

Special Report: Ten Decades of La Romanée

31 Vintages from 1915 to 2002

La Romanée. Mention this name in casual wine conversation to most wine lovers and you're likely to get that questioning, vaguely self-conscious "uh oh, I should know this" look; indeed even most dyed-in-the-wool Burgundy lovers have never tasted more than one or two examples, if any. There's a logical if painful explanation for this as La Romanée is the rarest of the rare, producing a whopping 350 cases in an abundant vintage and only 250 cases in a short one. In contrast, a good harvest for one of the top *premier cru* Bordeaux will produce 30,000 cases; it's remarkable to think that on average, La Romanée produces roughly one percent as much as say Château Margaux or Château Mouton-Rothschild (I can never understand why many people routinely refer to the top châteaux in Bordeaux as rare; expensive, yes, rare, no). By extension, it's no surprise that the .8452 ha La Romanée is the smallest *appellation* in all of France though curiously, most people believe that La Romanée-Conti holds that distinction (Château Grillet is often named as well); La Romanée-Conti is actually the 4th smallest among the major *appellations*, surpassing the 1.57 ha of Criots-Bâtard-Montrachet and its direct neighbor, the 1.65 ha La Grande Rue.

The Tasting: In early February, at the generous invitation of organizer Frank Hohmann, III, I had the virtually unheard of opportunity to taste multiple vintages across fully ten decades of this incredibly rare *grand cru*. To call such a tasting historic is an understatement and I have never seen or heard of its equivalent with such broad representation. Frank has been collecting the wines for years and many of the bottles presented were acquired on release and never moved from his cellars. My good friend Douglas Barzelay also munificently provided a number of the very old vintages for the assembled thirteen attendees, which included Louis-Michel Liger-Belair, the present winemaker for the Domaine Vicomte Liger-Belair. Kudos to The Mark Hotel in New York City for the impeccable service as well as the flawless execution of a superb meal that complemented perfectly the delicacy and subtle harmony of the older wines.

The event was divided into two sections: the first was a formal tasting of the 16 younger vintages back to the 1972 and served in four flights of four wines each. Beginning with the 1978, the older vintages were served with a simple but perfectly conceived four-course meal. I present the wines below by vintage for simplicity's sake rather than dividing them into the actual flights. I have also taken the liberty of including a note on the 1923, which I tasted in Burgundy in November, 2003; this wine was acquired in London and brought back to Burgundy by a Burghound.com subscriber for a special dinner.

Background: According to M. Liger-Belair, who is now the 7th generation of the family to be involved with La Romanée, the vineyard has been famous since the 14th C. He believes the walls surrounding the vineyard were actually originally built in the 14th C as well though they obviously have been restored many times since then. Further, Liger-Belair asserts that La Romanée was at one time part and parcel of La Romanée-Conti though the generally accepted view of things today holds that the two vineyards were always separate entities. It is extremely difficult to tease out whether this is true or not because La Romanée-Conti was often referred to as La Romanée and the reported size of the vineyard varied, if only marginally, as well. Indeed, when La Romanée-Conti was confiscated from the Prince de Conti and sold "for the good of the Republic", the sale document identifies the vineyard as La Romanée. Whatever the ultimate truth of the matter may be, what is known from the historical records is that ancestors of the Liger-Belair family acquired by marriage the first of nine parcels in what was known as Aux Echanges in 1815 and over the next twelve years, the remaining eight parcels were slowly pieced together (Note: some sources report that there were only 6 parcels, rather than 9, in Aux Echanges, which was according to the tax records of the time, considered to be part of Les Richebourgs; the vineyard was also sometimes referred to as Au Dessus de La Romanée). When the final parcel was acquired, the vineyard formerly known as Aux Echanges was registered in Dijon by Louis Liger-Belair and formally declared as La Romanée, which became the present day *monopole* of the Liger-Belair family.

As an aside, some texts hold that La Romanée was once part of Richebourg but an aerial view of the Vosne *grands crus* is not particularly persuasive in this regard. For La Romanée to have been part of Richebourg would have required that a completely misshapen parcel, forming a huge L-shape, been extant for several centuries. While it's true that vineyards in Burgundy are anything but square, neither are they as oddly shaped as what would result from hypothetically attaching La Romanée to Richebourg.

