

VOSNE-ROMANÉE

PEARL OF THE CÔTE

“Vosne-Romanée is the greatest Pinot Noir village on earth.”

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VOSNE-ROMANÉE HISTORY

For lovers of the world's finest wines, the village of Vosne-Romanée is a place of pilgrimage, with a vineyard-scape that includes some of the most hallowed (not to mention expensive) land in the world. While neighbouring Chambolle has the incredible Grand Cru of Musigny and Gevrey is rightfully proud of Chambertin and Clos de Bèze, Vosne can boast a roll-call of *climats* that are enough to make Burgundy geeks weak at the knees. Romanée-Conti, La Tâche, Richebourg, Romanée St-Vivant - these vineyards and the wines that come from them are the most sought after in the world. But Vosne is about more than just Grand Crus - the standard of wines across the board is exceptional; the village's cellars are occupied by some of Pinot Noir's master craftsmen, making village and 1er Cru wines that rightfully command high prices.

The village is mentioned in documents as early as the 3rd century, but when featured in the 'Chronicles of Bèze' in 650 it was spelt Vaona (which means forest), a name that would go through a number of subtle changes before Vosne was settled on. It was customary throughout much of history for religious orders to receive gifts of land and vineyards and so the founding of the priory of St-Vivant in 890 was when viticulture began to flourish. A large swathe of the village's best land was bequeathed to the abbeys of Cluny and Cîteaux, so before long the monks at the priory had sung into action and the resulting wines soon gained local repute.

Life continued like this for centuries, with the monks developing their knowledge of the village's land and perfecting the practice of viticulture, but during the 18th century things began to change, with a number of bourgeois families buying up available land. The Prince de Conti had purchased Romanée, while La Tâche and even Romanée St-Vivant (the church's back garden) had fallen into the hands of the rich. Most of what was left (including Richebourg) was owned by the church, but when the revolution began at the end of the century, both the wealthy and the church were stripped of their assets. In 1794, Romanée-Conti (the Prince had added his name) and La Tâche were sold at a national auction on the same day - they were merely the latest plots of land to go in the fire sale that followed the great terror.

Over time many of the vineyard holdings were broken up into smaller and smaller pieces thanks to the Napoleonic inheritance laws and some of the vineyard boundaries were redrawn (most notable La Tâche, which subsumed much of Les Gaudichots). In 1866 the village authorities decided to append the name of their most famous vineyard and became Vosne-Romanée, an action sparked by the neighbouring village of Flagey which had recently become Flagey-Echezeaux. Previously, the wines of Flagey had often been sold as Echezeaux or Nuits-Echezeaux, but once a couple of Vosne wines had been sold as Vosne-Echezeaux, the villagers of Flagey decided to act (although the denizens of Vosne were more than happy to go with the Romanée suffix). During this time there was plenty of needle between the two villages and even today they are separate communities in connotations some distance apart (Flagey is on the opposite side of the RN74). It is little more than the whims of fashion that phased out the use of Flagey for village and 1er Cru wines, and by the time the appellations were put in place during the 1930s, all of the Flagey vineyards except for Echezeaux and Grands Echezeaux were designated as Vosne-Romanée land for labelling purposes. Today, there are very few famous domaines in the village - Emmanuel Rouget being the only one of note.

As the 19th century progressed and turned into the 20th, Vosne was beset by the same problems as everywhere else in the region (and indeed, most of Europe). Mildew, phylloxera and two World Wars brought devastation in both an agricultural and economic sense. When Frank Schoonmaker came knocking on the growers' doors in the inter-war period, the prices being charged for Vosne's wines were derisory. The rise to prominence of Domaine de la Romanée-Conti and Henri Jayer ensured that by the time the millennium came around, the village's finest wines were the most expensive and highly prized in the world.



The total vineyard area of the commune's appellations is 229 hectares - 43% of village (99ha), 32% of 1er Cru (73ha) and 35% of Grand Cru (80ha) - an incredible number considering that this level of wine only represents 2% of Burgundy's total production. This figure is even higher (66%) when Flagey is considered on its own. When one considers that Gevrey-Chambertin has 410ha under vine it is perhaps easier to understand why the rarity of Vosne-Romanée wines has added to their lustre (and price tags) in a similar way to the whites of Puligny-Montrachet in the Côte de Beaune.

