

# BEAUNE 1<sup>ER</sup> CRU

## BURGUNDY'S VALUE SWEETSPOT?

*“In terms of price versus quality, I think Beaune 1er Crus could be the greatest bargain in Burgundy today.”*

Bill Nanson

ROBERSON WINE

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# BEAUNE 1<sup>ER</sup> CRU HISTORY

Beaune is one of France's (and perhaps the world's) most beautiful wine towns. While Dijon and Auxerre to the north are the administrative hubs of the region, it is Beaune (and to a lesser extent Nuits-St-Georges) that is the Burgundy wine trade's nerve centre. The medieval architecture and glorious spectacle of the Hôtel de Dieu provide the backdrop to this sleepy town full of negotiant's head offices, wine shops and the restaurants and wine bars that fill up with tourists at certain times of the year.

The town has been at the centre of Burgundian life for thousands of years, but its importance really began to grow once the Dukes of Burgundy made it their capital during the middle ages. They fortified the town behind the beautiful castle walls that still encircle it today and planted the surrounding countryside to vines. When Philippe 'The Bold' decreed in 1395 that the "*disloyal Gamay*" must be ripped up - apparently it was guilty of "*very great and horrible harshness*" - the wines of Burgundy grew in stature until they were revered as the finest in France. It was this decree that served as a forerunner to the appellation system, as the Duke demanded that only Chardonnay and the Pinot family of grapes could be planted in the region's vineyards.

Beaune's status as the commercial hub and regional crossroads meant that the burgeoning wine negotiant companies made it their home. These businesses would buy fruit or wine from the thousands of local grape growers in the Côte de Beaune (Nuits became a smaller equivalent for the Côte de Nuits) and craft blended wines under the names of the region's famous villages, which were then sold throughout France and beyond. Over time the reputation of Burgundy's wines grew to such an extent that prices became high and the merchant class became one of the most powerful groups in the town. Some unscrupulous characters inevitably got involved in the business of selling wine that was not exactly what it purported to be - demand for Montrachet Blanc or Beaune Rouge was high, and adulteration became an essential way for some merchants to meet this demand. When phylloxera struck towards the end of the 19th century and Beaune's vineyards were devastated, these dodgy practices became even more of a problem, to the extent that adulteration developed into outright fraud. Just as the situation appeared to be improving, war broke out in 1914 and once hostilities ceased the situation got even worse - something needed to be done and during the 1920s a movement started to enshrine the integrity of Burgundy's various village wines in law. The Marquis d'Angerville in Volnay, Henri Gouges in Nuits-St-Georges and, to a lesser extent, Beaune's negotiant houses embarked on a campaign to have the Côte d'Or's vineyards classified and their names strictly protected. This all happened at the same time as the development of the appellation system, so the two initiatives became one and during the 1930s Burgundy's hierarchy of village, 1er and Grand Cru vineyards was put in place. Beaune - like Nuits and Volnay, the home villages of Gouges and Angerville - was left without any Grand Cru vineyards to boast of. Some say that this was a concession that the leading campaigners were prepared to accept in order to get the larger framework accepted into law. Some say the negociants thought their 'brand' names were far more important than the vineyard classification. Some say it is just because there isn't any *climats* in those villages that warrant Grand Cru status. It could well be the case that this was the moment that the red wines of Beaune - until this point some of Burgundy's most prestigious - began to slip down the pecking order due to the lack of a Grand Cru. Previously, the power of the Beaune based negociants had ensured that they received the patronage of the local nobility and the court of the French king, with Beaune being their most important product and one that was often lauded by the trend-setting classes (Champagne enjoyed similar patronage in Paris, which helped to establish its reputation). Now there were no Grand Cru sites, the attention shifted elsewhere and villages like Vosne-Romanée and Gevrey-Chambertin quickly rose to the top of the pile.

It is this slip down the notional hierarchy of communes that leads us to the premise for today's tasting. The prices of Beaune's wines have risen in the last 80 years just like all Burgundy has, but in relative terms that increase has not matched the hike in prices we have seen in the white wines of Puligny and Chassagne, or the reds from Vosne, Gevrey and Chambolle. Burgundy's wine route is amongst the best trodden path in the world of wine buying and there is very rarely the opportunity to discover a bargain or an unknown producer. Has Beaune been overlooked for too long? With its wide variety of 1er Cru climats and interesting growers, is the Côte d'Or's value sweetspot?

While Beaune is the Côte d'Or's third largest commune (after Meursault and Gevrey), it has the largest amount of 1er Cru vineyard by some distance. The 318ha classified as 1er Cru dwarfs the 95ha of village vines and forms the lion's share of the commune's land under vine, running from the border with Savigny-les-Beaune in the north to the border with Pommard in the south.

