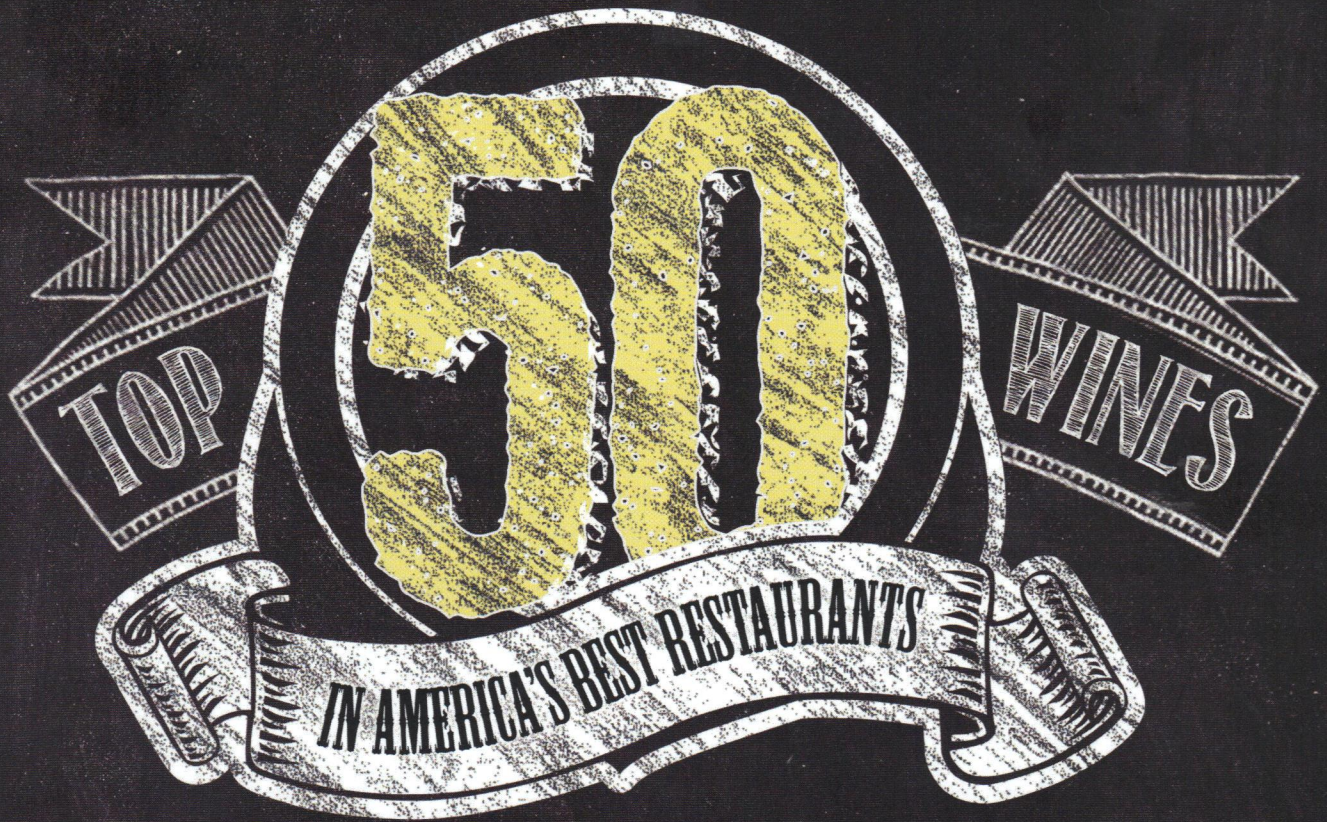


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Burgundy's **Southern Côte**

Pouilly-Fuissé recovers its lost prestige



Domaine Cornin includes plots in Chaintré's Clos Reyssier and Les Chevrières, both up for premier cru recog



by Roger Morris

“It is from the Mâcon Slope that one of the best white Burgundies comes, in a rolling valley half a dozen miles west of Mâcon. It is the first truly southern valley in Burgundy, where people speak more slowly and more quietly, and the men wear berets creased into peaks to shield their eyes from the glaring sun.”

