

SPIRITO di VINO *Asia*

Culture and Quality for a Luxury Wine-Style

*Twenty-five
years
of passion*

THE FIRST ETHNIC
ASIAN MASTER OF WINE,
JEANNIE CHO LEE
SHARES HER LOVE FOR
WINE AND FOOD

HONG KONG
*1st annual
Italian Wine
Celebration*

CHAMPAGNE
*A new direction
for Maison
Veuve-Cliequot*

ITALY
*Grappa Nonino
a symbol of
Italian lifestyle*

GOURMETS
*X-Treme Chinese
cuisine with
the Demon Chef*



Bimonthly Year 6 No. 31
HKD 65 / RMB 65 / SGD 9 / MYR 22
THB 200 / IDR 20,000



Above and right, the wine list featured at a dinner hosted by The Fine Wine Experience (www.finewineexperience.com) took three years to gather from various sources around the world. A highly conservative approach in selecting the bottles was used with careful due diligence using only known provenance and lots the organisers had the chance to taste in previous occasions.

A transcendental experience

At a once in a lifetime wine dinner,
guests tasted some of the best and rarest wines
made by the iconic Henri Jayer



by *Linden Wilkie* photos by *Brent Pottinger*



Here above, Linden Wilkie, Director of The Fine Wine Experience and author of this article, taking careful notes. He was impressed by the wines' clarity and "jewel-like" precision. He drew two conclusions from this special tasting: first, Jayer's wines were ahead of their time; but second, paradoxically, however much a pioneer he was, he was also a product of his time.



Henri Mayer makes the top spot or near top spot on anyone's list when the subject of the 20th century's greatest Burgundy vigneron is raised. Now, 11 years since his passing, 16 years since any wine was made bearing his name, and with interest in Burgundy strengthened at pace in Asia, the door is closing on opportunities to taste his life's work. In deliberating what to include in a dinner to focus on his wines, we decided two things would be important – firstly, that despite the prohibitive cost of the now 'unicorn' bottles [i.e. bottles not just rare or expensive but which make you feel guilty for even thinking about uncorking them], we would not have a picture of his vinous legacy if we did not include some of the greatest of his wines in the line up. (The final ticket price consequently ballooned to HK\$58,800 / US\$7,600 per seat). The second point was to include some closely associated wines for comparison. I'll explain what and why these bottles were included in a moment. Aside from the expense of these bottles today, there are now additional hurdles to leap. Many of these bottles have been traded and shipped all over the world. Sometimes their condition has suffered. There are of course a number of fake or at least questionable bottles in the market. Any of these issues rearing their head in our dinner would not have gone down well, despite the challenge. Consequently we took a long time (about three years), and a highly conservative approach in

selecting bottles with known provenance, and often also from selections where we had had the chance to try bottles already on other occasions. I mention all this because I would caution readers to be very careful in sourcing Domaine Henri Mayer wines today. Two key speakers led the dinner – Allen Meadows, author of Burgundy wine review newsletter Burghound, and Guillaume Rouget, grand-nephew of Henri Mayer, who today together with his brother Nicolas, farms the land and makes the wines from the same plots that Mayer did.

Also in attendance was James K. Finkel, who translated Jacky Rigaux's A Tribute to the Great Wines of Burgundy: Henri Mayer, Winemaker from

Vosne-Romanée, which is a treatise on Mayer's ideas on Vosne-Romanée, viticulture, wine and winemaking. Finkel also offered valuable insights this evening. For a deeper understanding of Mayer and his wines I would recommend this book, as well as Meadows' Vosne-Romanée reference book The Pearl of the Côte. As Meadows noted this evening, Mayer was mostly focused on one stretch in the Côte de Nuits: Echezeaux, Les Beaux Monts, Aux Brûlées, Richebourg, and Cros Parantoux are all adjacent vineyards. The exception is Meurgers, a some 600 metre journey from the others, at the Vosne-Romanée end of Nuits-St-Georges! In this small pocket of Pinot Noir splendour, Mayer spent some 50 years practicing what today might be regarded



Top of page, left, one of the "unicorn" wines being carefully uncorked. Right, twenty-nine different labels were tasted during the event. Bottom, for this high level and unique event, The Fine Wine Experience chose to work with the exceptional team at Hong Kong's Grand Hyatt whom they consider the gold standard of wine service and food pairings in the region.



as well established and (elusively) straightforward ideas. As Guillaume Rouget summarized: “keep yields low, use only healthy ripe fruit, and then just guide the wine – remove the stems, do cold pre-ferment maceration, try not to extract too harshly during fermentation, and age the wine in new oak barriques for around 18 months.”

