

Decanter

Jefford on Monday: Burgundy's other self



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Andrew Jefford discovers the surprising Crémant de Bourgogne, and recommends several of the sparkling wines to try.

They're out there, wherever you go in **Burgundy**, silently and greenly growing in low-profile, overlooked, sometimes secret spots. You won't give these vines a second glance – unless you happen to wander through each vineyard, counting the number of buds in spring.

"The whole of Burgundy is involved," says Pierre du Couëdic, the man who has run the UPECB (Union des Producteurs Elaborateurs de Crémant de Bourgogne) for the last 15 years. "There isn't a single village in Burgundy that doesn't produce grapes for **Crémant**."

Is he serious? They're growing Crémant grapes in Vosne-Romanee? Apparently. The Vosne village boundary, remember, stretches beyond the D974, and even out beyond the railway line, too. Down in the flatland vineyards, along with the still reds destined to be sold under regional appellations like Côtes de Nuits Villages and Bourgogne Rouge, you'll find Pinot being grown for Crémant purposes. Two extra buds give the game away.

Go back a century and a half, moreover, and there was a distinguished tradition of producing even the grandest red burgundies in sparkling-wine guise. Napoléon III and Empress Eugénie stopped for several nights in Dijon in August 1860. The couple were presented with a case of wines of imperial luxury at a grand dinner. It included Clos Vougeot and Romanée-Conti from the fine 1834 vintage – but there was also Romanée Mousseux (sic) 1846. Nuits-St Georges and Savigny-lès-Beaune were both villages which specialised in sparkling red wine, and sparkling Gevrey-Chambertin was common, too. A million bottles of red Bourgogne Mousseux were being sold annually in France by 1827.

During the twentieth century, the grandeur dropped away from Bourgogne Mousseux (though the appellation still exists, and remains the only one for sparkling red wines produced in Burgundy). In order to elevate aspirations once again, Crémant de Bourgogne came into being in October 1975, for white and rosé sparkling wines alone. It now claims to have some of the strictest rules for wines of this sort in France (including hand-harvesting in whole bunches, the use of small boxes with perforated bottoms, and the same pressing protocols as Champagne). Don't think you can just turn your worst grapes and least successful vats into Crémant, either: you have to declare your vineyard for Crémant before the end of March. There are 11,000 of those 'secret' parcels, accounting for a total of 2,500 ha within greater Burgundy as a whole.

The push for quality seems to be working. When Couëdic was appointed in 2001, average annual production varied between 60,000 hl and 70,000 hl. The 2016 figure was 152,515 hl. Marcel Combes is the sparkling wine maker for the Boisset-owned **Louis Bouillot**, the third largest producer of Crémant de Bourgogne after market leader Veuve Ambal and the Auxerrois specialist Bailly Lapierre. He's also been in post for 15 years, and has seen sales soar by at least 10 per cent a year – and by up to 20 per cent more recently. Sparkling wine of all sorts (and not just Crémant) now accounts for 27 per cent of Boisset's French turnover. Globally speaking (and most of current growth is coming from exports), Crémant represents 20 per cent of the sales of Burgundy's regional appellations, selling almost 18 million bottles a year at present.

Not just that, but it's the highest priced French sparkling wine after Champagne, filling the gap between most Cava and Prosecco (around £10 in the UK) and Champagne itself (where anything worth drinking begins at £20). Given all of this, I thought it was time to take a look.

Is it a serious Champagne rival?

No and yes. No — because it doesn't taste much like Champagne ... but yes, in that it can be a fine sparkling wine with marked regional identity. "Forget Champagne," says Combes. "We're very burgundian in style. We want the pretty fruit of Burgundy. This is a great wine region — and we can make sparkling wines which express the quintessence of Burgundy. Champagne and Crémant de Bourgogne are cabbage and carrots — the same class of wine, but completely different from one another."

These carrots come in different shapes and sizes. Most of the volume in Crémant nowadays comes from Chardonnay grown in the Mâconnais — and increasingly both Chardonnay and Gamay grown in Beaujolais. (The second biggest Crémant-de-Bourgogne-producing département after Saône et Loire is the Rhône.)

