

GERT CRUM (Author) and JAN BARTELSMAN (Photography): *Le Domaine de la Romanée-Conti*. Lannoo Publishers, 2018, 303 pp., ISBN 978-94-014-3481-2 (hardcover), \$112.00.

When I first opened the package containing this massive volume about the fabled Domaine de la Romanée-Conti (known by oeneophiles around the world as DRC),

²Brewed at the Benedictine Brewery of Mount Angel Abbey in Oregon.

my first thought was the episode of *Seinfeld*, first aired in 1994, in which Kramer promotes on *Live with Regis and Kathie Lee* a new book he has written—a coffee table book about coffee tables. The book has folding legs on its back cover, so that the book itself becomes a coffee table. Kramer’s book was small compared with this new offering by Gert Crum, with stunning photography by Jan Bartelsman. At considerably more than a foot high and nearly a foot wide, and weighing in at close to 10 pounds (and priced quite modestly at 100 Euros), this book could well function as a respectable coffee table in many a Manhattan apartment!

This luxurious version with updated text and new photography is the latest revision of Crum’s award-winning 2005 treatise. This is not a reference book *per se*, if for no other reason than its dimensions and heft preclude one keeping it anywhere other than on a large living room coffee table. Rather, it is a compendium of well-written essays plus stunning photographs that together tell the story of this most remarkable domaine, beginning nearly 800 years ago when the Abbey of Saint Vivant acquired four and a half acres of vineyards in Vosne, known as Cru de Clos. Apparently the monks were too immersed in prayer to have time to cultivate the vineyards, so they leased the property to others. In the 17th century, the de Croonembourg family obtained the land through marriage, and named it La Romanée, but for reasons that have never been documented.

In 1760, André de Croonembourg sold the domaine to Louis François I de Bourbon, the Prince of Conti. Two years later, the Prince added his own name to the vineyard; henceforth Romanée-Conti. This may have revealed some degree of narcissism, but the Prince was clearly a devout hedonist and lover of the grape, as he refused to sell any of the wine produced, keeping it all for his household consumption!

Over the subsequent hundred years, the Romanée-Conti vineyard was sold from one family to another until Jacques-Marie Duvault-Blochet expanded the domaine with new holdings in Échezeaux, Grands Échezeaux, and Richebourg. It was only “very recently”—in 1933—that La Tâche was added to the Domaine. Since 1942, two families have co-owned DRC—the de Villaine family and the Leroy/Roch family.

Madame Lalou Bize-Leroy, now 87 years old, is well known as the owner and proprietor of Domaine Leroy. (I wrote about her in a previous review in this journal (Stavins, 2014)). In 1974, she became co-managing director of DRC with [Aubert de Villaine](#). Together they helped build DRC’s reputation to its current heights, but a series of disagreements, including her displeasure at de Villaine’s involvement in the “[Judgment of Paris](#)” wine tasting, led to her being ousted in 1992. At the Paris competition, de Villaine had favored the French Cabernets over those from California, but had committed the sin of judging the California Chardonnays to be the approximate equal of those from the motherland (Ashenfelter and Quandt, 1999). To this day, Aubert de Villaine, now 80 years of age, remains co-owner and co-director of DRC with Henry-Frédéric Roch.

Today, DRC produces seven red wines from Pinot Noir grapes in seven vineyards (of seven distinct Grand Cru appellations): Romanée-Conti (4.5 acres producing about 450 cases per year); La Tâche (15 acres); Richebourg (8.7 acres); Romanée-Saint-Vivant (13 acres); Grands Échezeaux (8.7 acres); Échezeaux (11.5 acres); and, since 2008, Corton (7 acres). In addition, the DRC produces from a vineyard of Chardonnay grapes in Montrachet (1.7 acres).

As is well known, the wines of DRC are among the most expensive in the world, with Romanée-Conti itself at the very pinnacle. According to wine-searcher.com, currently the minimum retail price in the United States for a bottle of the 2016 vintage is \$21,000. To place that in context, note that a bottle of 1945 Romanée-Conti sold at a Sotheby's auction in 2018 for \$558,000.

Why do these wines command such staggering prices? An initial answer that is little more than tautological for readers of this journal is that the supply is miniscule (see the numbers noted earlier) and the demand is massive. So, why is the demand so great? Part of the answer is associated with the quality of the wines, due to superb *terroir*, high-density plantings, old vines, low yields, and only minimal intervention in the winery. Of course, much the same can be said of many other great, but considerably less costly wines. Surely, a larger share of the answer has to do with pedigree, prestige, and the existence of extreme wealth in many parts of the world.

The book takes two chapters to cover DRC's long history, a chapter to describe the *terroir*, a chapter for a close examination of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, and two more chapters to describe the procedures used in the vineyards and the wineries. One long chapter takes us through each of the eight Cru of DRC, and another features an interview with Aubert de Villaine, which is among the most interesting and satisfying parts of the entire book. A final chapter provides Michael Broadbent's complete tasting notes going from the 1940 vintage through the 2013 vintage. From the first page to the last page, the beautiful photography of Jan Bartelsman illustrates the text; indeed, in many cases, the text is no more than extended captions for the photos.

At the end of this review, Burgundy aficionados may be offended by my bringing into the discussion the existence of new world Pinot Noir, and even more so by my referencing one of my favorite wine films, *Sideways*, which I reviewed in this journal about 13 years ago (Stavins, 2006). A high-point of the film is when Maya (played by Virginia Madsen) asks Miles (Paul Giamatti) why he is so into Pinot Noir. His response, which is both moving and revealing, is this:

"I don't know. It's a hard grape to grow. As you know. It's thin-skinned, temperamental, ripens early. It's not a survivor like Cabernet that can grow anywhere and thrive even when neglected. Pinot needs constant care and attention and in fact can only grow in specific little tucked-away corners of the world. And only the most patient and nurturing growers can do it really, can tap into Pinot's most fragile, delicate qualities. Only when someone has taken the time to truly understand its potential can Pinot be coaxed into its fullest expression. And when that happens, its flavors are the most haunting and brilliant and subtle and thrilling and ancient on the planet."

That is what makes Pinot Noir wines so distinctive, with the best coming from Burgundy—the highest expression of special *terroir*. And, of course, no wines of Burgundy are more celebrated than those of Domaine de la Romanée-Conti.

Having gotten through this massive volume about the history and the wines of DRC without ever having tasted even a drop of any of these legendary wines, I should mark the occasion by opening a bottle. But, alas, I cannot afford even the “humblest” of DRC wines, or, for that matter, nearly any other Grand Cru Classé Burgundy. Much to my surprise, however, just now I found listed in my cellar database three bottles of 2007 Domaine Chandon de Briailles from the Les Bressandes vineyard in the Grand Cru appellation of Corton. If you will excuse me, I will close this review, and make my way downstairs to my cellar, with corkscrew and glass in hand.

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