

HUBERT de MONTILLE

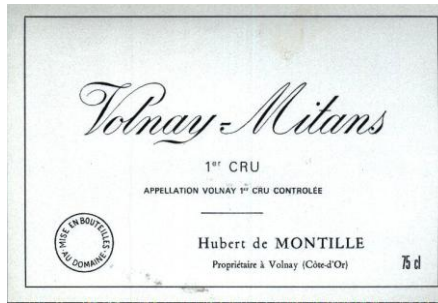
Volnay

More than any other vigneron save perhaps Henri Mayer, Hubert de Montille has by his example revolutionized Burgundian agricultural, winemaking and commercial practices in the last half century. Simultaneously he established significant local fame at his "day job" as a lawyer in Dijon.

Both professions ran in the family. Vineyard and cellar experience came first, but in the fifties, the legal profession was needed to pay the bills. De Montille never neglected such details as scrupulous experimentation in vine sources and training, selection of barrels, choice of harvest date (invariably late) or in identifying the finest parcels in Volnay and Pommard, purchasing them when possible.

But the real de Montille wine revolution began serendipitously in his cellar. As Tony Hanson relates, "During the 1959 vintage (his tenth), he made a mistake in calculating the amount of sugar to be used for chaptalization, with the result that a wine of only 11.5 alcohol was produced. To his great surprise, this developed better in bottle than any of his other 1959s. As a result, very little chaptalization has since taken place on this estate." Indeed, as a result of de Montille's "accident", at some point less and less chaptalization was thought necessary or desirable by many Burgundy estates, although as Hanson adds, it took time "for other growers to dare to follow him down to more moderate alcohol levels."

Nor was it just other growers or a few wine writers who were influenced. The "discovery" of de Montille Burgundy quite literally launched the careers of two importers without whom the



practice of the American wine trade and the public perception of French wine as we know it would not exist: Kermit Lynch and Becky Wasserman.

Just listen to Lynch in his book, *Adventures on the Wine Route*: "I cancelled my flight home and drove to Volnay. [As a result] I left for home having made my first wine discovery, my first direct purchase from a French wine *domaine*, and totally dissatisfied with the other wines I was selling. On the plane, my thoughts were soaring. I wanted more de Montilles. I wanted a de Montille in each village of the Côte d'Or. I wanted to turn the 747 back so I could begin ferreting out growers. That one tasting was a revelation, and what had been an interesting business became a passion."

Before you even turn the page, Lynch goes on to link his experiences with de Montille's then-current 1972s to two further developments that revolutionized the American wine trade: shipping in "reefer" containers, and learning to taste and appreciate wines in their uniqueness and in the context of both terroir and cuisine.

Having been introduced to Burgundy in 1983 through Becky Wasserman, I too experienced a recapitulation of the "de Montille revelation", and mature bottles from this cellar constitute some of my fondest tasting memories since.

(cont. next page)

Burgundy

**Bourgogne
Volnay
Volnay 1er Cru
Volnay Champans
Volnay Taillepiés
Volnay Mitans
Pommard Pézerolles
Pommard Grands Epenots
Pommard Rugiens
Puligny-Montrachet Caillerets**

*New to the estate in vintage 2002
will be two Beaune 1^{er} Crus.*

*For information on de Montille's
holdings and practices, as well as
assessments in the wine press,
please consult the following page.*

* * *

de MONTILLE *cont.*

Yet for all of his influence, precisely in America the wines de Montille bottles are nowadays highly controversial. Nor do the importers he most influenced any longer ship his wine to the States. (I suppose that follows from the fact your reading about him *here!*).

There are two fundamental reasons for the neglect of these wine in the U.S.. The first is that the domain does not make it easy on potential export contacts. They are comfortable with a reputation that brings them loyal private clients and a place on all of the best restaurant wine lists in France. Wines are released when the family, not the wine trade, sees fit. A great deal of wine remains in their cellars, sometimes to be sold many years hence, and the top crus are often all but unobtainable.

In the difficult 1983 vintage, de Montille bottled every drop in magnum. This was his challenge to the trade and a statement about *his* confidence in a year when most vitner's produced wines undrinkable today and scarcely pleasurable two decades ago either. Finally, I suppose it was a *warning* to anyone foolish enough to approach these wines casually or in their youth!

Which brings us to the other reason for de Montille's eclipse this side of the Great Puddle (or is that "Muddle"?!): the style of the wines. We are nowadays so accustomed to wines made to give pleasure in their youth that to protest that a wine *requires* time to show its stuff will earn you derisive hoots. "Don't even try to hide behind that old saw!" you will be told. Michel Rolland, Helen Turley, Tony Soter ... all the great winemakers of the late Twentieth Century are taken to have proven beyond a gustatory doubt that you *can* have your cake – that is to say, the full hedonic and intellectual satisfaction of which wine is capable, *plus* ageability – and eat it, now!

A preference for youth over maturity is ultimately just that, an aesthetic *preference*. What is undeniably true is that the de Montille style, young or old, runs counter to the rather jammy, oaky, plush Pinot favored by most American wine writers. De Montille has no patience with the "cosmetic" use of cold soak or 100% new barrels.

A reaction to lower-alcohol Burgundy long been in train, further distancing U.S. Pinot fashion from de Montille's principles. Sweetness of fruit and plushness of texture are the qualitative touch-stones overriding all other factors in the minds and mouths of most Americans, and alcohol contribute mightily in those departments.

Hubert's son Etienne, a professional accountant, has taken over day-to-day operations and announced the style will modulate toward increased approachability. A sign of the times, surely, and the young 1999s and 2000s are indeed already delicious. But neither the financial bottom line nor stylistic sea changes on either side of the Atlantic are likely to significantly alter the de Montille paradigm.

Hanson succinctly summed up the controversy and the glory of de Montille Pinots when he wrote in his landmark book *Burgundy*: "These wines can be a bit strict or severe when immature maybe, but they have no extra fat on them, and no noticeable make-up. They can be brilliant and fascinating like diamonds."

"The domaine's wines are a yardstick of what fine Volnay and Pommard should be."

Remington Norman,
The Great Domaines of Burgundy

"A small estate, but greatly loved by those who know its mature bottles. ... since [1981] there has rarely been a risk of disappointment ..."

Anthony Hanson, *Burgundy* (1995)

"... a reference point ..."

Bettane & Desseauve, *Classement 99*

Burgundy

Total acreage, production: 6.3 in Pinot Noir, for around 2,000 cases annually, plus (since 1993) a tiny sliver of the great Puligny-Montrachet "Caillerets".

Many tiny, top-quality plots are combined for the "1er Cru" bottling. The single-vineyard wines express great delicacy and finesse, with decisive personalities.

The Pommard Pézerolles characteristically yields one of the domaine's richest wines. Rugiens displays the most structure and often the most complexity. (The de Montille portion of Grands Epenots is so tiny that one seldom tastes it, much less has any to sell!)

Interestingly, only the Bourton of the Pommards and those Volnays that inform the "1er Cru" bottling are in vines older than 25 years.

Vinification: Minimal chaptalization (with finished alcohol normally under 12.5%). Relatively short, warm primary fermentations but very leisurely malolactic fermentations are the rule. At most a third of the barrels (coopered expressly for the domaine from wood they age) are new. "If our wines were Chambertin or Richebourg," says de Montille, "we might put them into all new wood." Although he virtually single-handedly created a modern Burgundian style of Pinot vinification, de Montille is not unwilling to consider such radical modern inventions as the must evaporator, a device which might eliminate chaptalization.