

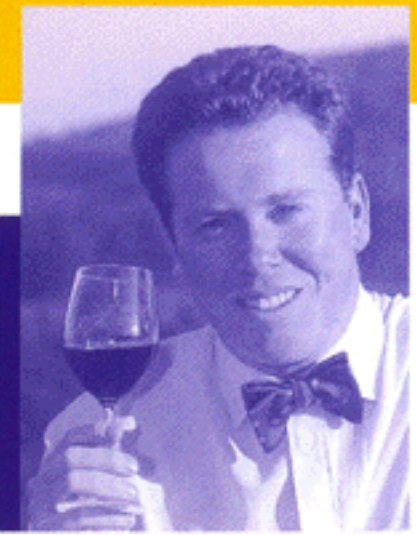


Tales of the Vine

Where there's muck

By Francis Gimblett

THE Datebook



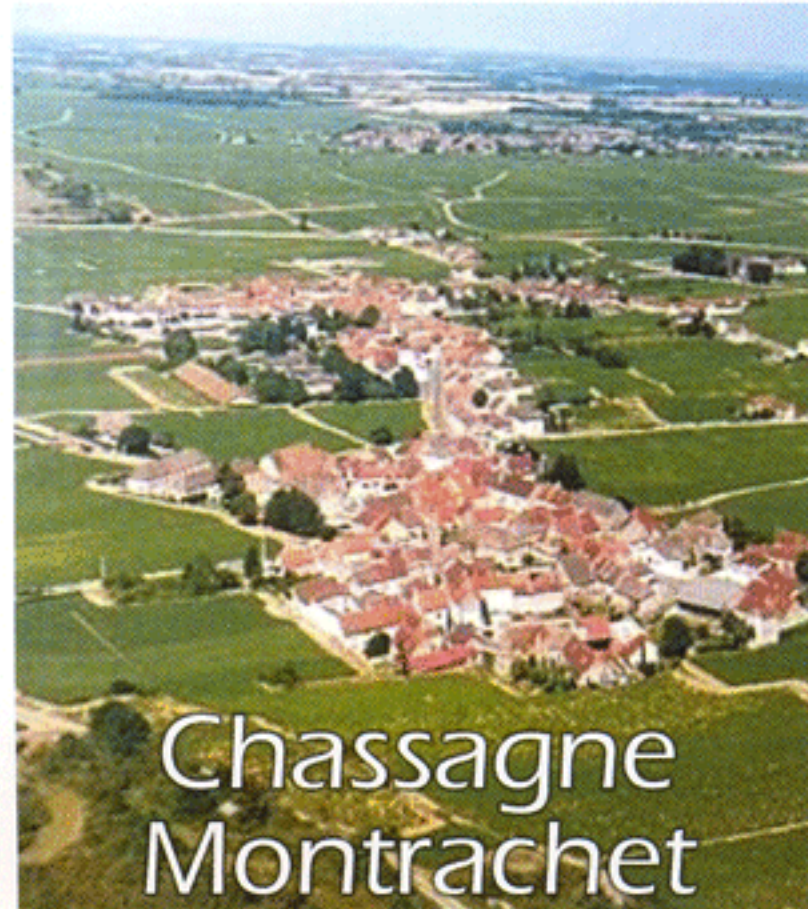
A muffled blast and the sound of rock raining onto the quarry floor around the corner made me feel my intrepid excursion had taken a turn for the worse.

On examining the faded metal sign at the entrance to the quarry, with its artistically challenged stick of dynamite, I had assumed that the timings written beneath had borne a relation to the times that the quarry was in use. Also, this was Sunday in rural Burgundy and, it being 6.30 in the morning, I had felt it reasonable to believe that the only life I was likely to encounter would emit a hiss before sinking its teeth into my calf as I crossed its path on the bike.

Although quite well concealed on a slope behind the famous wine town of Chassagne Montrachet, I had noticed the quarry on a previous trip and felt drawn toward it. This siren-like attraction of a hole in the ground may seem a little odd, though I had yet to see a cross section of what makes Burgundy so special (yes, I know – probably still odd!).

Burgundy is an isolated strip of vineyard land that lies along an exposed limestone slope running south of Dijon. Its 30 miles of Pinot Noir (red grape) and Chardonnay (white grape) vineyards are barely two miles wide and all are exposed to a similar climate. The way the grapes are grown and methods of production are largely the same along the ridge from producer to producer (of which there are thousands). So just what is it that makes one wine sell for £7 a bottle and another from adjacent vines fetch £300 or more? Mud & rock!

A few years ago on a study trip to Burgundy, a hugely knowledgeable and friendly (though completely bonkers) geologist asked me to fetch three samples of earth from adjacent plots of



vines without him seeing. The plots were no more than a few metres apart. One was Le Montrachet (the world's finest white wine vineyard), another a Premier Cru of Chassagne-Montrachet (its wine selling for a fifth of the price) and the last a more humble Chassagne-Montrachet vineyard. He turned back towards me and (with his eyes closed) asked me to present him with the three handfuls of earth. He briefly rubbed a little of each through his fingers, smelt and then finally tasted them before

correctly identifying each.

He explained that, all other things being equal, the key to quality was in the sub-soil as the vines would push deep into the rock below to reach water and collect nutrient, which would translate to flavour in the glass. He also explained that if one producer owned vines in each soil, the order of quality would always be the same. He offered the earth back to me to try the experiment for myself though I declined, as a tractor with a fertiliser spreader had just emerged from the vines!

I have still only to imagine what goes on underground, as I now know Burgundian quarrymen have considerable enthusiasm for their trade matched only by religious zealots (and possibly Ainsley Harriot)! I left the quarry with a turn of speed that Lance Armstrong would have been proud of!

Francis Gimblett is Director of Taste of the Vine Ltd., a corporate entertainment company staging interactive wine, whiskey, beer and cocktail shows and Wine Challenges™ for client hospitality and team building.

Taste of the Vine runs a non-profit making wine information club for those working in events and hospitality roles. The club covers topics affecting wine within hospitality. Please call Francis on 01428 656319 for an application form (entry is free) or for further details.