Readers with an eye for detail may recall that the Liger-Belair family also owned the original La Tâche, which was at this time only 1.45 ha. Louis-Michel Liger-Belair's great grandfather died in 1924 and ownership of the family domaine passed to his great grandmother, who was holding the vineyards for her grandchildren. Unfortunately, when the grandmother passed on in 1933, the grandchildren were still minors and according to French law, they could not take ownership. The other 10 members of the Liger-Belair family agitated to receive their lawful shares and did not want to retain the vineyards any longer. Thus, these inheritance problems forced the Liger-Belair family to put up for sale its various properties, which included among other vineyards, La Romanée, La Tâche and Reignots. At the public auction in Vosne-Romanée, in August 1933, Edmund Gaudin

de Villaine acquired La Tâche and merged it with his parcels of Les Gaudichots to create the present day La Tâche. All was not to be lost however for the Liger-Belair heirs as one Juste Liger-Belair, a priest, decided to save at least a portion of the family *patrimoine* and purchased both La Romanée and Reignots at the auction. The vineyards passed to Juste Liger-Belair's nephew, who was also Louis-Michel's grandfather who was killed in 1941 during World War II.

Louis-Michel's father did not want to enter the wine business and thus the vineyards were rented out on a sharecropping basis to the Forey family in 1946. Grandfather Forey tended the vines and made the wines between 1946 and 1961, at which point Jean Forey took over until 1987. Jean's son Régis was responsible for La Romanée from 1988 until the sharecropping agreement was terminated after the 2001 harvest. (Note: the Forey wines are reviewed in Issues 5, 9 and 13). Because the Liger-Belair family was not directly in the wine business, they have long dealt with *négociants*, including one that was established within their own family called Maison C. Marey et Compte Liger-Belair. Maison Leroy bought the wines from 1951 until 1961, at which point a new agreement was reached with Maison Bichot which lasted until 1975. In 1976, Bouchard Père et Fils was retained and until 2001, they were the exclusive agents. Beginning in 2002 and continuing to 2005, there will actually be two different versions of La Romanée as Bouchard will market 50% of the production with the other half being sold directly by the Vicomte Liger-Belair. Unfortunately for the family, when the original contracts were signed, they stipulated that the domaine receive only 12 bottles of each vintage. Thus, if you happen to visit the domaine, there's no point in asking if you can buy any older vintages of La Romanée!

Louis-Michel Liger-Belair is now responsible for all of the vineyard work and the vinification of La Romanée plus the *élevage* for his portion of the production. He says that his *élevage* methods and those of Bouchard differ somewhat. Specifically, Liger-Belair did not rack the 2002 after the malo and in fact did not rack the wine at all until just before bottling; by contrast, Bouchard prefers to rack after the malo is complete; Liger-Belair prefers to use barrels from the forests of Alliers, Tronçais and Bertranges with medium toast whereas Bouchard uses medium plus toast (this particular difference was quite evident in comparing the 1999 with the 2002); lastly, Liger-Belair does not filter whereas he believes Bouchard usually does. To be precise, Liger-Belair actually does the *élevage* for Bouchard but at their instruction and with barrels that they supply. Bouchard will do the bottling for their half of the production.

Liger-Belair told me that he has also changed several viticultural practices as well compared to those employed by Forey. First and foremost, Forey did not actively work the soil and used herbicides to control weeds and grasses whereas Liger-Belair uses a horse and a light tractor to control these plants and to avoid unduly compacting the soil. He also says that he treats his vines with anti-rot sprays much less often than was the case before, preferring to spray only when there is a clear need. It is also evident that the Liger-Belair approach is to use a much lighter hand regarding extraction during the *cuvaision*. There are no enzymes, no commercial yeasts and no post-fermentation maceration. The grapes receive 7 days of a cool but not cold maceration at 15° C and when the new wines is racked into barrel, the pomace is pressed very lightly so as to extract only "the highest quality tannins. As soon as the press wine turns coarse, I stop pressing as I don't want harsh tannins in the final blend".

The vineyard itself sits directly above La Romanée-Conti, south of Richebourg and north of La Grande Rue. Unlike almost all of the vines in Vosne, those in La Romanée are planted north/south rather than east/west because if they weren't, the tractor working the vineyard would spend all of its time doing u-turns. As one moves south, there is a slight hump in the middle of the vineyard, from which the vines slope gently away in both directions. When viewed from the bottom of La Romanée-Conti, it's easy to see that La Romanée rises rather rapidly above its shared lower border and displaying a slope of approximately 16%. It's also interesting to see that there is a lot more rock in Aux Reignots, the vineyard directly above La Romanée; it's frankly amazing to see the change occur in as little as 6 feet. Most of the vines are 55 years old (they were planted in 1951) though there is a small portion of 12 year old vines that are declassified and will be until they are deemed to be producing sufficiently high quality grapes to merit inclusion in the main *cuvée*.

