

Decanter

BURGUNDY

The kings of Burgundy



The days when négociants held sway over the highs and lows of market pricing may be over, but they still wield enormous power over the quality of millions of bottles of Burgundy made each year, says Bill Nanson

THE NAMES OF Burgundy's largest négociants, or *maisons* as they prefer to be known, have changed very little in recent years, but by necessity much has changed in the way they operate. They are faced with a reduced pipeline of grapes as old suppliers 'go it alone' and, of course, due to consecutive low-yielding vintages. These tendencies are straining their old, market-making positions, where merchants were known to balance out the highs and lows of pricing. That said, trade body the Fédération des Syndicats de Négociants-Eleveurs de Grande Bourgogne estimates that 50% of Burgundy bottles are *négoce* bottles – more than 90 million bottles' worth.

In the current era, the long-held belief that *domaines* produce better wine than négociants, is at best clouded. As the critical narrative has become ubiquitous, the modern-day fact is that no producer can be competitive without a basic level of quality, and there is almost no place to hide as quality becomes the pre-condition for economic activity.

Maisons nowadays – and indeed for the past 10 to 15 years – have had to safeguard their grape supplies, by buying both vineyard land and expiring *domaines* in the Côte d'Or, and/or by augmenting their portfolio in the regions of Mâconnais, Chalonais and Beaujolais, where it is easier to acquire land – and some have not restricted themselves to France. Essentially, all the large *maisons* are, today, also large, sometimes huge, *domaines*.

Here are six négociants that I regard highly:

