

## Book and Film Reviews

**Author/Director, Title**

**Reviewer**

**Film**

David Kennard (Director)  
*A Year in Burgundy*

Robert N. Stavins

DAVID KENNARD (Director): *A Year in Burgundy*. Written by David Kennard. InCA Productions, 2013, 91 minutes.

Imagine driving through a lovely, bucolic setting on the road from Mâcon to Dijon through picturesque vineyards north of Chalon-sur-Saône. You lean back to enjoy the view, thinking about the superb wines produced from these tiny, garden-sized properties by dedicated vigneronns. And then your focus, your reflections, and indeed your pleasure are shattered by unnecessary chatter—the annoying verbal commentary delivered by your guide. That mixed bag captures the beauty, the interest, and the limitation of this new film from producer, director, and writer David Kennard, who, it should be said, has built a remarkably diverse portfolio of documentaries over his 30-year career, ranging from natural science (Carl Sagan’s acclaimed PBS series *Cosmos* and the superb BBC series *Connections* with James Burke) to the performing arts (*Keeping Score*, with Michael Tilson Thomas).

As academics, we are trained to lay out for the reader our theory, the facts, our analysis, and our conclusions in clear, concise language. But in creative writing, the best authors describe situations and the words and thoughts of characters, but never tell the reader what conclusions to draw or what emotions to feel. The same difference is found in dramatic films, with second-rate Hollywood movies making everything absolutely explicit, virtually telling the audience what to think and feel, while the best films provide no more than building blocks upon which members of the audience can develop their own thoughts and feelings. With documentary films, this distinction can also be key. Some of the best documentaries provide no more than pictorial, musical, and verbal inspiration, leaving the audience to come to its own conclusions (see my recent review of *Somm* in *Journal of Wine Economics*, 8(2), pp. 238–241).

In *A Year in Burgundy*, the narrator speaks too often and tells us too much. For example, it would have been effective to allow the film's scenes, interviews, and conversations to inspire in the viewer the recognition that the best winemakers of Burgundy are true artisans, perhaps even artists. Instead, the narrator states flatly, as in a lecture, that "the greatest winemakers are artists." And this is in the first minute of the movie!

The film focuses on Martine Saunier, a French-born, California-based wine importer. We follow her over the course of a challenging year (2011) in Burgundy as she meets with five client producers in their vineyards and wineries in Burgundy. When we first observe her, she is celebrated by the narrator in glowing terms, which struck me as perhaps a bit excessive for a wine importer and distributor. But I came to find the characterization particularly annoying by the end of the film, when I learned that she (together with David Kennard) was the film's senior producer.

Saunier's first job after college was in marketing, and it shows. Is it unfair of me to note that we are not told in the film that Madame Saunier sold her wine-importing business, Martine's Wines, in 2012 or that the lovely family home that has "been in her family for centuries," where we first see her climbing into her Citroën Deux Chevaux to visit her growers, has in fact been converted to a B&B by her brother?

With Martine, we visit (from south to north): Dominique Cornin in the Mâconnais of southern Burgundy; Michel Gay and Domaine Morey-Coffinet in Côte de Beaune; and Bruno Clavelier, Christophe Perrot-Minot, and Domaine Leroy, who have vineyards in the Côte de Nuits.

The film begins in the spring, when Martine visits Domaine Morey-Coffinet with its proprietor Michel Morey, who runs the business with his son, Thibault. Michel explains, "I think no one has a particular gift at the start. As little children, we grow up surrounded by vines and wine cellars, by fathers and grandfathers who talk about wine, and the aromas and the tannins. I think that even as a little child, even if you don't taste it, you start to get a feeling for wine quite quickly. By the age of five or six, Thibault could identify different wines by their smell." Thibault responds, "When I was young, it was my passion. I only went to school because I had to. When I came home, I joined my parents in the vineyards and the cellars." No narration is necessary to frame or explain the message.

As summer arrives, we travel to the best region for Pinot noir—the Côte de Nuits, north of Beaune—visiting vineyards in the hills just above Vosne-Romanée and learning about the rocky soils and unique microclimate of a small closed valley. Gradually, the incredible diversity of the terroir of Burgundy begins to emerge: 400 different wines produced in the single village of Chassagne Montrachet.

