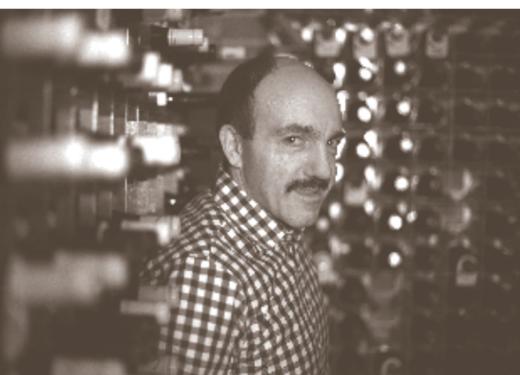


The *Hospices de Beaune* wine auction

By GERARD BASSET OBE

EVERY YEAR IN THE BEAUTIFUL TOWN OF BEAUNE, THE WINE CAPITAL OF BURGUNDY, THE WORLD'S MOST FAMOUS WINE AUCTION OCCURS: THE HOSPICES DE BEAUNE WINE AUCTION. IT IS AN IMPORTANT OCCASION IN THE WINE CALENDAR AND IT IS THE CENTRAL PART OF 'LES TROIS GLORIEUSES'.



Taking place on the third weekend of November, 'Les Trois Glorieuses' wine festival consists of three main events. The celebration starts on the Saturday afternoon with the pre-tasting of the new wines from 'The Hospices' and in the evening there is a formal gala dinner inside 'The Chateau du Clos de Vougeot', the historic building within the famous 'Clos de Vougeot' vineyard created by the Cistercian monks. The Sunday afternoon is reserved for the wine auction and the festivities conclude on Monday by 'La Paulée' a very relaxed banqueting lunch taking place in the wine village of Meursault.

In 1443 Nicolas Rolin, Chancellor at the Court of Philippe Le Bon Duke of Burgundy, decided to establish a hospital to take care of the ill and the poor of this period. This hospital, called 'Hotel-Dieu', was completed in 1451. It is an impressive building with a superb architecture and is now a museum that can be visited. As it is not difficult to imagine it is an extremely popular attraction with a huge number of tourists all year around.

This charitable institution was, and still is, financed in part by the sales of the wines made from the donated vineyards. The first vineyard was donated in 1457 and more vineyards have been donated to the Hospices de Beaune, by many benefactors, over the following five centuries.

The wines of the Hospices were historically sold by private sale to local merchants, but after the French Revolution new methods were introduced. The changes culminated in 1859 with the wines produced from the different vineyards belonging to the Hospices being sold by auction for the first time. Each lot of wine was sold by a system using candle flames to conduct the auction. This candle system 'A la bougie' was still in use until very recently. From 1899 onwards, each wine (known as a Cuvée) has carried the name of a generous benefactor of the Hospices, for instance Beaune Cuvée Nicolas Rolin.

Having experienced some patchy results, some questions were being asked about the way the auction was conducted. In 2005, on the occasion of 145th auction, Christie's was appointed to organise the wine auction of The Hospices de Beaune, and to open the sale up, so that private individuals could take part and not just wine professionals as it was the case until then. In our digital era, Christie's brought in more modern ways to bid for the wines and gave a new impetus to the auction. It is fair to say that the involvement of Christie's and its wine consultant, Master of Wine, Anthony Hanson, one of the true Burgundy wine experts, has been very beneficial for the auction.

Today, the estate of the Hospices de Beaune owns over 60 hectares of vineyards, and 85% are First Growths, or Great Growths. 22 wine-growers (vignerons) look after the different vineyards and an Oenologist-Manager looks after making the different cuvées. Until 2005 each cuvée used to be put into new oak barrels but now, depending on the style of the wine, it can be either new oak barrels or barrels which have been used before and therefore don't impart too strong oaky flavours. Potential customers or their representatives have the opportunity to taste each cuvée the day before the auction takes place. The Sunday the auction is conducted and the wines sold are allocated to the successful bid winners. Each cuvée might consist of several barrels but it is possible to bid for just one barrel called "piece" (equivalent to 24 cases of 12 bottles or 288 bottles) at the time.

Thereafter, bid winners are then offered options of some wine producers who would be prepared to mature and when ready bottle their wines. Each wine will bear the name of the appellation it comes from (i.e Beaune, Meursault, Pommard, others...), the historical name of the benefactor and also the name of the buyer or any brand the buyer wishes to see on the label, so long as it can fit in with the official labelling regulations. Once bottled, roughly just under two years later, the wines will be sent to the bid winners. Of course, the wines will not be ready to drink and in most vintages will require cellaring for a few more years.

Personally, I cannot go every year to this incredible wine weekend extravaganza but I certainly keep fond memories

of when I attended. And when it comes to the Hospices de Beaune wine auction itself it is so exciting to witness the fervour of the people participating.

Receiving the finished wines is also a wonderful feeling as an emotional bond has been created with the wines and not just because of the personalised labels. If you are interested in buying you might want to form a group with several wine lover friends.

I would recommend that you contact Anthony Hanson, at the wine department of Christie's, a few weeks before November. You will be able to discuss the possibility of placing a bid, and you will receive some great advice on what it could cost and what you could obtain. You might want to travel to Beaune too and attend the auction. For sure a very memorable weekend, but if you do then make sure you book a hotel many weeks ahead. Even so you might have to lodge a few kilometres away as the event is so popular and hotel rooms are like gold dust that weekend.

The Hospices de Beaune auction is unique and something every wine lover should experience at least once; Santé! ■

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