Despite the proximity of Vosne and Flagey, there are subtle differences in their terroir. While Flagey's vineyards range from a base level of about 250m and slope up to about 310m in altitude, the majority of Vosne's vineyards start from a much lower point - about 180m - before reaching the same height. The steeper slope means that much of the rocky scree soils (including alluvial sand and wash from higher up the valley) are washed down to the lowest part of the slope in Vosne, while in Flagey much of Echezeaux sits on these soils. The great Grand Crus of Vosne sit on more marl-based soils (Romanée-Conti) or limestone (La Romanée and La Tâche). Most of the 1er Crus vineyards from either side of the Vosne/Flagey border sit on oolite soils (sandy limestone), with the clay content increasing as you head further south towards Nuits-St-Georges - that is why 1er Crus like Malconsorts and Reignots combine a sense of power with their classic Vosne elegance.

In tonight's tasting we will look at four different village wines, each from a top producer in the village (well, Hudelot-Noellat's cellar is in the neighbouring village of Vougeot, although most of their vineyard holdings are in Vosne). There are five 1er Cru wines, four from the Vosne side of the village and one from Flagey. Finally, we have Echezeaux Grand Cru from Flagey. This selection is intended to represent a spectrum of terroirs as well as vintages.

Clos de Réas (2.12ha)

Starting at the southern end of the village, Clos de Réas borders Malconsorts to the west and the south-west tip of the vineyard touches the border with Nuits-St-Georges. The climat is a monopole, owned in its entirety by Michel Gros, who traded some of his inheritance of Richebourg to make sure he kept the site intact. It is the village's only 1er Cru monopole and was one of the first wines to be bottled by a grower themselves (it can be found on price lists as 'Domaine Louis Gros' as far back as the 1850s). It has been in the Gros family since 1860. This close to NSG, it is little surprise that the terroir is rich in clay and the wine sturdy in its build. Although Michel Gros also makes a wonderful Clos Vougeot, his Clos de Réas is considered his best wine in certain vintages.

VOSNE-ROMANÉE TERROIR

Aux Reignots (1.62ha)

The vines in Reignots are effectively a continuation of its neighbour to the east, La Romanée. As you move further up the slope the soil gets more sandy and the aspects turn more easterly - both factors that led to it achieving only 1er Cru status. This is, however, a top class site in the same part of the village as Petit-Monts and Cros Parentoux, and can produce spectacular wines in the right hands. The largest owner is Comte Liger-Belair and their wine and the wine of Sylvain Cathiard are among the best 1er Crus in the village. Both of these producers (and Domaine Robert Arnoux too) work the vineyard by horse due to the steep incline.

Aux Brulées (4.53ha)

The name originally means 'baked', as this plot is particularly well exposed high up on the cote, but despite getting a lot of sun there is also a steady breeze that flows down from the Hautes-Cotes above. The soil here is a combination of clay and limestone, giving fresh wines with no little body. There are also deposits of iron in the best parcels, which can infuse the wines with a dark minerality and extra weight - it is this propitious mix of soil types that has led to Brulées producing wonderful wines over the years and being held in high esteem by those documenting the vineyards down the centuries.

Les Suchots (13.07ha)

The village's largest 1er Cru is Les Suchots, and is another vineyard that was celebrated by experts of days gone-by like Dr Laval and Camille Rodier. This is no surprise when one considers Suchots illustrious neighbours - Romanée St-Vivant, Richebourg and Echezeaux. Being such a large site though, not all parcels are created equal and the eastern section of the vineyard (lower on the slope) has a trough that can have flooding problems in cool, wet vintages. Good bottles of Suchots are renowned for their spicey, exotic notes - aromas and flavours that represent the essence of Vosne-Romanée.

Beaux Monts (11.39ha)

This site - the lion's share of which is on the Flagey side of the village divide - was one of the original parcels worked by the monks of Citeaux. It is divided into four lieux-dits, but it is the Beaux-Monts Bas that is the most highly sought after zone, bordering Echezeaux to the east. The top soil in most of Beaux-Monts is actually quite shallow, so the limestone subsoil is reached pretty quickly and lends the wines a mineral freshness. This is balanced by iron deposits and enough clay content to bring a sense of breadth to the wines, the best of which (from the likes of Leroy, Dujac and JJ Confuron) can be superb.

Echezeaux (36.26ha)

The largest Grand Cru in the Côte de Nuits (Clos de Vougeot excepted), Echezeaux is comprised of eleven sub-climats and each has its own characteristics - to the extent that we dedicated an entire tasting to the vineyard a couple of years ago! The majority of DRC's Echezeaux vines are located in the climat of 'Les Poulailles' (they own 81% of this 5.21ha section). This part of the vineyard has rocky marl soils - excellent Pinot Noir terrain - and their shallow nature means the roots plunge quickly into a limestone base that has excellent water retention and subsequently there is very little hydric stress here in the warmest vintages. This climat is effectively an extension of Grands Echezeaux and there are similarities between the two DRC wines - full and rich but with remarkable finesse and potential for ageing.