Impressions: Unlike some top tastings that I have participated in, this one was indisputably of absolute top quality even though not every wine showed quite as well as one might have hoped. It was also fascinating to see 5 distinct periods represented in the 85+ years of evolution in the wines represented in the tasting: there was the long period before the War, the post-war period of Forey *grand père* followed by those of Jean Forey and Régis Forey and then finally, the new era of Louis-Michel Liger-Belair. What is perhaps most interesting about these periods is not so much that there were greater or lesser stylistic differences in evidence so much as the highly distinctive *terroir* of La Romanée was virtually always present. Burgundy geeks often sardonically joke that such and such a *terroir* is no match for a heavy handed producer's style but in this case, the voice of La Romanée clearly transcended style, the impact of various vintages and, perhaps most impressive of all, it was distinctive young and old.

For as long as I can remember, La Romanée has, naturally enough, been compared to its illustrious neighbor La Romanée-Conti and quality comparisons are inevitably made. These comparisons have some logical basis as well for the wines are similar in many respects, which is no big surprise given their close proximity to one another. Both wines are reserved, even borderline austere in their youth and both require long aging to reveal the full extent of their intrinsic genius. Neither of them are flashy wines, indeed they are often so subtle that their greatness escapes the casual observer. For example, I've heard it

said at too many tastings that “I just don’t get La Romanée-Conti; I much prefer La Tâche or Richebourg” not to believe that wines that force the drinker to work at appreciating them are often overlooked in favor of more generous wines. But greatness doesn’t have to mean flashiness as the brilliance of La Romanée is its sense of completeness, that it is a perfect sphere of a wine with no one facet dominating over another. If I had to draw a distinction between La Romanée and La Romanée-Conti, I would suggest that the tannic structure of La Romanée is ever so slightly less refined. It will be interesting to see if this continues to be true as the present Liger-Belair freely admits that he wants to make a more elegant wine than had been crafted in the post WWII era.

The other aspect that the tasting underscored was how consistent the *terroir* of La Romanée is and consistency is one of the hallmarks of the great *terroirs* anywhere. It can of course be argued that the best *terroirs* tend to receive the most care and attention and be owned by the greatest domaines with the most resources, both financial and gifted winemaking. However, with the exception of the 1982 to 1993 period, virtually all of the wines met or exceeded what one would have reasonably expected from the standpoint of quality relative to the general quality of the vintage. Only the 1919 was a real let down and it’s not at all clear that this wasn’t simply the fault of a less than representative bottle. By contrast, when one considers the great red burgundy vintages of the 20th C that were present, La Romanée delivered 1915, 1923, 1937, 1949, 1952, 1953, 1959, 1964, 1966, 1971 and 1978; again, only the 1919 wasn’t what it reasonably should have been. Moreover, there were some minor vintages where the wines definitely outperformed; examples of this would include the 1950, 1982 and 1986 and while none of these were great wines, they were much better than anyone would reasonably expect. Among later vintages, I must admit to being somewhat disappointed, in particular with the 1989, 1990, 1993 and 1997. I believe, based on two prior bottles, that the less than stellar showing of the 1989 can be attributed to this particular bottle. However, this qualification cannot be used for the lackluster 1990, 1993 and 1997. However, the 20th C ended with a solid run as all of the vintages from 1995 forward, again excepting 1997, were outstanding and the 1999 qualifies as brilliant.

The future of La Romanée appears bright as well because the young Louis-Michel Liger-Belair has already proven himself to be a gifted winemaker and a serious *vigneron*, understanding well that quality is first and foremost created in the vineyard itself. In preparing for the future, it helps to have a clear understanding of the past. In this regard, it is entirely to Liger-Belair’s credit that he attended this tasting at his own expense so that he could learn from tasting older vintages what La Romanée becomes with time. The domaine has no extensive library of older vintages and thus he quite rightly concluded that this tasting offered an unparalleled opportunity to fill in the gaps in his knowledge, as it were.