—Alexis Lichine, *The Wines of France*

Once featured in the front windows of top wine shops, Pouilly-Fuissé may soon be back: By 2014, the Institut National de l’Origine et de la Qualité (INAO) is expected to elevate up to 14 of the region’s vineyards to premier crus.

Pouilly-Fuissé’s current status as an also-ran in the pantheon of Burgundy’s classic chardonnay-based wines has not historically been the case. From the 1950s well into the 1970s, Pouilly-Fuissé was *tout le rage* of the American country club set. There was no white wine competition from such New World redoubts as the Russian River Valley or Marlborough, and Chablis at the time was producing little wine, especially for export. But, as so often happens, demand for the wine led to over-production, which, combined with America’s blossoming love affair with big, creamy California chardonnays, made Pouilly-Fuissé increasingly *passé*.

“Because it was so easy to sell everything, it resulted in the mass marketing of Pouilly-Fuissé, and very little of it was estate bottled,” explains Frédéric-Marc Burrier, head of Maison Joseph Burrier and president of the Union des Producteurs de Pouilly-Fuissé.

Burrier is the man most responsible for trying to raise Pouilly-Fuissé to its former status—and perhaps even higher. “We can’t compete with the wines from up north without this classification,” he says, pointing out the history that led to the current state of affairs. When Burgundy’s grand cru vineyards were officially recognized in the late 1930s, there was no classification of premier cru wines. Nevertheless, several white wine vineyards along the Côte d’Or and in the Mâconnais were allowed to list their names on their labels in addition to the local village name since they had a historical recognition as de facto crus. In the Mâconnais, only the wines of Pouilly-Fuissé were accorded such status.

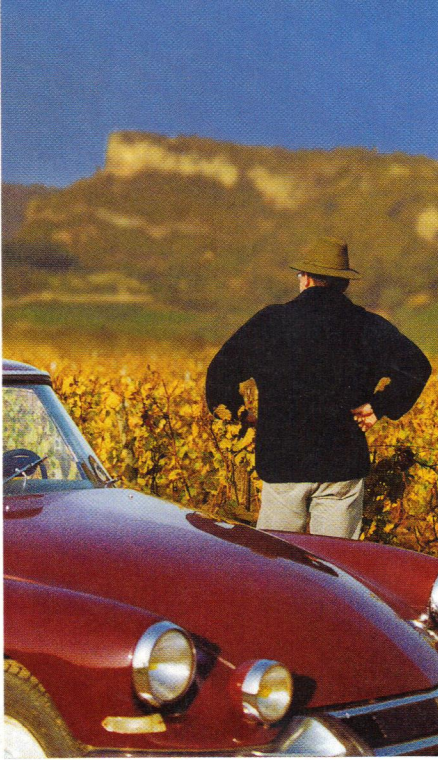
When France surrendered after the German invasion of 1940, all of northern and western France, including most of Burgundy, was occupied by German troops, with the rest of the country being led by the German-supported Vichy government. Chablis, the Côte d’Or and the Côtes Chalonnais were all in the occupied zone, while the Mâconnais, including Pouilly-Fuissé, was in the *zone libre*. In 1942, Burrier says, a law was passed in occupied Burgundy to recognize premier cru vineyards, primarily as a means to raise additional tax revenues. Most of these new premier crus were historically recognized as just a step beneath the grands crus. But since Pouilly-Fuissé wasn’t part of the occupied zone, it was left out of the classification.

“Not a lot of people complained at the time,” Burrier says, “because they didn’t have to pay the extra taxes.” It was a time of war and extreme economic distress, and not surprisingly, few in Pouilly-Fuissé worried about bragging rights and future marketing clout. Then, after the liberation of France in 1944, the ability to easily sell Pouilly-Fuissé as affordable white Burgundy kept producers satisfied.

