

THE SECOND 2004 VINTAGE

Burgundy is a magnet for new world winemakers bitten by the Pinot bug, intent on learning the secrets of this most traditional and famous of wine regions. We Australians have a particular advantage because, with our seasons opposed to the northern hemisphere, we can go and be part of a second vintage in the same year, while the vines at home are just emerging from winter dormancy and the previous vintage wines are sitting quietly in barrel.

The 2004 vintage in Burgundy will end up being a surprisingly good one, for the cool grey summer was followed by a magically warm and dry autumn. The best wines will come from the domaines that escaped the hail and managed the disease pressures well, and my friend Dominique, vineyard manager at Château de Pommard, scored well on both counts.

Vintage began a little late this year and I was able to spend some days in the vines before harvest. Days spent doubled over the low vines, cutting out botrytis (grey rot) infected bunches and plucking off leaves in the bunch zone, making the fruit easier to find for the pickers, and quicker to dry in case of rain.

The contrast to our vineyard at Mount Majura, where the vines are tall, botrytis is rare, and leaf plucking must be done much earlier to avoid sunburn, reinforces how different the climates and methods of vineyard management are.

In the softer Burgundy climate, where lack of rain doesn't drive the roots deeper in search of water, ploughing is used to cut off the surface roots, as well as control weeds. Deep rooting is a key objective because the true expression of terroir, the ultimate goal in Burgundy, is thought to depend on the roots meeting the geology of the subsoil and bedrock.

Close vine planting (10,000 vines per hectare are required by law) causes competition between vines, also helping force roots down, but unfortunately not enough competition to reduce vigour, so that to arrive at their exemplary canopies, Burgundian vigneron spend many hours thinning shoots and trimming vines to stay within the capacity of the low trellises. The shoots branch, and branch again, making a high level of second crop and immature leaves that compete with the primary crop for precious ripening energy. It is a vineyard system that clearly involves difficulties, but is the result of many centuries' experience and is probably the best system possible for Burgundy, where Pinot is able to make such extraordinary wines, with such fascinating expression of the differences between terroirs.

The contrast with our vineyard system at Mount Majura is quite stark. We plant only one quarter as many vines per hectare, giving each enough room to attain a natural balance, limiting vigour and second crop, and largely avoiding the need for trimming. The vines are forced to root deeply in search for water, so the inter-row space can be under permanent grass cover, protecting it from erosion. The wider rows allow a higher trellis with a vertically divided canopy, so that shoot density is reduced and less work is needed thinning shoots and plucking leaves by hand, yet the bunches are open to air and sunlight. It soon becomes clear that one doesn't go to Burgundy to learn "secrets" or copy individual practices – viticulture and winemaking are such a complex of inter-related natural influences and management practices, that a whole system is developed to suit the climate, soil and culture, and should not be translated.

Similar contrasts arise in the winery. With the high load of botrytis-infected and under-ripe bunches in Burgundy, the quality-conscious producers pick the grapes into small cases which are emptied by hand onto the *table de tri*, a conveyor belt where each bunch is examined and up to half the crop might be discarded or downgraded. There is not much point introducing such a labour-intensive operation in a quality-conscious Australian operation where the incidence of botrytis is very low and the crop is harvested fully ripe.

Rather than picking up "secrets", what I have learned most from working vintages in Burgundy, is an understanding of the profound importance of origin, of terroir in the winemaking philosophy. I don't go in order to learn how to make my wines more like Gevrey Chambertin or Pommard, rather how to make them more clearly Mount Majura!

The Burgundians see the variety as incidental to the place of origin of the wine – they are not trying to make Pinot Noir wines, but use this variety because it has shown itself to be a sensitive translator of the differences in soil and mesoclimate between small identified vineyard areas. Everything is driven by the desire to respect these influences of the site of origin and to allow them to be expressed. There is even a view that the first requirement of a wine is typicity, fidelity to its terroir,

and only then is quality to be considered.

I was a little shocked to be told that in Australia, “you have no terroir”. On further investigation, this arose from two conceptions: firstly that Australia is some vast, uniform, sundrenched and irrigated plain, and secondly, even where there are differences in topography, geology and climate, that we haven’t had the length of experience to understand this landscape and discern the boundaries between terroirs. Fortunately neither is completely true, and some Australian and New Zealand regions (Coonawarra, Heathcote and Martinborough come quickly to mind) are *based on* terroir.

We now have over thirty years experience (in the modern era) with winemaking in the Canberra District. At last count there were eighty-five vineyards, planted on a range of soil types and over a significant spread of altitudes. Winemakers around the District are comparing and discussing the characteristics of wines from each of the different sites. At Mount Majura Vineyard, we have a patch of soil that is different to the surrounding country, and we aim to make wines that express this site, and even the differences within it. The soils are red (due to the high iron content of the parent volcanic rock), relatively high in clay, as well as being over a narrow belt of limestone. The vines are planted up a slope from 660 to 700 metres altitude, with the slope facing generally east but ranging from southeast in the Pines block through to northeast at the end of the North block.

We haven’t had the benefit of many centuries of experience, but we’re making up for it by looking very closely at what our vines and our wines are telling us. And after receiving the compliment from a new friend, Sam, that I was “*le plus bourguignon des vigneronns australiens*”, I know I’ll be back to keep looking closely at Burgundy too.

Frank van de Loo
Mount Majura Vineyard



Checking a wooden vat about to be filled. (L-R) Sam, Frank and Dominique.