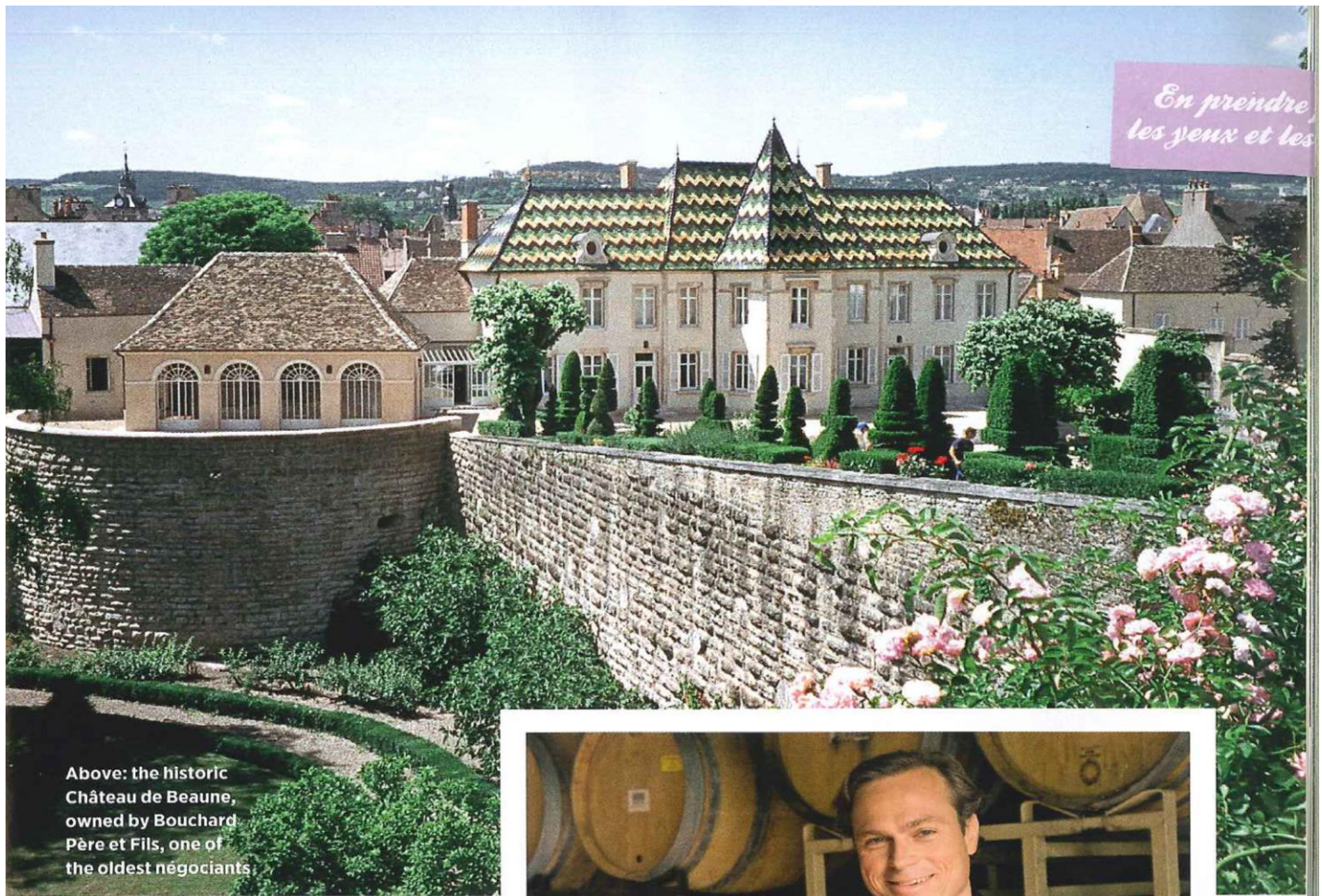
Bouchard Père et Fils

Bouchard Père is based in the same side of Beaune's old town as Louis Jadot (see p54). Its offices and Château de Beaune are set in beautiful gardens that also surround the bastions – the old protective walls of Beaune. Here, wine slowly matures at a near-constant temperature thanks to walls seven metres thick in some places. For a small sum you can take a tour of the property and I'd recommend doing so, particularly if you have the chance to see the inner sanctum that is the Bouchard family's 'reserve', where many of the bottles date back to the 1800s.

One of the oldest négociants of Beaune, Bouchard Père et Fils was established in the 1730s, staying under family control until 1995, when the extended Bouchard family chose to sell its *maison* to Champagne producer Joseph Henriot. Sadly, Henriot died in 2015, but not before injecting cash, resources and much-needed confidence in the team and their wines. With 130ha of vines in Burgundy, Bouchard claims to be the largest *domaine* in Côte d'Or – particularly impressive when you consider that 84ha are premier and grand cru vineyard.

Also like its near neighbour Jadot, Bouchard has recently passed its winemaking baton on to the next generation, in this case Frédéric Weber, who was assistant to Philippe Prost since 2003. The wines of Bouchard, post-Henriot, have gone through a series of stylistic phases; for a long time with a little too much

'Fifty per cent of Burgundy bottles are négoce bottles – more than 90 million bottles' worth'



Above: the historic Château de Beaune, owned by Bouchard Père et Fils, one of the oldest négociants

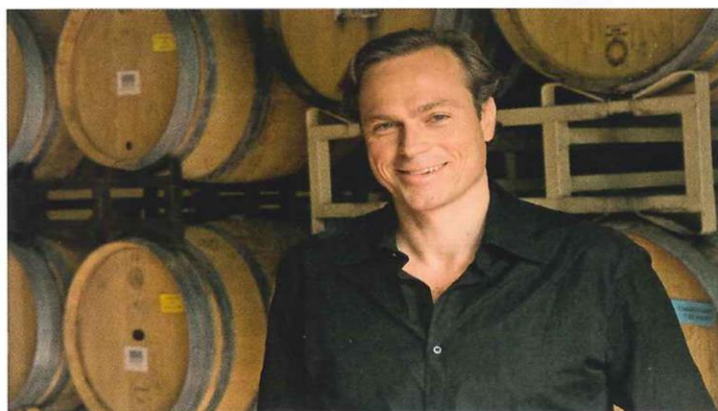
oak (the 2005s still show that) then there was the overt whole-cluster phase. It wasn't until 2009 onwards that I found the two to be underpinning, rather than dominating, the wines. Balance has been exemplary in recent vintages. This search for a red wine style was always puzzling to me, because the whites have always been modestly oaked – the watchwords for both, finesse and intensity. The reds here are now very fine, but their whites attain the very highest levels.

www.bouchard-pereetfils.com

Jean-Claude Boisset

The négociant JC Boisset is comfortably the largest company in Burgundy. Jean-Claude began his business in the 1960s, and while he is now retired, in theory at least, having handed the reins to his son, Jean-Charles, Jean-Claude can still be seen around the office in Nuits-St-Georges.

Jean-Charles spends much of his time in the US, forging new partnerships and dynasties – not least by way of marriage to Gina Gallo. Back at the ranch, it is Jean-François Curie (head of Boisset La Famille des Grands Vins), a veteran of both JC Boisset and Joseph Drouhin, who says, 'Branding is very much a two-edged sword: you can't have a great Chablis and a



Photograph: Christian Peacock

poor Meursault – because it's your name that counts.' Security of (grape) supply is paramount in modern Burgundy and, as Curie puts it, 'Working with partner growers has changed very much in terms of the commitment on both sides; it's not now just a price for x years, there are vineyard management aspects, pruning aspects, picking dates plus in-built rewards for our suppliers too.'