The terroir is predominantly clay over a limestone base, with shallow soils in the north of the appellation and deeper soils to the southern end. The central section of vineyards have higher gravel content and certain sections of the southern zone that feature lots of white marl. All in all, there is quite a lot of variance in the commune's terroir and this, combined with the large number of growers, serves to make the wines somewhat inconsistent. In order to look at this varying terroir in closer detail, we will follow the natural division that is brought about by the three valleys that the 1er Crus are spread across.

## Northern section

This part of the appellation has shallow clay soils, forcing the vines to burrow deep in to the limestone sub soil in order to find nutrients. This tends to yield wines of structure, but the southern exposure also allows for the vines to get to full ripeness in most years. The wines are often quite tough early in their lives, but in good vintages they can be amongst the most successful sites in the village.

Today we will be tasting examples from:

Les Marconnets (9.39 hectares)

This site is renowned for producing wines with excellent acidity with plenty of potential for development. The most northerly of Beaune's climats, Marconnets is similar in soil structure to certain sites further north (including Nuits Les Cailles) and it is often said that it gives wines close in style to the Côtes de Nuits, although these tend to come from the higher section of the vineyard as the lower section can suffer from flooding in wetter vintages.

Clos du Roi (8.41 hectares)

This site sits directly down the slope from Marconnets and part of it is classified as village rather than 1er Cru - which makes it all the stranger that it has this name, because Clos du Roi is usually reserved for one of the village's best vineyards. The higher, 1er Cru section, does yield some excellent wines but the vineyard is quite flat and suffers from a high water table that can make things difficult in hot vintages as the vines cannot get deep enough to fend off drought conditions. While Marconnets can produce wines with plump fruit, the Clos du Roi tends to give more earthy expressions of Pinot.

Les Perrieres (3.20 hectares)

This small site is high up on the slope and faces south-east. In days gone by, the land immediately to the north was used as a quarry and the soil here demonstrates why - it is higher in limestone content and very stoney, hence the name of the climat. The highest part of the vineyard is well exposed and gives wines with excellent acidity and minerality.

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## Central section

The geology changes as you move south into the central section, which was carved out of the hills by rivers on each side. The water has long since departed, but the alluvial element of the soils is evidenced by a much higher percentage of gravel in the vineyards. The most famous of these sites - Les Grèves - is considered by some to be the village's best site and both Clive Coates and Bill Nanson are of the opinion that this section gives the most complex wines of the commune. The slopes in the central section are particularly steep, and with the additional drainage power of the gravel, there is seldom an issue with ripeness or freshness.

Today we will be tasting examples from:

### Les Grèves (31.33 hectares)

This large vineyard covers a large chunk of the central section, with varying depths of soil and levels of clay. By and large though, the clay content is lower here and gravelly soil allows the roots to go very deep so neither drought nor rain pose too much of a problem. There is the issue of erosion to deal with high up the slope, but not so in the central part of the vineyard, where Bouchard have their Clos de l'Enfant Jesus - perhaps the village's most renowned red wine.

### Les Reversées (4.78 hectares)

Further to the south, but still just about in the central section, the slope broadens out and Reversées sits at the bottom of it, nearly getting to the outskirts of the town. This position on the slope means that the soils are quite deep here, with dark, clay rich soil having washed down from above. The wines are plump and fruity, but Coates does not see them as having the same potential or quality as Grèves or Teurons.

### Les Champs Pimont (16.25 hectares)

This is one of the larger 1er Cru sites and it stretches from the central section into the southern hemisphere of Beaune's vineyards. It is no surprise therefore that the terroir is variable and this is exacerbated by the change in aspect. Most of the vineyard faces in a predominantly easterly direction, but there are two terraces that face more to the south. As you move from north to south, the gravel content of the soil also decreases. The section bordering Les Avaux is where the most interesting wines come from.

## Southern section

As the vineyards get closer to Pommard the soils get deeper, the gravel content decreases and the clay content rises, giving wines that are towards the lighter end of the Pommard style spectrum. The majority of these sites sit on the curvature of the hill, so the aspect changes from due east to due south as you get closer to the border. The best examples are expansive, rich and full fruited in good vintages, if perhaps lacking the verve of wines from Grèves or Teurons. The lower vineyards are on very flat land however, and wines from these sites rarely reach impressive heights.

Today we will be tasting examples from:

### Les Aigrots (18.83 hectares)

To the north of Clos des Mouches is Les Aigrots, where the soils are sandier and thus the wines slightly lighter in body. The northern section of this site, where the aspect is east facing and the soils quite sandy, is more suited to the production of white wines, whereas the southern part is where most of the Pinot is planted.

### Clos des Mouches (26.16 hectares)

This site has become as famous for Drouhin's white wine as it has for Drouhin's red wine - the surprise to many is that it is actually produced by a number of other domaines too, it's just that own about half of the vines here. The northern-western section is higher up the slope, very stony and rich in white marl, so this is where the Chardonnay is planted. The central and lower sections are much richer in clay (although the limestone base is prevalent here) and this is where the Pinot is found.