Although today there are a range of views on the use of stems in Burgundy, and the tide has turned against the use of 100% new oak for many leading domaines, what Mayer prescribed is today considered standard practice. But we must remember that Mayer pioneered this approach during very difficult economic times. As his renown grew in the ‘70s Burgundy had reached something of a nadir, and the incentive was quantity rather than quality. Yields were higher, and it seemed better to get the crop in soon after the Ban de Vendange would permit harvest, rather than await optimal ripeness but court disaster as autumnal weather conditions threatened the crop. Of course, even in that era Bacchus would smile from time to time and help deliver beautiful vintages like 1971, 1978 and 1985. In years like those, many good wines would be made, and wines from Mayer would be simply sensational. But one of the hallmarks of Henri Mayer wines (and superlative estates in general) is just how superior they can be in more difficult vintages like, say, 1983 or 1987. Mayer’s story is intimately intertwined with the vineyard he ‘created’ – Vosne-Romanée 1er Cru ‘Cros

Parantoux’. The name already existed, as did, of course, the land. But from 1951 the parcels were slowly assembled by Mayer – either as owner or farmer*, and much of the land had to be restored to vines from wild brush and artichokes(!). Enormous rocks had to be dynamited in order to plant the vines. The work complete, Mayer applied to INAO for Cros Parantoux to be upgraded to 1er Cru status, which it was. As Meadows summarises neatly in *Pearl of the Côte*, ‘It is difficult to say whether the celebrity of winegrower Henri Mayer (1922-2006) made the vineyard famous or the quality of the site made Mayer’s reputation.

Either way it was an extraordinary marriage for 50 years.’ (p63). Mayer’s nephew, Emmanuel Rouget, began working for him in the mid-1970s, and from the mid-1980s we begin to see Domaine Emmanuel Rouget wines, including Cros Parantoux from 1989. The Mayer family-owned vineyards were all leased to Emmanuel Rouget on Mayer’s retirement, and since 2002, all of the Mayer-owned portion (0.715ha of the 1.01ha total) of Cros Parantoux has been exploited by Rouget. So, there was a transition, a nexus perhaps, in the twilight of Mayer’s pre-retirement life at the end of the ‘80s and beginning of the ‘90s when he mentored both Méo and Rouget. We wanted therefore not only to explore Mayer’s wines across a range of terroirs and vintages, but to focus in on this transitional period when the Jean-Nicolas Méo and Emmanuel Rouget wines really begin, and take that rare chance



This page above, the internationally acclaimed Burgundy expert Allen Meadows comments on the wines of Henri Mayer. Below, the dinner was a feast for the senses. Opposite page, the wines were not just rare and expensive but also making the guests feel guilty for even thinking of uncorking them. Consequently, the final ticket price was HK\$ 58,800 per person.





to compare them side by side with Mayer's own examples. Once again for this level of event we chose to work with the exceptional team at Hong Kong's Grand Hyatt, whose wine service and food pairings set, in my view, the gold standard here. Below I have reproduced my notes for each wine we tasted. The 1996 Murgers from Méo was corked, so we served a 1991 Murgers from him instead. Otherwise everything was per the original programme. What impressions was I left with to build upon past experiences with these wines? I would say this: Mayer's wines have a clarity, a raw, jewel-like precision, a concentration and brightness of fruit, and a moderate sense of gloss from the new oak.

Compared to the general sense a vintage might convey, a well-stored Mayer bottle will seem strikingly vibrant and youthful in comparison. The taste is presciently modern, and there are two conclusions I would draw from this: first that Mayer's wines were ahead of their time; but second, paradoxically, that however much a pioneer he was, he was also a product of his time. What I mean by that is that he stood out, and his wines from the '70s, '80s and '90s still stand out, in the context of the wines made in general at that time. But, because his ideas were followed, and because the economic scene has improved dramatically for Burgundy (giving incentive at last to quality over quantity) in my view a number of domaines in Burgundy today make wine that approaches the quality he achieved. That is not to appreciate nor com-

mend Mayer any less for what he achieved. It's simply that he led the way, and the success of his ideas prevailed. As Meadows stated at the beginning of this evening's dinner, "Henri Mayer and Georges Roumier were the two greatest winemakers of the 20th century."