JC Boisset covers virtually all levels of wine, and many regions outside Burgundy. Then there are overseas initiatives and spirits brands to manage too. In recent years, one of its largest growth areas has been in Crémant de Bourgogne, today a strategic division of JC Boisset. Curie notes that 'Crémant is additive to volume, value, profit and image'.

As with many maisons, the domaine-owned vines of JC Boisset are amalgamated to form a separate 'domaine entity', in this case Domaine de la Vougeraie. >

Above: Jean-Charles Boisset is now at the helm of Jean-Claude Boisset and the Boisset Collection of wineries in France and the US



Vineyards in Chablis owned by fiercely independent négociant Albert Bichot

Away from the large bulk of supermarket shelves, the face of Maison Jean-Claude Boisset's range of négoce wines has, for more than 10 years, been winemaker Grégory Patriat. Trained at Leroy, Patriat oversees a broad range of cuvées, though usually with between one and four barrels of a particular wine. Production is a little over 200,000 bottles per year – representing more of a boutique level compared with many large companies. The contracts seem rather stable and the quality is on a very high level – these remain some of the most affordable labels of their type.

www.jcboisset.com

Albert Bichot

The Bichots have resided in Burgundy for about 700 years, yet only decided to enter the wine business in the 1830s – so a long way from being the oldest company in my selection. Yet, as a family firm wedded in Burgundy (there's also a little distributed Rhône), it is close to being unique among its peers.

Albéric Bichot heads this self-funded family company and he points out, 'The plan of our maison is not to grow for the sake of it. We would prefer to finance everything ourselves and stay family-owned. Bichot remains independent, in good shape, and is 95% focused on wines of the Grand Bourgogne.'

Grand Bourgogne? The strategy here is not dissimilar to that of other large négociants, concentrating on security of supply by buying and maintaining 100ha of domaines across the region: Long-Depaquit in Chablis, Clos Frantin in Nuits-St-Georges, Du Pavillon in Pommard, and Adélie in Mercurey. Although

'We would prefer to finance everything ourselves and stay family-owned'

Albéric Bichot



Above: Albert Bichot's Clos de la Roche Grand Cru 2013

Bichot owns the 65ha Domaine Long-Depaquit in Chablis, it also buys, yearly, the same volume again of grapes and wine in Chablis. These purchases were a strong driver for the acquisition of Domaine Pascal Bouchard's merchant business in 2015. Bichot now has a capacity in Chablis of 150ha. As Albéric notes, 'One of our biggest challenges is to maximise the usage of those assets.'

The Maison Albert Bichot labels are virtually identical to those of the domaine wines, so attention to the labels is important if you really must have a domaine wine. But quality is high. Pre-bottled samples show richness of fruit and fine direct intensity too. Post-bottling, I often find a more obvious vanilla component, which needs about three years to be absorbed by the maturing wine. I am rarely disappointed by bottles older than 10 years – particularly Domaine du Pavillon's Corton-Charlemagne, which drinks beautifully after eight or more years of storage.

NB: Despite having such a strong presence in Chablis, Maison Bichot proclaims to be a 'red wine domaine', to such an extent that it chose to submit three reds and one white for this tasting, rather than two of each.

www.bourgogne-bichot.com

Louis Jadot

Housed in what must be one of the (if not *the*) most beautiful buildings in Beaune, is Maison Louis Jadot; a complex blend of Maison Louis Jadot, Domaine Louis Jadot, Domaine les Héritiers Louis Jadot and Domaine Gagey – though fortunately for us, all of those labels are remarkably similar. But then there are also the domaines of Duc de Magenta, Ferrete >

Nanson's top 24 négociant buys



Bouchard Père et Fils, Chevalier-Montrachet Grand Cru 2013 98/100
£178.33 Millésima

Overtly fresh aroma and a clear mineral character, with no obvious reduction. In the mouth this is on a massive scale: full of complexity and displaying a beautiful energy. A mineral wine but with brilliant clarity and even some tannin too. **Drink** 2016-2040 **Alcohol** 13%

Louis Latour, Bâtard-Montrachet Grand Cru 2013 96
£113.33 Forth Wines/Inverarity Morton, Millésima

Slightly compressed aromas but the base and mid-range notes reveal a compellingly beautiful, complex wine. But what scale we have on the palate: super-complex; every part of your mouth active! The finish comes with small waves of reprise. A beautiful thing that you can either sniff or drink, ideally both. **Drink** 2016-2040 **Alc** 13.5%

