru which yields just 600 bottles of Chardonnay – all for private consumption.

In Carneros near San Francisco, he and his wife Pamela have collaborated with her cousin Laurence Hyde under the banner of Hyde de Villaine to produce a complex, layered Chardonnay. Other projects include the petitioning of UNESCO to enshrine and protect the values and doctrines of Burgundian viticulture, and the restoration of the Abbey of St Vivant in homage to the medieval monks who pioneered the concept of *terroir* that underpins Burgundian wine making. In 2006 in another echo of Conti, who was painted dining while Mozart played the harpsichord, Villaine invited a sextet from the Berlin Philharmonic to play at the ruins for a fund-raiser.

There is also the quest to expand DRC itself. Last December, Villaine leased 2.3 hectares from Domaine Prince Florent de Mérode to make red wine in the Corton *appellation* in the Côte de Beaune. As these wines normally sell for only £500 per case in the best of years, something must have caught Villaine's eye. DRC plans to make three grands crus – a Corton-Bressandes, a Corton Clos du Roi and a Corton-Renardes – for release in 2012. Total production will be only slightly greater than the average annual production of Romanée-Conti, just 475 cases – side-splittingly tiny.