True. But now, in the early 21st century, Burgundy enthusiasts have a number of contemporary options for cellaring and enjoying comparable quality in what is being made today. (Isn't that great?!) But, to understand the philosophical origins for this, we must experience Mayer's wines! Rouget's wines were a close study of Mayer's. In the 1990 Cros Parantoux flight I narrowly preferred our bottle of Rouget's to our bottle of Mayer's. (Disclosure: The Fine Wine Experience imports Domaine Emmanuel

Rouget's wines to Hong Kong). Jean-Nicolas Méo's wines stand apart stylistically from those of Mayer and his protégé Rouget. Méo's seem to express a touch less power, fewer fireworks, less show, but perhaps more finesse. His '96 Richebourg was exceptional in this dinner, and to my palate his Murgers '91 was, for quality, on par with Mayer's '80 and '85 examples. As you will see from one or two notes below, some of these wines reach such peaks, are simply so thrilling to drink, that it is difficult to put the experience into words. It was all the more special to experience such wines at a dining table accompanied by Meadows, Rouget, Finkel, and guests, many of whom had travelled to Hong Kong from around the world to share the evening. 🍷



Above, from left to right, Guillaume Rouget of Domaine Emmanuel Rouget and great-nephew of Henri Mayer, Erica Meadows, Allen Meadows, Linden Wilkie, Micheal Wu, also Director of The Fine Wine Experience. Eleven years have passed since Mayer's passing and sixteen years since any wine was made bearing his name making the event an outstanding opportunity for guests.

1991 Domaine Méo-Camuzet Nuits-St-Georges 1er Cru 'Aux Murgers', magnum

94

Full colour still ; a fine sweet fruited aroma, candied plum and cherry, a touch of musk, and an overriding earthy, wet garden note make up the complex aromas ; elegant in style, fine, fine-textured palate, velvety with succulent slightly dried fruit character. Still a little firm on the finish. After an hour or two this extended to a long sweet-earthy finish. A great example and expression of Murgers.

1996 Domaine Emmanuel Rouget Vosne-Romanée 1er Cru 'Les Beaumonts'

94

Deep ruby, fine hue ; dark fruit with a distinctively spicy note, biscuity sweetness, detailed expression ; quite fleshy, '96 brightness in the acidity, this is juicy, and of moderate weight. There are some lovely leafy-sweet aromatics that appear at the finish. The balance between intensity of fruit, and bright sapid acidity is superb. Plays to the strengths of '96 without too much compromise.

1996 Domaine Emmanuel Rouget Echezeaux Grand Cru

94

Deep ruby with a full hue ; sweet, biscuity reserved nose, some oak ; lush, firm, opulent yet moderate in weight and depth. A glossy style, plump, gourmand. The fleshiness and bright acidity make this so morish. Grandeur in expression than the more subtle Beaumonts in this flight, this is broader, more potent. Impressive, bold Echezeaux.

1996 Domaine Méo-Camuzet Richebourg Grand Cru

96

Fine hued ruby, still a brightness on the rim ; gorgeous nose, candied raspberry and roses, a really refined sort of perfume, very scented ; focused on the palate, layered, lovely perfume to the fruit, deep, but also seductively pretty, aromatic, long, and very very fine. This comes across as very elegant after the Rouget Echezeaux's boldness of style. This is still youthful, yet now open and expressive, beginning its prime. A really lovely Richebourg.

1993 Domaine Emmanuel Rouget Vosne-Romanée 1er Cru 'Cros Parantoux'

93

Bright and still a deep shade ; fresh, floral, ripe aromas, jewel-like fruit expression on the still youthful nose ; that crystalline precision and luminous quality extends to the palate too, with red cherries, mineral notes. This is so pure, elegant yet intense, tannic yet supple. Real complexity on the finish. It is still so young. A statuesque sort of Cros Parantoux that I suppose may always be firm.

1993 Domaine Henri Mayer Vosne-Romanée 1er Cru 'Cros Parantoux'

96

A clear bright deep shade, still youthful ; more oaky nuttiness on the nose and more exuberant fruit expression. A fresh, lively nose ; intense, focused, very pure, bright, sherberty red cherry fruit, mineral, very finely defined and clear. A hint of moss on the finish. Intense. Firm. A hint of 'bitters' in the crystal clear finish.

1993 Domaine Henri Mayer Echezeaux Grand Cru

95

Bright clear ruby ; open, quite perfumed on the nose, a more seductive aroma after Mayer's Cros Parantoux. There is musk, a hint of popcorn, spices. On the palate the Echezeaux is intense, focused, with a rounder feel and more breadth on the palate than the Cros Parantoux, fine with slightly musky notes, generous, fleshy, yet very precise and welldefined. Still youthful but drinking well – more ready, as we might expect, than the Cros Parantoux.

