



THE SPECTATOR

GUIDE TO CRUISES

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PASSENGERS AND CRU

BARGES AND BURGUNDY
ARE A CIVILISED COMBINATION

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Complex subject, Burgundy wine. Mon Dieu! I had no idea there was so much to it. By about Thursday of our Grand Cru canal barge tour along Burgundy's Côte d'Or, with talks, lectures and tastings, some afloat, some ashore, some deep underground in musty medieval cellars, the old bonce was ready to explode with all the information I was trying to cram in about *climats*, *terroirs*, *vignobles*, and viticulture in general. Not to mention the exciting and bloody history of the Ducs de Borgogne in the 14th and 15th centuries, lectures on which they gave us for 'relaxation' in between.

We were five passengers on the 128-foot luxury canal barge, plus six crew, including a top-drawer chef. In France a canal barge equipped for guests goes by the poncey term *péniche-hôtel*; the interior décor theme of ours was Louis XV. There was also a swimming pool, six feet six inches deep at one end, in which you could do three strokes from one side to the other, and when we were moored in towns it drew scoffers and admirers alike to the quayside. Our route was Canal du Centre east to Chalon; the Saône river north to St Jean de Losne; and the Canal du Borgogne as far as Dijon. In other words, we traced the foot of the 70 km long, two km wide limestone escarpment known as the Côte d'Or, which produces 32 of the 33 Burgundy Grands Crus.

Our barge was called the *Amaryllis*, one of Afloat in France's fleet of five *péniche-hôtels*. The moment we stepped aboard we were handed a glass of champagne and introduced to Jean-Pierre Cropsal, wine expert, Burgundy patriot and for us novices a John the Baptist figure — a preparer of the way. I thought he was the

village idiot at first. But he turned out of those Gallic holy innocents that I seem to always meet when I go to France. And he was the best and most sure-footed introduction to the subject of Burgundy wine, or wine full stop, that you could possibly imagine.

Jean-Pierre Cropsal is neither tall nor thin. He is bald. His eyes are alarmingly magnified by his glasses. I can see him now, slopping an inch of, say, Criots-Batard-Montrachet 2009, into a glass and raising it aloft like a prize and twirling it at an alarming speed. He addresses us in his punctiliously pronounced English.

'Hill of the bastard. Less than a hectare. The rarest wine in the world. I always look for the weakness in this wine, for the crack in the armour, but alas I can never...' Then he plunges his hooter in to the glass mid-sentence because he can't wait a second longer. He carefully breathes in the fumes. We wait. Now he takes a mouthful, swills toothily, swallows. A long pause. Now he seems to be struggling against powerful and turbulent emotions and he puts a hand on the table to support himself. Staggered by the excellence of this wine, he can't speak formally. He can only mutter to himself: '*Oh! C'est fantastique, ça!*' Then he recovers and is back in character. 'Ladies and gentlemen this wine is truly remarkable. A pure wonder. Crazy! Next time I see Richard Fonteyn, I'll say, 'Richard! Once again it's perfect!''

Jean-Pierre lectured to us twice at the beginning of the cruise and turned up again in mid-week — now rather surprisingly dressed as an English country gentleman, and took us down into the famous cellars under the ancient fortress town of Beune. The walls ◆◆

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of the cellars were medieval walls built on Roman walls built on Celtic walls. As he led us between the mouldy stacks, he picked out a blackened bottle here, then another, even filthier one there, purely on a whim it seemed, and he charged us with carrying them back to his ninth-century classroom horizontally, so as not to disturb the sediment. Back in his classroom he used a pointing stick to indicate the various communes on the wall maps, and we opened these old bottles one by one and drank them to his scintillating and omniscient commentary. I felt like an Alexander having the good fortune to be educated by Aristotle. He chose for me a Vosne-Romanée Les Beaumonts 1985, a Premier Cru. Oddly enough I enjoyed this particular red more than any of the Grands Crus.

For Jean-Pierre Cropsal, terroir is everything. The grape is merely a vector for translating terroir into wine. 'Pinot noir is blotting paper. It is the soil that speaks. Plant pinot noir on a rubbish heap and you will get rubbish wine. Accept this notion and you have the key to Burgundian wine.'

And this is how devoted Jean Pierre is to terroir. He will take a new class of wine students out to the Bienvenu-Batard-Montrachet vineyard and make them each eat a handful of soil as their first lesson. And although he knew everything about Burgundy wine (to the point of confessing to knowing nothing), and he was viscerally passionate about his Burgundy, he was never a bore. 'The wine in your glass is either good or it's not good. Simply be with your glass. Believe in your first impression. Do

not intellectualise. Wine is above all a pleasure.'

Perfectly armed now by Jean-Pierre's Burgundian attitude to *vin*, we did the rounds of the chateaus and vineyards, eventually supping all 33 Grand Crus with famous Borgogne wine tribunes such as Veronique Drouhin, Phillippe and Christine Drouhin, and Laurent and Claude Ponsent. Usually we went over to their place for dinner, then they came to ours. We were nodding with these luminaries over their Grands Crus as though we were all old muckers. Most of us spat out the tastings or swallowed only a single small mouthful. I preferred to knock mine back. Especially after learning that the Grands Crus comprise only 2% of the total Burgundian wine output and that they can be very expensive.

All right, vulgar question, I said, at dinner on the last night, but how much is this little number, for example, per bouteille? At the time we all had our noses in a Romanée-Conti '63. In English pounds, they said? Four grand to you. That's if you can get hold of any. Double that in a restaurant. A single hectare of vines at Pulney-Montrachet recently sold at auction for over 20 million euros.

The Romanee-Conti '63 wasn't bad. But four grand! Hearing this only confirmed my growing suspicion that there are certain things that civilised people take for granted that I can never know, understand or even guess at. ●

Six nights from £6,440pp, including return Eurostar fares and transfers (0845 077 2222; www.afloatinfrance.com).

French idyll: life on the Côte d'Or (left); the *Amaryllis* (top right); breakfast on board (above)

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