But most rewarding is the time that we spend with Madame Lalou Bize-Leroy, owner and proprietor of Domaine Leroy. At the time, she was 79 years old

(or “young” in her case, as the cliché goes). She is youthful and enthusiastic, and her backstory is an interesting one, though unfortunately left out of the film. Born in 1932 as Marcelle Leroy, she established herself as a businesswoman in the Burgundy wine business in the 1950s, when she took over the négociant business of her father, Henri Leroy. Beginning in 1974, she was co-managing director of Domaine de la Romanée-Conti (DRC). Along with Aubert de Villaine, she was credited with helping to build DRC, but a series of disagreements, including apparently her displeasure at de Villaine’s involvement in the “Judgment of Paris” wine tasting, led to her ouster in 1992.

After leaving DRC, Madame Lalou focused on her family’s properties, and built the holdings, excellence, and reputation of Domaine Leroy. Like the others in the film, she is a hands-on producer, carefully supervising each and every stage of growth, harvest, and production. Listening to her speak in the film—gently yet passionately—about the lives of her vines and her absolute dedication to biodynamic farming methods, I was reminded of listening several years ago to another master grower and vigneron, thousands of miles away: Christophe Baron, the exceptionally talented Frenchman who has been producing his magnificent Cayuse wines in Walla Walla, Washington, since 1997.

About halfway through the film, it is fall, at the time of harvest. The narrator states that the harvest is difficult because of the possibility of impending rain; however, the light music accompanying this commentary does not convey tension but, rather, a carefree mood, as student pickers move through the vineyards. When the narrator announces, “There’s tension in the air,” it has precisely the opposite effect, because we as viewers have not felt the tension. What a contrast with *Somm*, in which the viewer clearly sensed the stress felt by that documentary’s main characters: four young men preparing for an exam to join the Court of Master Sommeliers.

Ironically, among the most beautiful scenes in the film—in terms of pure aesthetics—are the landscapes following harvest, after the grapes are gone and the leaves of the vines begin to die, going from subtle shades of yellow to bright red. These scenes, with vineyards in the foreground, the village behind, and a hillside behind, look like a painter’s intoxicant. If we squint just a bit, it is not difficult to imagine a landscape by Claude Monet before our eyes.

As winter arrives, we move from the open and public process of harvest to the closed and very private, even confidential process of wine-making. Every vigneron has his or her own methods, including a wide range of approaches just for punching down the grapes inside the vats to maximize extraction. Down in the cellars, the wines are now in barrels, sometimes topped up once per week to avoid exposure to air due to ongoing evaporation. Then comes *battonage*, the gentle stirring of the wine in barrels to mix the sediment with the liquid, a couple of times a week if the wine is too acidic.

Then, as scenes of automated bottling fill the screen, a winemaker laments, “Burgundy wines ought to be all different, but science now allows us to make wines that are all the same. That’s a pity—they all used to have their own character, like human beings. Progress is pushing all of us to make the same kind of wine.” This comment, which may be accurate, does not square with what we have otherwise seen and heard in the film, leaving me to wonder, has Burgundy too been “Parkerized”?

Suddenly, the scene moves 4,000 miles westward, to Blackberry Farm, an intimate luxury hotel and resort located on a pastoral 4,200-acre estate in the Great Smoky Mountains of Tennessee. An affluent group of friends meets in the wine cellar to enjoy glasses of Burgundy, including some of the same wines that we have followed during the year, albeit samples from earlier vintages. It turns out, of course, that the evening is hosted by Martine Saunier. She introduces Thibault Morey—strange to see him well-dressed and thousands of miles away from his father’s Burgundy property. Then, it’s upstairs for dinner, presumably with one of Martine’s wines paired with each course.

At the conclusion, we are transported back to Burgundy, and amid the barren scene of old vines, cloudy skies, and cold weather, the families begin to prune their vines. They burn the dead wood in the field in the midst of the rows, just as they have been doing for hundreds of years. And, as the narrator inevitably reminds us, “there are lots of things they do in Burgundy that they have been doing for hundreds of years.” In a few months, the first signs of spring will arrive, and then it will be another year in Burgundy.

*A Year in Burgundy* is the first in a series of documentaries on fine wine forthcoming from director David Kennard. He has just completed *A Year in Champagne*. I will certainly watch his new film, because I expect it to be beautiful and informative, but I hope there will be less narration, and more reliance on the film’s characters and scenes, and thereby more trust in its audience. Less can, indeed, be more.

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