

Exquisite variation

Can Burgundy's limitless nuance be explained by anything other than *terroir*?

Words by Richard Hemming

Illustrations by Ritchie Xavier



There's an album called *Death Metal for Funerals*.

It features *Gorging on Putrid Discharge* by Amputated, and *Anal Chronic Epatorrea* by Masturbation; perfect for people who don't want to go quietly.

All right, that album doesn't exist (although the songs, honestly, do). There is, however, a record which plumbs even lower depths of human depravity. It's called *Jazz For Wine Tasting*.

Never have four words together been more arse-puckeringly middle-class. I'm listening to it as I type; it's all bossa nova rhythms, flannel suits and lounge bars – John Lewis jazz.

At any moment I'm expecting Frasier to walk in and say, "Sherry, Niles?"

There are fourteen tracks

on this album, all named after grapes or regions. The clever dick in me wants to crack gags about how track thirteen, Sangiovese, sounds an awful lot like track four, Chianti. Snort. And don't you think that track eight, Bordeaux, is something of an *encépagement* of tracks one and six, Merlot and Cabernet? A-ha ha ha, kill me now. And you know what to play at my funeral.

In truth, all the tracks sound pretty much the same to the casual ear – which, appropriately enough, is exactly what the casual nose presumes about how wine tastes. But if any region could disprove this, it would be track two on *Jazz for Wine Tasting: Burgundy*.

Here is a region tailor-made to vindicate *terroir*. Take the Côte d'Or: one

climate, two grapes, dozens of appellations, hundreds of domaines, thousands of variations on a theme. Some of it is utterly transcendent, but a lot of it is like gorging on putrid discharge. Fully understanding the fine weave of Burgundian *terroir* requires considerable dedication. The comparison with jazz becomes ever more apposite.

To elaborate: in both cases, practitioner is a more reliable signpost to quality than source material. Anyone can bottle a bad Chambertin; anyone can record a bad *Round Midnight* (shame on you, Kenny G).

Both require immersive dedication to achieve true enlightenment, and indeed the most hardened jazz and Burgundy devotees both



emit a similar wavelength of scary Zen intensity. Both have mainstream representation (Mâcon-Villages: the Jamie Cullum of Burgundy?) but the real stuff is obscure to all but the few. And both were pioneered by eleventh-century French monks. Or perhaps not.

But let's return to the crux: as scripture is for supplicants, so Burgundy is for *terroir*: proof that their belief is real.

Much of the talk about *terroir* involves bullshit so supercharged it smells like it was buried in a cow horn over the winter. Yet the exquisite nuance and infinite variation of Burgundy simply cannot be explained in any other way.

Richebourg and Echezeaux are two of the most revered plots of Burgundy, knitted into the

quilt of vines that billows over the Côte de Nuits. They are less than a kilometre apart, share the same altitude and nurture the same variety. Richebourg faces east, Echezeaux tilts more towards the southeast. Both have limestone bedrock, though topsoils can vary from metre to metre.

It is these minuscule variations in aspect and soil that are responsible for the different flavours and textures that emerge in the wines they birth. In the hands of the finest practitioners, the results can be profoundly different, despite being cut from the same cloth. They are phantasms of each other – alike in soul, divergent in body.

The touchstone for such mystical hooch is Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, the Jesus,

Buddha and Gandalf of Burgundy all rolled into one. Here, *terroir* rings truest. The vineyards are impeccable and the grapes are pristine, but perhaps most significantly, the winemaking is essentially invariant. Tasting their different crus is an enlightening, absorbing experience, casting light upon every ruffle and fold of each origin: not just Richebourg and Echezeaux, but also La Tâche, Romanée-St-Vivant and La Romanée-Conti itself – every one with its own distinct, individual personality.

What other possible explanation can there be, if not that the vineyard confers upon their wines these kaleidoscopic fractions of flavour?

The trouble with *terroir* is its inexact definition, and our



scant understanding of exactly how and why these differences are caused. Looking for a scientific explanation of *terroir* is like decoding the emotive pull of a Miles Davis trumpet solo by analysing its wavelengths: a soulless exercise.

Transmogrification has been largely discredited. The fact that Chablis, for instance, is often fancied as tasting of chalk or oyster shells cannot be credibly explained by the roots of the vines somehow sucking these compounds up from the earth and depositing them in the grapes – but the composition of soil certainly can influence how grape flavour develops.

The mineral and elemental make-up of vineyard dirt can influence the pH of grape juice, for instance. Also, water availability is determined in part by

natural drainage potential – sand holds far less water than clay, for example – and this in turn can have an important effect on vine physiology, and the fruit it produces. Then there's the soil microfauna population to consider, or the modulation of microclimate by soil colour, to say nothing of the cosmic forces – whether real or imaginary – that some growers believe in.

Subtle, incremental differences caused by these phenomena can result in significant flavour divergence when amplified through fermentation. Again, much of this process is still mysterious – it may be explicable through chemistry and biology, but it remains a natural phenomenon that is largely uncontrolled and can't be artificially synthesised.

Perhaps fermentation shouldn't be conjoined with *terroir* when attempting to decode its manifold mysteries, but it's undeniable that yeast plays a vital part in allowing these *terroir* differences to be expressed.

It is *terroir* that facilitates these changes in the first place – of that, there can be little doubt. Scientific proof may be scant, but the way that Burgundian appellations can refract Chardonnay and Pinot Noir into seemingly limitless spectra of flavour, where all else remains equal, is the only evidence needed.

When it comes to jazz, improvisation doesn't need to be explained to be enjoyed; likewise *terroir*, when it comes to Burgundy. In both cases, the sheer, palpable, miraculous existence of their exquisite variation is the thing to relish.