Even recently, the momentum to work toward premier status hasn’t been universally well received. “We started the process to get premier cru status in 2007,” Burrier says. “We didn’t have to convince the INAO. We had to convince our own people. We had to explain to some of them what a premier cru was.”

“Some [local producers] were initially hostile to actual recognition of premier crus,” says Audrey Braccini of Domaine Ferret, who has vineyards in the communes of Fuissé and Vergisson and who has joined the steering committee. She says it took several years of cajoling while the committee continued to survey plots and to document winemaking practices, soils and subsoils as well as tastings of the different *climats* through a range of vintages.

The proposal they’ve drawn up tracks the geological formation of Pouilly-Fuissé through four evolutionary stages. The first was the gradual recession of the primordial sea that covered most of France 200 million years ago during the Mesozoic period. When the surface of the land broke through, about 65 million years ago, it was covered with deposits of skeletal marine life (limestone) and clay that gradually eroded into valleys. This period was followed by a violent geophysical upheaval, as tectonic plates collided so forcefully they pushed up the Alps in the east and the less-majestic Massif Central in the west. Subsequent disruptions created a range of



hills running north-south through Burgundy, followed by an onslaught of glaciers—the last major movement—which rounded everything off to form the region’s *côtes*.

Pouilly-Fuissé itself lies at the southern terminus of this rich vein of limestone, and here the violent geological forces left behind two stunning stone promontories—the widely visible Roche de Vergisson and the Roche de Solutré, both in the northern part of the region. The rock of Solutré, the southernmost of the two, has the greater lore. In 1866, archaeologists found skeletons of more than 1,000 horses and reindeer at the base of its cliff, presumably driven by Stone Age hunters up the gentler back slope to plunge to their deaths.

Huddled around these outcroppings today are the vineyards of two of the four communes that make up Pouilly-Fuissé: Vergisson and the combined village of Solutré-Pouilly. Fuissé is just south and then there’s Chaintré, close to the northern reaches of Beaujolais. Of the 14 *climats* nominated for premier cru status, Solutré-Pouilly and Fuissé each have four and

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also share one; three are in Vergisson and two in Chaintré.

The selection of vineyards nominated for INAO consideration was based primarily on historical reputation dating back before World War II and the establishing of Burgundy AOCs in the 1930s. Many of the vineyards were cited by post-war writers such as Lichine, and their names have appeared on bottles underneath the words “Pouilly-Fuissé.”

Producers from Pouilly-Fuissé *climats* recognized by critics and the marketplace as being of superior quality welcome comparisons with the great white wines of Côte d’Or. Dominique Cornin, who with his son Romain uses biodynamic principles for Domaine Cornin wines from the Mâconnais and Beaujolais, says, “Some Pouilly-Fuissé has the same generosity as a Meursault, while others, such as our Pouilly-Fuissé Chevrières, that are grown on limestone, are more comparable to a Puligny-Montrachet.” Grape growing and winemaking are similar in both regions, Cornin says, and “taste and aging [potential] are similar, except when Pouilly-Fuissé is young, it is more fruity than a wine from Côte d’Or, but they are comparable after some years.” Burrier states flatly, “We believe there is as much potential in the Mâconnais as there is in the Côte d’Or.”

It is not yet certain what winegrowing regulations will accompany premier cru recognition, though Burrier says they have based their proposal on the requirements for premier crus in Burgundy (village wines at 60 hectoliters per hectare and premier crus at 58, and minimum natural alcohol potential, or ripeness, at 11 percent volume for village and 12 percent for premier cru).

For now, it is a waiting—and guessing—game. The INAO can decide to accept a *climat* in total or in part, excluding portions it deems less desirable. Or it might even add some vines from a secondary vineyard contiguous to a famous one. “The INAO will try to reduce the size of the premier cru areas, but we will argue,” Burrier says. “As you can see, nothing is easy and simple,” he says. “That is part of the *charme* of Burgundy!” ■

“Some Pouilly-Fuissé has the same generosity as a Meursault, while others that are grown on limestone, are more comparable to a Puligny-Montrachet.” —Dominique Cornin

