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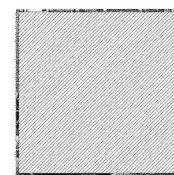




IMAGE COURTESY: CHRISTIE'S

Christie's has been in charge of the Hospices de Beaune charity wine auction since 2005

Serious Wine, Pure Fun

THE WORLD'S MOST FAMOUS WINE AUCTION WEEKEND: BURGUNDY'S LES TROIS GLORIEUSES

by Elin McCoy

A non-stop party mood takes hold at the annual three-day Hospices de Beaune weekend in mid-November, when the world's Burgundy lovers descend on the picturesque walled town of Beaune, the famous wine region's unofficial capital.

Its winding streets are packed with street vendors shucking baskets of oysters, stirring huge pots of boeuf bourgignon, and purveying Burgundy's addictive traditional cheese puffs known as gougères. Wine shops offer Meursault by the glass and red-coated bands, with trumpets blaring and drums booming, march down narrow cobbled streets. One word to describe the atmosphere? Rabelaisian.

The centerpiece of it all is the Hospices de Beaune charity wine auction, which has been around since 1859 and takes place on the third Sunday in November. At the 157th edition on November 19, about 600 barrels of wine (three-quarters

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LUXELIFE

The party descends on the streets of Beaune, the picturesque walled town in Burgundy region, during the three-day Hospices de Beaune weekend in mid-November. A snap from last year's merry-making

red, one quarter white) from the 2017 vintage will go on the block. London-based Christie's has been in charge of the sale since 2005; in 2016, it brought 9.1 million euros (about \$10.7 million at today's rate), including 200,000 euros for a special President's barrel. All the proceeds go to medical charities and heritage conservation. While 80 percent is purchased by Burgundy's top negociants, plenty of private individuals bid, too.

But the festivities start before the auction, on Friday and Saturday, with tastings and special candlelit dinners in medieval stone cellars.

Bouchard Aine et Fils, owned by the Boisset family, for example, opens its cellars to wine lovers for an "interactive smell and taste adventure." Maison Drouhin's "Dinner of the Dukes" (250 euros) takes place in its stone cellars in the heart of Beaune. (Wine lovers can sign up for these through the websites of the Beaune tourism office and their favorite negociant houses.)

On Saturday morning, a can't-miss tasting of 3,000 wines from every appellation in Burgundy, including Domaine de la Romanee-Conti, features a chance to meet the winemakers. A preview of the auction wines held in the Hospices' own cellar offers the first taste of the vintage's baby wines.

Three grand events that follow give the weekend its Les Trois Glorieuses nickname. The first is Saturday night's official kickoff, a glamorous invitation-only black-tie dinner at historic estate Clos de Vougeot. Drinking and eating, punctuated with speeches and toasts in French, goes on well past midnight. (This is worth doing once, but skippable.)

The second is the wine auction itself, the weekend's highlight. The flamboyantly gothic Hospices de Beaune, with its steep, multicolored tile roof, is the town's biggest tourist attraction. Built as a hospital for the poor in 1443, it's now a



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(This and facing page): Hospices de Beaune charity wine auction in progress last year

must-visit museum. Most people don't realize that it also owns 135 acres of top vineyards, including premiers and grand crus donated over the centuries by wealthy benefactors. The 2017 auction wines are all from these vineyards, overseen by the Hospice's first-ever woman winemaker.

"There's a theory that auction demand and the prices are signals for the market," says Burgundy expert Jasper Morris, who writes the official notes describing the wines to help private buyers decide what to bid on. "But it's more symbolic than a real indicator."

The auction audience is a who's who of Burgundy, along with a few celebrities to add glitz. Many wine lovers follow the proceeds in the square outside via a huge television screen.

If you want to bid, you can also do it online. A barrel holds 288 bottles and bidders must team up with a negociant who keeps the

wine in its cellars and bottles it. Maison Albert Bichot is one of the few to provide an easy way for individuals to purchase from one bottle to an entire barrel.

To me, the most memorable part of the weekend is Monday's wine-soaked Paulée de Meursault lunch for about 700 people (give or take a dozen or so) at the Château de Meursault. Everyone streams in, bringing bottles to share, and famous winemakers pour magnums of their own rare wines. The convivial event lasts for hours, with everyone periodically bursting into renditions of popular drinking song Le Ban Bourignon, which involves plenty of clapping and twirling your hands back and forth above your head.

The wine is serious; the auction weekend is pure fun.

For information, <https://www.beaune-tourism.com/discover/hospices-de-beaune-wine-auction> ◀