1990 Domaine Emmanuel Rouget Echezeaux Grand Cru

95

Fine, clear, paler than the '93, healthy centre with a mature rim ; sweet nose, with a meaty earthy note, a touch of oak, overall a spicy, open aroma ; lovely on the palate, saline-edged fruit, a touch of mineral, melting texture, some spice on the finish which also conveys some sous bois. Drinking beautifully and at its peak.

1990 Domaine Emmanuel Rouget Vosne-Romanée 1er Cru 'Cros Parantoux'

97

A touch deeper than the Echezeaux, fine hue; nutty Mayer-esque oak signature, spicy, beautiful florals; taut in its attack on the palate, fine fruit and structure, lovely bright fruit, focused, layered, concentrated and long. This is tightly wound. After an hour or so it began to really open up. Just gorgeous and with Tardis-like inner dimension – it enters in a compact way, precise, delineated, and then it expands as it traverses the palate. Surprising. The is so wonderfully seductive and compelling now. An amazing wine.

1990 Domaine Méo-Camuzet Vosne-Romanée 1er Cru 'Cros Parantoux'

93

A deeper shade of ruby, mature rim ; sweet nose, a touch of dark chocolate, blue-edged fruit ; rich and intense on the palate, musky, leafy-earthly-laced tannins. Overall less fresh in expression than the Rouget or Mayer '90 Cros Parantoux, but this is also bolder, and with more tannin. The clarity is a touch more masked, but the wine is nonetheless seductive, with a more candied edge to the fruit – real sweetness. Delicious.

1990 Domaine Henri Mayer Vosne-Romanée 1er Cru 'Cros Parantoux'

96

Bright and clear ruby, a touch of development right at the rim ; sweet nutty nose, a touch of funk to the fruit ; intense, concentrated fruit on the palate, round in texture, but with luminous jewel-like clarity. This is intense, taut yet concentrated. Still so amazingly fresh. For me, a notch behind the Rouget example, because there is also just a hint of something funky on the palate – a smudge in the otherwise brilliant picture.

1980 Domaine Henri Mayer Nuits-St-Georges 1er Cru 'Meurgers', magnum

95

Still a good colour, with a garnet-bricked rim; lovely sweet nose, smoky bottle-age notes, a touch of licorice and earth, and caramelised pastry, together with a savoury sous bois counterpoint – a wonderful aroma!; elegant in shape and expression, mid-intensity (after the peak-power of the '90 flight), great purity, an earthy note, and a mineral, egg shell-fine like texture. Pure, long, savoury, earthy with sublt fruit all through. Just lovely. How did he do it? This shows the greatness of the man.

1985 Domaine Henri Mayer Nuits-St-Georges 1er Cru 'Meurgers', magnum

94

Bright, with a fuller colour than the '80, clear rim; sweet sweet nose of candied fruit, lovely ,exuberant fruit with a savoury edge; on the palate the fruit sweetness is so seductive – a really candied centre here, with sapid acidity, lovely fruit, the texture is gentle and resolved, pure. There is still a vibrant energy here. Sweeter, but not greater than the '80. A great pair of Meurgers!

1982 Domaine Henri Mayer Echezeaux Grand Cru

87

Colour is quite advanced, fully bricked through ; the nose is a little 'soggy', its earthy and sweet, but a little tired ; on the palate an elegant entry, good acidity, a lack of density, though a nice flavour. Fully evolved. Indeed, this was the only wine this evening which really faded in the glass. A pity. I've had better bottles of this.

1985 Domaine Henri Mayer Echezeaux Grand Cru, magnum

99

A bright mid depth of colour, with a bricked edge; gorgeous gorgeous incredible nose, so spicy, sexy, vibrant, musky and exciting; concentrated on the palate but fully supple in texture, spicy, a touch of candied orange rind, everything wrapped in spice, plump, totally cohesive and balanced. Lovely acidity. Just delicious. Amazing. A perfect magnum of an amazing wine.

1985 Domaine Henri Mayer Richebourg

99

Deep colour, still some ruby, an aged rim; super sweet and sherberty nose, really quite particular – the expression is wild, bright with red fruit – sweet wild strawberry sherbert, florals; wow! Such fruit on the palate – wild steawberry, some spice, quite floral. This is just gorgeous, melting yet so fresh and well defined. This has emotional impact, it pulled me up like a kite. The purity and beauty of expression here boggles the mind. This is amazing.



THE FINE WINE EXPERIENCE

[www.fine**wine**experience.com](http://www.finewineexperience.com)

Shop D, 85 Queen's Road West, Sheung Wan, Hong Kong

Tel: +852 2803 0753 | **Fax:** +852 2803 0776

Opening Hours:

Monday to Friday	10am - 7:30pm
Saturday	1pm - 7pm
Sunday & Public Holiday	Closed