

Decanter



ALL CHANGE AT BURGUNDY'S CLOS DE LA COMMARAINÉ

Jane Anson reports on ambitious renovation work at Clos de la Commaraine in Pommard and tastes through wines being made elsewhere in Burgundy by its new American investors.



Jane Anson May 30, 2019

We haven't found any pottery, so you are probably okay,' one of the archaeologists calls out cheerfully to us on our arrival.

I can feel Jean-Luc Vitoux relax, just a little, besides me as he takes this in.

We are standing in front of two vast pits dug into the front garden of **Clos de la Commaraine**, the Monopole 1er Cru vineyard in Pommard that he has been in charge of running since November 2017. Behind us is the château building and, immediately beyond that, the 3.75ha walled vineyard. The château is right now stripped back to its skeleton, centuries of modifications and alterations removed, with medieval floors and windows exposed. The property was first built in 1112 and has thrown up constant mysteries; why, for example, are there doors that seem to go nowhere? Was there an entire extra floor at one point?

This time around, the renovations will see **la Commaraine** become a luxury hotel, restaurant and spa, although most likely not until 2021.

For today, though, renovations are on hold while the action centres around the pits. Clear outlines of half-submerged stone blocks in the ground in front of us trace the walls of an earlier structure. 'Probably as far back as the 10th century,' says one of the two women from the Bâtiments de France carrying out the survey. 'But without pottery or other artefacts its hard to accurately date.'

'I am torn between intellectual interest at finding remains here, and knowing that any finds could hold up the renovations by months or longer,' admits Vitoux, a former lawyer from Champagne and now a Burgundy wine producer and négociant. Vitoux – whose legal expertise covered viticultural acquisitions and regulations for many years – is the man on the ground for Boston-based American financiers Denise Dupré and Mark Nunnally, owners of a rapidly-growing French wine empire.

I came across their biodynamic **Champagne house Leclerc Briant** when researching for my Wine Revolution book. It was their first French winery investment back in 2012.

More recently, their stunning **Royal Champagne Hotel and Spa** near Epernay opened to international fanfare in July 2018, helped perhaps by the fact that one of Dupré's former roles was as dean of the Boston University School of Hotel Administration.

'It seems hard to believe that this particular American-led operation is not going to gain in status and importance.'

Whether this experience soothes or alarms their new Burgundian neighbours is up for debate.

They have had to get used to American arrivals in recent years, of course – Stan Kroenke at Bonneau du Martray, for one, and Grace and Ken Evenstad at Château de la Créée in Santenay, among others.

'The jury is out I would say,' says Vitoux, 'but we hope to show that we are going about things in the right way'.

This latest chapter began in 2017 with the purchase of the 22ha **Domaine Belleville** in Rully and négociant house and winery Manoir Murisaltien in Meursault, followed later that year by a long-term tenancy agreement for Clos de la Commaraine. Reports have suggested an investment of around €30 million.

Since then, things have moved pretty fast.

All three estates are now in organic conversion, and various soils studies have been carried out to better isolate and identify terroirs.

The grapes from **Clos de Commaraine** were being sold in their entirety to Maison Louis Jadot on purchase, but the new owners have taken them back in-house, and sold off 4ha of land that they didn't feel was of high enough quality for their plans.

Comte Louis-Michel Liger-Belair of Château de Vosne-Romanée agreed to come on board as consulting winemaker as of the 2018 vintage, working with full-time winemakers Charles Nébout and Isabelle Laurand.

There are expansion plans to expand as and when high-quality parcels become available, and a new micro-négociant business launched in the meantime.

Spotting new boutique négociants has become something of a sport in Burgundy recently. As land prices climb, more and more people are choosing the route of buying grapes or juice and creating their own brands.

A possible road map for **Les Parcelles de Saulx** can be found with Pascal Marchand, who comes from Montreal (although in Burgundy since 1983) and who launched his own high-quality micro-négociant business with Canadian financier Moray Tawse back in 2010. Today he works with partner-growers to create extremely high quality wines from 51 appellations and 25 climats, with unfiltered and unfinned wines, and biodynamic principles wherever possible.

But it seems Vitoux already has very particular ideas for the new négociant. Launched in October 2018, **Les Parcelles de Saulx** takes its name from a former 15th-century owner of **Clos de Commaraine**, and so far has 21 wines from 21 plots, with one climat and one winemaker per bottling.

For the whites, they buy grapes or must and vinify in Meursault, while for the reds they select instead finished wine, and oversee the barrel ageing, until a new red wine cellar is completed later this year. All purchases are of organic or biodynamic grapes where possible.

'The aim is to avoid blending and bottle only single climat wines from single producers, which makes us a little different from many Burgundy négociants,' says Vitoux.

'Even our village Mercurey will, as of the 2018 vintage, be split into two separate named plots to ensure we reflect the different climat expressions. For now we are making 30,000 bottles per year, and our methods make it unlikely that we will be able to go above 50,000.