The historical production areas, though, are up in the Yonne département around Chablis and Auxerre — Chablis, remember, was a leading Champagne grape supplier prior to that latter area's delimitation in the early years of the twentieth century. Châtillon-sur-Seine in the arctic north of the Cote d'Or (which lies just 28 km from les Riceys in Champagne's Aube) is almost entirely devoted to Crémant production. Another key production area since the early C19 is Rully in the Côte Chalonnaise, though nowadays most of Rully's grapes are more valuable as still white wine than as Crémant. The Hautes Côtes de Beaune and the Hautes Côtes de Nuits are a further significant source — as are those flatland vineyards up and down the Côte d'Or.

All of these sub-zones give a different style of Crémant. Veuve Ambal and Boisset's Louis Bouillot blend widely for their major cuvées, so those differences are less clearly apparent than house style (Veuve Ambal is fuller and softer, Louis Bouillot is restrained, nuanced and delicate). Bailly Lapierre, by contrast, does have a distinctive regional style — incisive, zesty and saline, every inch the Tonnerrois northerner. The Crémant of the enormous Cave de Lugny in the Mâconnais offers another profile: it's a much more rounded and comfortable wine, though retaining admirable freshness.

Then come the highly characterful wines of leading smaller producers like Louis Picamelot in Rully or Parigot et Richard in Savigny-lès-Beaune, and of their counterparts in every one of the producing sub-regions. "Remember that there are more and more producers in Champagne," says Philippe Chautard of Picamelot, "who are interested in expressing terroir. We shouldn't try to be an 'under-Champagne' but rather emphasise our Burgundian terroir differences," — which in Pacamelot's case means some single-vineyard Crémants.

There is a problem, though, as Grégory Georger of Parigot points out. "We try to make our wines from the Côtes de Beaune and the Côtes de Nuits alone, but it is getting very hard to find enough fruit, especially with all the recent climate problems. The cost of grapes can be higher than in Champagne — yet no one wants to pay Champagne prices for a bottle of Crémant." Louis Bouillot, too, began an outstanding run of single-vineyard, Côte d'Or Crémants from 2003 onwards, but has now pulled back because it was so hard to sell them at a remunerative price. The company has, though, replanted the En Bollery vineyard just across the road from Clos Vougeot (formerly in Gamay) with Pinot and Chardonnay which will be pruned for and made into a new prestige Crémant.

It's partly to address problems of this order that the UPECB has recently instituted **a new hierarchy for top Crémant de Bourgogne**, called Éminent (for Crémant with an extended ageing period after the second fermentation of 24 months) and Grand Éminent (with an extended ageing of 36 months plus three months in bottle). It may work, over a decade or two.

The old Champagne hegemony is slowly being broken up – by Franciacorta, English sparkling wine, the finest Cavas from companies like Recaredo and Gramona (and, outside the DO, Raventos y Blanc) and top sparkling wines from New Zealand and cool-climate Australia (notably Tasmania). The growing pride and effort which is going into Crémant de Bourgogne means that Burgundy will join them.

Tasting Crémant de Bourgogne

Louis Bouillot, Les Grands Terroirs, Dessus Les Vermots, Blanc de Noirs, Brut Nature, Crémant de Bourgogne 2005

This pure Pinot comes from a single cool vineyard at the top end of Savigny-lès-Beaune: mid-gold in colour, with aromatic notes of kirsch, peach and vine flower, and now with some of the mushroom complexities of age. Characterful and searching on the palate: fruits and woodland undergrowth, almost tannic, yet with lots of breed and finesse. 93

Louis Bouillot, Perle d'Aurore, Crémant de Bourgogne NV

The Louis Bouillot 'Perle' series is exceptionally well-crafted for its price and all of the wines are recommendable. I've picked out the Rosé Perle d'Aurore, though, as rosé is something of a Bouillot speciality (over a million bottles are produced every year) and it's a wine which isn't shy about its burgundian identity. "We want," says Marcel Combes, "vinosity above all, almost a touch of tannin, with what you could almost call a compote style of fruit." Autumn red fruits are there on the nose, but in a soft and understated style; on the palate, by contrast, those same notes reappear in an undeniably vinous, resonant and firmly stated manner. This is a true mealtime Crémant, based on a blend of 70 per cent Pinot and 20 per cent Gamay with 10 per cent Chardonnay, the fruit principally coming from the Châtillonnais, the Côtes du Couchois, the Hautes Côtes and the southern, limestone-soiled sector of Beaujolais. 90