THE WINES OF CORTON GRAND CRU
The history
Burgundy is, of course, a region with a long and distinguished history. Some of Europe’s most important figures have ruled over what is today’s Côte d’Or and many of them have played an important role in the development of Burgundian wine. One of these characters was Charles the Great (known as Charlemagne), King of the Franks and Holy Roman Emperor until his death in 814. Charlemagne ruled over his subjects with an iron fist and was renowned for his intimidating physical presence (6ft 4ins was very big in those days) and his love of fine food and wine. In the twilight of his life he was advised by his doctors to stop eating his beloved roast meats, but there was no chance that was happening. The story goes that Charlemagne spotted that following the winter, the snow melted first on the high slopes of the hill of Corton. Charlie thus decreed that this was the ideal place to plant grapes and the resulting wine would become his favourite. After many years of enjoying the rich red wines from Corton, his wife became worried that they were compromising his honour. Why? Because as his beard turned from red to white, the copious amounts he was consuming would end up staining his facial hair, leaving him looking a tad foolish. Mrs Charlemagne therefore persuaded him to have some of the red vines ripped up and replaced with white ones. Corton-Charlemagne was born. While this charming story may have some truth in it, there are very few historical records of white grapes being planted on Corton right up until the 1800s. What we do know is that Charlemagne definitely owned the land, as there is records of the section that constitutes much of today’s Corton-Charlemagne Grand Cru vineyard being bequeathed to the church in 775AD. This exact portion was then sold to what is now Domaine Bonneau du Martray following the French Revolution, meaning that it has had only three owners since its inception.

Since the early days, Corton has always had an excellent reputation. The famed commentator Andre Jullien ranked Corton as one of his ‘Vins rouge de premiere classe’ back in 1824, while Dr Lavalle was complementary about both the red and the whites of Corton in his 1856 work. Lavalle had ranked the vineyards on the hill into a four tier classification and this was broadly adhered to when the appellation boundaries were drawn up in the 1930s. However, trouble was brewing and years of legal wrangling would follow the first appellation decree. The problems stemmed from the fact that the hill of Corton rises up above three villages - Aloxe, Pernand and Ladoix. When the initial applications were being made for the classification of vineyards, landholders in all three villages made their applications, as although Aloxe had the lionshare of the hill, winemakers in Pernand and Ladoix had been labelling their wine as Corton for generations. Initially, in addition to the Aloxe vines, 28.7 hectares of Ladoix was give the right to use the Corton Grand Cru name, a decision which the residents of Aloxe immediately appealed against. Some of it was rescinded, leaving just the vineyard of ‘Le Rognet et Corton’ in the appellation. So then the Ladoix vigneron appealed and, by 1942, they had added the lieu-dit of Vergennes to the list. On the other side of the hill, a similar dispute was going on with Pernand, this time regarding the status of Corton-Charlemagne. At first, in 1934, the authorities sided with Aloxe and barred the ‘En Charlemagne’ lieu-dit from calling itself ‘Corton-Charlemagne’. This decision was reversed on appeal and in 1942 the decision went with Pernand! Expansions of the Grand Cru, in 1966 for Pernand and 1978 in Ladoix, have brought the total hectarage to just over 160 hecatres across the three villages and including Corton-Charlemagne and Charlemagne.
The vineyard
I say 'including Corton-Charlemagne and Charlemagne', because these are actually two separate Grand Cru appellations. Corton-Charlemagne can apply to any of the designated vineyards towards the top of the hill from Pernand all the way round to Ladoix. Charlemagne however, applies only to the lieu-dix of 'En Charlemagne' (Pernand) and 'Le Charlemagne (Aloxe). In reality, Charlemagne is almost never used and according to the official 2008 figures, just 7 hectolitres of wine was declared under the appellation (vs 2237 hectolitres of Corton-Charlemagne). The third possible white wine designation is Corton Blanc, which is wine made from Chardonnay grown further down the slope in the vineyards dominated by Pinot Noir. This is quite a rare wine, as only 162 hectolitres were declared in 2008 and while there are good examples to be found, it rarely reaches the qualitative heights of Corton-Charlemagne. As far as red is concerned, there is one catch all appellation - Corton - although the wide range of lieu-dix or climats are often used on the label to denote the specific origin of the wine.

A major quirk in the layout of Corton is that many of the vineyards qualify as both Corton and Corton-Charlemagne. When this is the case (as it is in parts of Pougets, Renardes, Le Corton, Rognets and a number of others), what matters is the grape variety. Pinot for Corton, Chardonnay for Corton-Charlemagne. It is interesting that, nowadays, the price of Corton-Charlemagne fruit is higher than Corton Rouge and a number of growers are considering (or have actioned) a shift from red to white in their plots of vines.

The terroir
The higher slopes on the hill are dominated by white marl soils that are rich in clay and on a limestone base. On the Pernand side of the hill the soil is very flinty, while elsewhere there is more clay. This manifests itself in a tighter, more austere style of wine above Pernand and broader, fuller (and often more simple) wines above Aloxe and Ladoix. The aspect of the vines is also important here, with much of the slope being south facing, but the vines above Pernand being very much of a westerly orientation and almost north facing on the appellation boundary.

Of course, for the quality of the red wines, almost exactly the opposite is required to the whites. For Pinot, the higher clay content in the soil and the southerly exposure is ideal for eking out the additional ripeness that would be impossible on the Pernand side of the hill. Thus the Ladoix and particularly Aloxe zones are where the best red wine vineyards are to be found, such as Renardes, Bressandes and Clos du Roi. All of these are situated at about 270-300 metres of altitude and produce the most complex and long lived examples of Corton Rouge.