'We buy from well-known producers and pay a little above market value to ensure that we are attractive to the right people. But in Burgundy it is never just about the money. We are able to convince them to work with us because they appreciate the approach.'

Clos de la Commaraine will be similarly terroir-led. The 3.7ha are now split into 10 plots, all harvested and vinified separately.

'Last year we had 60 barrels in total from the grapes. We sold on 25 barrels as 1er Cru Pommard but not under our name, and have a further 35 that we ageing and tracking as they develop.

'We are simply trying to understand the terroir right now, analysing the effect of different rootstocks, clones, massal selections and so on. We will decide, together with Liger-Belair, how much to release under the Commaraine name later this year. We are looking to bottle the most elegant style of Pommard and don't want to compromise.'

I tasted through a sampling of both **Domaine Belleville** and **Les Parcelles de Saulx** after spending the morning visiting the vineyards in Rully, Meursault and Pommard, so that when we were back in the cellar Vitoux could point out, 'that's the one by the old tennis court', or 'that's the one from the south-facing slope that we walked up to'.

The majority of the wines to date are Côte de Beaune or Côte Chalonnaise – a place that is quickly gaining in importance and buzz right now.

Rully in particular seems to be benefitting from big names arriving from the Côte d'Or – I was taken the back there the next day by Domaine Drouhin – and from wines being bottled by individual estates rather than anonymous cooperative cellars.

More Côtes de Nuits climats are due over the next few years, and it seems hard to believe that this particular American-led operation is not going to gain in status and importance.

Certainly having Louis-Michel Liger-Belair on board should help soothe local sensibilities, and on the evidence of this tasting, **Belleville, Commaraine and de Saulx** are names to watch.



**Tasting Domaine Belleville
and Les Parcelles de Saulx
wines Vintage 2017**





Domaine Belleville, Rully, 1er Cru La Pucelle 95 Points

On east-facing stony slopes, this is a stunning wine full of slate and white flowers, with the most gorgeous mix of minerality and creaminess and some white peach richness through the mid-palate. It's proof that Rully is truly worth sitting up and taking notice of. From 40-year-old vines, matured in 25% new oak.

Domaine Belleville, Les Boudrières, Puligny-Montrachet

94 Points

Sourced from 55-year-old vines on clay-limestone slopes, this is more closed up at this early stage than the Rully, even though it's a village wine. It takes its time in the glass, slowly revealing flaked pastry and grilled almond notes pepped up by white pepper and even cinnamon on the finish. It's a great quality wine with lots of layers, walls and kick. One of my favourites in the lineup.



Domaine Belleville, Mercurey, 1er Cru Le Clos l'Evêque

94 Points

From clay-limestone soils that err on the side of limestone, this wine is gorgeously elegant with real power through the mid-palate, softened by a grilled caramel edge. I love this - it's serious but has grace and lightness of touch. It closes in on the finish, letting you know that it's going to exceed expectations with some ageing. 35% new oak.



Domaine Belleville, Rully, 1er Cru Rabourcé 93 Points

On east-facing stony slopes, this is a stunning wine full of slate and white flowers, with the most gorgeous mix of minerality and creaminess and some white peach richness through the mid-palate. It's proof that Rully is truly worth sitting up and taking notice of. From 40-year-old vines, matured in 25% new oak.

Domaine Belleville, Les Hâtes, Santenay 92 Points

From 0.75ha of east-facing slopes in the village of Santenay, close to the premier cru of Beaurepaire. It gives a finely woven, elegant Santenay with floral edges. It's subtle, accessible and enjoyable - a great quality wine from low-yielding vines on limestone-dominant soils. 35% new oak.



Domaine Belleville, Les Perrières, Mercurey 91 Points

Sourced from 40-year-old-vines on an excellent site with gravel-heavy soils. This is clearly a more tannic centre and bite compared to the village Rully but still extremely elegant, with a gentle, mouthwatering finish and spicy grilled notes. 30% new oak.





Domaine Belleville, Rully, 1er Cru Chapitre 90 Points

A tiny east-facing climat that covers 0.4ha, this was once part of the Chapitre des Chanoines of the Cathédrale St Vincent de Chalons. Delicate aromatics leap out of the glass, and there's clear grip from beginning to end. Crushed raspberry fruits are followed by some real salinity on the finish. A delicious, softly spoken wine. 35% new oak.

Domaine Belleville, Mercurey 90 Points

2017 is the last vintage that they will produce a village Mercurey before splitting the fruit into two separate lieux-dit bottlings. I prefer this style to the La Créée Rully - it has a round richness to it for sure, but also a good core of freshness. The acidity is gentle but does its job, and the white flower notes are extremely appealing on the finish, lifting things up and providing balance to the gentle citrus.