Domaine du Pavillon (Albert Bichot), Corton-Charlemagne Grand Cru 2013 95

£68.60 (in bond) **Fine & Rare**
A large-scaled nose, which is fresh and mineral; certainly less deep than the Montrachets (above). Big and powerful, direct and silken, with really super waves of flavour. A great wine in the making, with really brilliant length too. **Drink** 2017-2040 **Alc** 13.5%



Joseph Drouhin, Clos des Mouches 1er Cru, Beaune 2013 95
£47 (ib)-£85 Berry Bros & Rudd, Lea & Sandeman

Wide, complex and high-toned aromas. Big in the mouth – a wine to luxuriate in, with lots of density and richness but with sufficient acidity and energy for prolonged interest. A big and long wine; the balance is just enough now, but the material here begs 10 to 20 years of ageing, at which time it will be much better knit. A certain tannin here – really

a shame to drink at the moment. **Drink** 2018-2040 **Alc** 13.5%

Domaine du Duc de Magenta (Louis Jadot), Morgeot, Clos de la Chapelle 1er Cru, Chassagne-Montrachet 2013 93
£38.25 (ib) **Fine & Rare**

A deep and forward nose that begins a little like Meursault – good but nothing memorable. It fills the mouth, but there's also a super combination of freshness and flavour intensity. A really lovely wine and nothing to prevent you drinking it already. **Drink** 2016-2035 **Alc** 13%

Bouchard Père et Fils, Genevrières 1er Cru, Meursault 2013 91
£40 Millésima

Broad and lightly ginger-spiced nose; faintly reduced too but it opens up with more and more sweetness. Big and modestly opulent in the mouth, but with enough acidity to support the richness and a lovely ginger-infused mid-palate flavour that is utterly delicious. **Drink** 2016-2035 **Alc** 13%



Jean-Claude Boisset, Les Limozin, Meursault 2013 91
POA Liberty Wines

A rather classic Meursault aroma with its undertow of ginger cake. Wide and fresh, not so deep, but larger in the mouth. Elegant and with very fine acidity – there's even a hint of saltiness. This is very good indeed for a villages wine. A really super bottle already. **Drink** 2016-2020 **Alc** 13%



Louis Latour, Sous les Puits, Puligny-Montrachet 1er Cru 2013 91

£40 Forth Wines/Inverarity Morton, Millésima
Displaying a panorama of apricot and grapefruit aromas, and there's a nice understated freshness too. Big in the mouth – much more mineral in character than the nose – with a real impact of mid-palate flavour. Impressive but not as tasty as some. **Drink** 2017-2035 **Alc** 13.5%

Jean-Claude Boisset, Le Trezin, Puligny-Montrachet 2013 90
POA Liberty Wines

Deep, fresh aromas, hinting at reduction but there's some minerality too – one might even say Puligny tension. Gloriously rounded on the palate, which is fresh and energetic, with more mineral notes. Perhaps not quite as tasty as the Boisset Meursault, but perfectly fine to drink already. **Drink** 2016-2022 **Alc** 13%

Joseph Drouhin, Rully, Côte Chalonnaise 2013 89

£15.99 Booths, Christopher Keiller, Forth Wines/Inverarity Morton

Deep, opulent, pineapple fruit on the nose with faint minerality. Quite large in the mouth, with ripe yellow fruit flavours but also with good underlying acidity and hence energy. Overall, tasty and sweet, with a more-than-modest, nicely mouthwatering, warm-fruit finish. **Drink** 2018-2040 **Alc** 13%



Domaine Gagey (Louis Jadot), Le Clou d'Orge, Ladoix 2013 88
£16 (ib) **Fine & Rare**

Toasty, with an undertow of fresh fruit – classic and crisp. A round palate but with good detail and tasty fruit. The acidity and energy are wrapped up in fine richness, though overall it lacks a little sparkle. Interestingly a hint of tannin on the finish and some minerality too. A good wine that surely hints at more potential. **Drink** 2017-2025 **Alc** 13%

Albert Bichot, Clos de la Roche Grand Cru 2013 96
£91.50 (ib) Bancroft, Forth Wines/Inverarity Morton

Not a massive nose, but with beautifully complex, airy fruit – deep and seriously gorgeous, showing a touch of violets too. An obvious sweetness of ripe fruit with a growing intensity of flavour. There is a width of tannin but it is virtually submerged. The length is simply excellent, with fine mouthwatering fruit flavour, and a little vanilla in the mix. This is clearly the best red of my line up. **Drink** 2016-2050 **Alc** 13.5% ➤