



NAVIGATING THE NÉGOCIANTS

Learn about these grower-sellers to get a better understanding of Burgundy.

BY ANNE KREBIEHL, MW

Traditionally, négociants were merchants who didn't own or farm vineyards. They bought wines from small farmers and then blended, matured and sold them under their own names. Until the 1970s, this was the principal business model of Burgundy, and it often represented the only route to market for peasant growers. Bigger growers had bottled and sold their own wines for a while.

In the 1980s, more small growers began to bottle and sell wines under their own labels. A few decades later, that practice had changed their fortune and created a flowering of quality and stylistic diversity. As these estate-bottled wines became available, most of the hype was about them. It still is. For some reason, bigger négociants seemed less exciting. Some négociants had a bad name because they traded only on Burgundy's name and didn't uphold its quality.

Those languished, while others went for uncompromising quality. The best have a great track record and impressive vineyard holdings across the region. They're known as négociants-éleveurs, or merchant-growers, who make wines from their own vineyards and purchased grapes.

Today, the wines from these merchant-growers can represent excellent value, especially now that bottles from the most sought-after small estates have become eye-wateringly expensive and sold on allocation only. Burgundy has 3,577 estates that bottle their own wine. These are spread across 84 different appellations and 74,260 acres of vineyard, all of which really can be confusing. A good place to start is to get to know four historic négociants and why they're important to the region's past and present.



Workers at Louis Latour around 1905



Cuverie et Caves de Corton Grancey

Louis Latour's Cuverie Corton Grancey

CONSISTENCY IS KEY FOR LOUIS LATOUR

The Latour family has owned vineyards in the region since 1731 and founded this house in 1797. It also continues its legacy as a cooperage. The family continued to acquire vineyards and, by 1860, exported Burgundian wines as far afield as the U.S., Argentina and England. Buoyed by that success, Latour became a négociant business in 1867.

It's run today by Louis-Fabrice Latour, who represents the family's 11th generation at the helm. He says that Louis Latour owns 119 acres of vineyards across 24 appellations of the Côte d'Or, and it buys grapes from 2,470 acres in 130 different appellations. All this adds up to an annual production of five million bottles. Notably, the firm owns more than 62 acres of grand cru vineyards. "The challenge is to keep consistency in both style and the quality across the range," he says.

"Contrary to what people may think, it is a challenge to make a very good Bourgogne Pinot Noir assembling different wines from different growers". That the firm makes wines across Burgundy, also from lesser-known appellations, and markets them through the Latour brand also presents value for growers.

"The Latour name is on the label whatever the vintage or appellation, and we have to preserve it through quality," says Latour. "Our clients will be more likely to buy an appellation they are not familiar with because they know Louis Latour, they know our style."