Domaine Belleville, Chaponnière, Rully 88 Points

If you're looking for the fresh cherry and raspberry nose of a simple, good-quality red Burgundy, this one has it in spades with its bright fruits, light tannins and approachable nature. A little rustic on the finish, it takes its time to soften but is unfussy and enjoyable.

Domaine Belleville, La Créée, Rully 87 Points

Once part of Les Pucelles but split off when Les Pucelles was designated a premier cru, this village wine is already open and easy to approach. It's less mineral-focussed than some Rully whites you can find, although it still has grip. Its juicy as it travels through the palate, loaded with apricot notes, and will make a lovely aperitif wine - great to crack open and easy to love. It's not my favourite style, but is definitely expansive and enjoyable. 25% new oak..





Les Parcelles de Saulx, Meursault 1er Cru

Les Poruzots **95 Points**

Meursault has no grands crus, but Poruzots/Porusots (meaning 'stony place', reflective of the soils) is at the higher end of premier cru quality. This is extremely young and closed, with clear citrus tang, more than in any other white in the lineup. There's great length and persistency, and a mouthwatering finish. This is going nowhere fast and is easy to recommend. It shows that same smoky liquorice edge that the best reds of the lineup have also displayed. One to savour. 50% new oak.

Les Parcelles de Saulx, Chassagne-Montrachet

1er Cru Clos St-Jean **95 Points**

A stunning, texturally rich Chassagne that elongates and expands in the mouth - a great sign of the potential for Les Parcelles de Saulx (and this is from a premier cru better known for its reds). We don't know which grower of Clos St Jean this comes from, but I love the balance of salinity and rich, fleshy stone fruits. A great quality wine, only the second vintage to be produced.



Les Parcelles de Saulx, Gevrey-Chambertin 1er Cru

Fonteny **95 Points**

Biodynamic growers supply the fruit for this wine, sourced from powerful soils with serious limestone and very little topsoil. It has clear black and white pepper notes, with rosemary touches and tight, dark fruits. It's extremely elegant, if a little closed, and lifts beautifully through the palate. Oak charring is noticeable, but not overpowering, leading to a mouthwatering finish. Good personality.



Les Parcelles de Saulx, Volnay, 1er Cru Mitans 94 Points

From east-facing slopes, the flavours here are significantly more profound than in the village Volnay, with the liquorice edge of a great Burgundy. It's light in colour but intense and drawn out in flavour, evolving and unwinding in the glass. Excellent quality.

Les Parcelles de Saulx, Nuits-St-Georges, 1er Cru Les

Meurgers 94 Points

There are very few Côtes de Nuits wines within the Saulx stable for now, but this one is definitely pulling its weight. The plot is located on the Vosne-Romanée side of Nuits-St-Georges (Méo-Camuzet has vines here, among others), and it will need a good few more years in bottle before it starts to soften. You can see and feel the tannin level creeping upwards, but they are already elegant. It has both aromatic clarity and fully-fleshed redcurrant and raspberry grip. It has tons of potential but I would give it until at least 2022.



Les Parcelles de Saulx, Corton Les Perrières

Grand Cru 93 Points

An elegant Corton, with a touch of reduction on the first nose right now. It's sourced from mid-slope vines on stony soils, and has clear spicing with dark fruits and a menthol finish. The acidity holds it firmly in place to the point that it's pretty austere at the moment and it needs time in bottle.



Les Parcelles de Saulx, Sous le Bois de Noël et les Belles Filles, Pernand-Vergelesses **93 Points**

Pernand-Vergelesses is one of my favourite places on the Côte de Beaune. The gorgeously-named Sous le Bois de Noël et les Belles Filles climat (named, apparently, after romantic conquests in days gone by) faces east on a slope at an altitude of about 260m. It ripples with huge potential and is one to find at all costs. It's not giving a whole lot away right now: it's tightly bound but clearly hiding generous layers of stone fruit and freshly cut herbs.

Les Parcelles de Saulx, Nuits-St-Georges **92 Points**

A fairly classic Nuits-St-Georges, full of pretty dark cherry fruits and gentle tannins that offer grip through the body of the wine. A smoked caramel and woodsmoke hit on the finish adds a gourmet touch.



Les Parcelles de Saulx, Gevrey-Chambertin **91 Points**

Elegant and fleshy red fruits are married to power but balanced by a push of acidity through the finish that seems to tiptoe through the tannins.



Les Parcelles de Saulx, Volnay **90 Points**

Volnay makes some of the most enjoyable reds on the Côte de Beaune, and this is a lovely, delicate wine. There's good fruit here with clear acidity and firm but fleshy red fruits. Liquorice and crushed cranberry notes emphasise freshness and grip.

Les Parcelles de Saulx, Narvaux, Meursault **90 Points**

This good quality Meursault is from one of the most complex village plots, located on one of the higher, cooler spots just above the Genevrières and Bouchères premiers crus. The richness to the texture is not immediately clear and it's a little closed, but sit with it and things begin to open through the palate, finishing with an enjoyable kick.