Conclusions: First, and without question, the results amply demonstrate that La Romanée merits being mentioned in the same breath with the very best in Burgundy. I would unhesitatingly place it in the same league as La Romanée-Conti, La Tâche, Musigny, Chambertin/Clos de Bèze and Richebourg. Exactly where it would rank in such a hierarchy is difficult to say and I’m frankly not so sure that its exact placement really matters so much as it’s important to acknowledge that it is entirely appropriate to include La Romanée in any discussion of Burgundy’s elite. In fact, I would go so far as to suggest that it is every bit as gifted as all but La Romanée-Conti, which is not to say that it is superior to Musigny or La Tâche, only that it is just as unique and original. Second, La Romanée is not a modern wine, at least not in the sense that Richebourg and La Tâche are. La Romanée shares much of the essential character of La Romanée-Conti and I would suggest that La Romanée-Conti is not a modern burgundy either; it’s much too subtle and reserved when young and its perfection and individuality, even when mature, require that the connoisseur come to it rather than it coming to the taster in the inimitable fashion of a great La Tâche or Richebourg. This is not to suggest that these wines are in any way vulgar or lesser because of their generosity of expression but rather that appreciating a great La Romanée-Conti or La Romanée requires some effort on the part of the drinker. Great examples of La Tâche or Richebourg give their all freely and without reservation whereas a sublime La Romanée still imposes upon the drinker a requirement to meet it in the middle as it were. Lastly, La Romanée requires time, lots of time, to fully express the genius of which it is so clearly capable. While it is of course true that all of the very best Burgundies require time, La Romanée requires 20 years or more to really be at its best. There was not one important vintage from 1985 forward that had peaked and even then, a number of the minor vintages in the 1980s suffered from less than pristine winemaking. In short, buy young La Romanée only with the intent of enjoying its brilliance when it’s fully mature but when you finally open that precious bottle, you’re in for one of the most sublime wines imaginable.

La Romanée by Vintage and Producer/Shipper

2002	Vicomte Liger-Belair	95
1999	Bouchard Père et Fils/Château de Vosne-Romanée	96
1998	Bouchard Père et Fils/Château de Vosne-Romanée	94
1997	Bouchard Père et Fils/Château de Vosne-Romanée	84
1996	Bouchard Père et Fils/Château de Vosne-Romanée	93
1995	Bouchard Père et Fils/Château de Vosne-Romanée	94
1993	Bouchard Père et Fils/Château de Vosne-Romanée	86
1990	Bouchard Père et Fils/Château de Vosne-Romanée	88
1989	Bouchard Père et Fils/Château de Vosne-Romanée	90
1988	Bouchard Père et Fils/Château de Vosne-Romanée	NR
1987	Bouchard Père et Fils/Château de Vosne-Romanée	87
1986	Bouchard Père et Fils/Château de Vosne-Romanée	89
1985	Bouchard Père et Fils/Château de Vosne-Romanée	90
1982	Bouchard Père et Fils/Château de Vosne-Romanée (en magnum)	88
1979	Bouchard Père et Fils/Château de Vosne-Romanée	85
1978	Bouchard Père et Fils/Château de Vosne-Romanée	94
1972	Bichot/Château de Vosne-Romanée (en magnum)	87
1971	Bichot/Château de Vosne-Romanée	96
1966	Bichot/Château de Vosne-Romanée	95
1964	Royé-LaBaume	94
1961	Leroy	92
1959	Leroy	91
1955	Leroy	89
1953	Leroy	NR
1952	Leroy	96
1950	Leroy	91
1949	Thomas-Bassot	98
1937	Belin, Jules	93
1923	C. Marey et Cte.Liger-Belair	93
1919	C. Marey et Cte.Liger-Belair	86
1915	Morin	99

Note: all of the following bottles were in acceptable to excellent condition, adjusting of course for their respective ages. To the best of anyone's knowledge, only the 1964 had been reconditioned and this was done at the domaine by Liger-Belair himself.

