

Book Reviews

Author, Title	Reviewer
Charles Curtis <i>The Original Grand Crus of Burgundy</i>	John W. Haeger
Denton Marks <i>Wine and Economics: Transacting the Elixir of Life</i>	Peter Pedroni
Suzanne Mustacich <i>Thirsty Dragon: China's Lust for Bordeaux and the Threat to the World's Best Wines</i>	Stephen Chaikind
Michael C. Qian and Thomas H. Shellhammer (eds.) <i>Flavor Chemistry of Wine and Other Alcoholic Beverages</i>	Lawrence R. Coia

CHARLES CURTIS: *The Original Grand Crus of Burgundy*. WineAlpha, New York, 2014, 257 pp., ISBN 978-0-9906844-0-4 (paperback), \$19.99.

Throughout the wine world, Burgundy is everyone's poster child for rational, *terroir*-driven site delimitation and vineyard classification: a *découpage* of about a hundred appellations and at least another thousand individual site names (*lieux dits*) arranged in a neat hierarchy of qualitative tiers. Other regions treat Burgundy as their prime example of how to do it right, idealizing the monks who are said to have paid close attention to sites and wines as early as the twelfth century, the Burgundian dukes who legally protected Pinot Noir against "lesser" grape varieties, and the consistency of "local, loyal, and long-standing practices" that survived cataclysmic regime changes to become embedded in controlled appellation law when it was promulgated in the 1930s. Burgundian arrangements have been used as a reference point from Alsace to Barolo, and Burgundian terminology is self-consciously echoed in the Erste Lage and Grosse Lage rubrics recently embraced by Germany's Verband Deutscher Prädikatsweingüter.

Although Burgundian arrangements were not codified until the twentieth century, it is generally conceded that much of their foundation was laid a good deal earlier. To

explore that turf and identify what he calls “original *grand crus*”—that is, de facto *grands crus* before the advent of the *appellation d’origine contrôlée* (AOC) schema—Charles Curtis presents English translations of extracts from two eighteenth-century, four nineteenth-century, and one early twentieth-century French works. Of these, only one, as far as I know, has been rendered previously in English (André Jullien, *Topographie de tous les vignobles connus* [1816]), so the mere fact of translation, even of short excerpts, should be useful to anglophone readers. Chapters 1–5 consist of thread text by Curtis about each work and its author(s), woven around short translated excerpts. The authors bring quite different personal and professional backgrounds to their interest in Burgundy’s vineyards, and these differences mark their respective works. Chapters 6–22 follow the same pattern of thread text and excerpts, but each of these chapters is geographically delimited, beginning in the north with the Côte Dijonnaise and ending at the south end of the Côte d’Or, at Santenay, facilitating attention to commune-specific details. In chapters 1–5, the thread is a good introduction to the sources and their authors who, apart from Jullien, are not especially well known. Some of the translated excerpts are unremarkable; it is not surprising to learn, for example, that “the people of Beaune [ca. 1780] believe themselves in exclusive possession of the best wines of Burgundy” (p. 21). However, much of this material is keenly interesting and occasionally startling as historical documentation. Consider, for example, that Denis Morelot railed as early as 1831 against “greedy proprietors” who “cover their supposedly weak vineyards in manure” and “propagate by layering more vines than they should” so that their grapes “contain above all water and vegetable proteins” and are produced in “over-abundant” quantity (p. 38). In addition, winemakers in the nineteenth century were sugaring their musts “even in hot years” (p. 42). Finally, landholding patterns, at least according to Morelot, differed significantly and consequentially between the Côte de Nuits and the Côte de Beaune, the latter “incredibly fragmented,” leading to more blended wines, whereas the very best wines “that come from the same cru” were mostly from the Côte de Nuits (p. 44). There is also Jules Lavalley’s assertion, quoted on p. 51, that by 1855, vineyard surface planted to Gamay was almost 10 times greater than the surface devoted to Pinot Noir, largely (it is implied) because of excruciatingly low yields for Pinot, averaging just 18 hectoliters per hectare, or about half of what is typical today in *premier cru* vineyards. Historians know that Pinot lost ground to Gamay after the French Revolution, but the extent of the loss may have been understated.

In chapters 6–22, Curtis takes excerpts primarily from those parts of Jullien’s, Morelot’s, and Lavalley’s works where the authors have grouped their vineyard descriptions into qualitative categories (e.g., Tête de Cuvée, 1ère Cuvée, 2ème Cuvée, etc.), because it is aggregation of such assessments that drives Curtis’s own list of the “original *grand crus*.” The nineteenth-century groupings are generally consistent with modern classification and therefore confirm the proposition that most highly classified sites were known as such at least a century before the AOC work was done in the 1930s, but Curtis notes the exceptions carefully, especially where important vineyards are concerned, pointing out that some differences between

unofficial nineteenth century and official twentieth century reflect altered footprints for the *crus* concerned. For example, Les Gaudichots was not part of La Tâche in Lavallo's time but had been combined with it by the 1930s. Similarly, Les Véroilles, a separate *cru* in the nineteenth century, was made part of Les Richebourgs in the twentieth century. There is also abundant evidence, however, that nineteenth-century authors attached great importance to proprietorship. In their lists for each commune, Jullien, Morelot, and Lavallo listed the owners of each *cru* by name, along with the precise size of each owner's holdings, sometimes making clear that changes of ownership had affected the quality of the wines produced. For example, "during the time that Clos-du-Roi [in Chenôve] was owned by the crown, the vines harvested there enjoyed a very high reputation"—a reputation that was subsequently lost (p. 73). This preoccupation with ownership is more, I think, than a reflection of the wholesale changes that followed the French Revolution. It is also quiet confirmation that Roger Dion (1896–1981) and Jean-Robert Pitte have been at least partially correct when they have argued that proprietors' ability and willingness to invest in their vineyards is a more powerful determinant of wine quality than the intrinsic properties of *terroir*, a proposition vehemently contested by most "terroirists." Jullien, Morelot, and Lavallo were also very conscious of heterogeneity within individual *crus*. For example, notwithstanding that no fewer than 34 different *climats* can be found within the walled 50-hectare surface of Clos Vougeot, and that per Lavallo "the upper parts give a wine that is very fine and delicate, [whereas] the lower parts ... give inferior wine" (p. 28), Vougeot has consistently been treated as a single *cru* for classification purposes. Alas for logic, one *cru* is not always one *climat* or vice versa.

By its nature, *The Original Grands Crus of Burgundy* is not an easy read and is perhaps better sampled than read cover to cover. However, there is fascinating content here, great attention to detail, and a potent reminder that the exceptional individuals who wrote extensively about Burgundy's vineyards in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are a source for much more than information about *crus* and classifications. Jullien, Morelot, and Lavallo were witnesses to evolutions in viticulture, wine making, and economic history writ large. If the excerpts from their work that Curtis has translated and annotated stimulate more attention to the original works than they have received to this point, our understanding of the transition from the Ancien Régime to the nineteenth century may be improved.

John W. Haeger
Stanford University
jwhaeger@gmail.com
doi:10.1017/jwe.2016.7