2002 La Romanée – Vicomte Liger-Belair: (bottled 3 weeks ago). An adroit trace of wood frames stunningly elegant, dazzlingly complex black fruit aromas, leading to sappy, mouth coating, powerful and very deep if presently tight and somber flavors of astonishing richness and length. But it's the seamless harmony, superb purity of expression and sheer class that distinguishes this. In a word, breathtaking. 95/2014-30

1999 La Romanée – Bouchard Père et Fils/Château de Vosne-Romanée: Very deep, almost black ruby color. There is a healthy dose of new wood but there is absolutely no doubt that this wine has sufficient density to absorb it. Extremely ripe, rich and expressive for young La Romanée, which is often severe, reserved and austere in its youth. The intensity of this wine is dialed way up with thick, super ripe aromas of black berries, oriental spices, tea, leather and a trace of underbrush coupled with extremely dense, extract of pinot noir flavors and fine, dusty tannins that create a massively structured wine that somehow remains in perfect balance. There is unusual volume as well yet the wine remains elegant with outstanding mid-palate concentration. Simply fabulous potential that should permit this to be extremely long lived and a wine that hasn't changed a bit since my last review in February of 2001. 96/2014-30

1998 La Romanée – Bouchard Père et Fils/Château de Vosne-Romanée: Medium ruby. This is nothing short of phenomenal and may even one day outclass the other worldly '99 with it's sexy, stunning aromatic complexity and ultra pure nose featuring layers upon layers of black and red pinot and violet fruit mixed with dried rose petals and rich soil notes plus dazzling spiciness. The moderately structured flavors are buffered by superb extract and the sheer depth and breadth of flavors is amazing. To be sure, this is not especially massive and the tannins are presently not quite as well integrated as with the '99 but the potential here is extraordinary. 94/2012-30

1997 La Romanée – Bouchard Père et Fils/Château de Vosne-Romanée: In contrast with the aromatic fireworks of the first three vintages, the '97 displays under ripe, somewhat green and borderline unpleasantly vegetal aromas followed by round, supple and easy flavors that have no where near the same sense of breed, depth, complexity and refinement as the prior wines. In fact, I found this hard to like if not technically flawed and though it's by no means structurally resolved, the less than optimally ripe phenolics suggest that it would be best not to wait too long to pull the cork to preserve what fruit remains. 84/try from 2005?

1996 La Romanée – Bouchard Père et Fils/Château de Vosne-Romanée: Medium ruby color that is no longer as deep as the '99. Fresh and still entirely primary, elegantly perfumed violet and black fruit aromas introduce round, sweet, brilliantly delineated middle weight flavors of considerable breed and class and delivers a racy, long, stunningly pure finish. The basic character here is interesting as the nose is wonderfully expressive yet the flavors, and especially the finish, is somewhat somber and reserved. Still, there is excellent potential though this will clearly require another 6 to 8 years to really begin drinking well. 93/2011-30

1995 La Romanée – Bouchard Père et Fils/Château de Vosne-Romanée: The nose is just beginning to reveal the barest trace of secondary aromas with subtle nuances of violets, earth, spice, smoke and hints of game that precede robust, structured and very dense, almost robust flavors that deliver outstanding length. There is not the finesse and almost perfect balance of the '96 but there is much more density and mid-palate sap plus a finishing note of chocolate. This is still relatively young and should last for 30+ years. 94/2012-25

1993 La Romanée – Bouchard Père et Fils/Château de Vosne-Romanée: A rather funky, not entirely clean nose that somewhat resembles brett but isn't leads to otherwise dense, sappy and complex flavors and solid length but the nose is unpleasant. I have had better bottles than this one but more than a few examples have had this moderately unclean nose. 86/try from 2008+

1990 La Romanée – Bouchard Père et Fils/Château de Vosne-Romanée: Some initial bricking with a medium ruby center. A subtly perfumed nose mixed with pronounced secondary aromas blends into big, moderately rich, well-developed flavors that are still quite structured if not particularly elegant and display a noticeable vegetal component on the intermediate length finish. In short, this is good but not special and I would begin looking for reasons to open any bottles you may have as it's unlikely that this will improve further even though it should soften. 88/now to 2015

1989 La Romanée – Bouchard Père et Fils/Château de Vosne-Romanée: This too evidences a touch of bricking. A rather evolved nose of elegant, very ripe spice and smoke with obvious earth notes that have an ever-so-slight vegetal character. The flavors are delicious, round and rich if not especially complex and while this could be enjoyed now, it is holding well and finishes with a lovely sweetness. 90/now Note: I have had better bottles of this that were not necessarily richer but certainly more complex and without the vegetal quality.

1988 La Romanée – Bouchard Père et Fils/Château de Vosne-Romanée: Austere, backward with under ripe aromas marred by subtle yet unmistakable cork taint. Underneath the funk lurks impressively rich, dense, sweet and potent flavors that offer plenty of power and length. No other recent notes and this was not rated.

1987 La Romanée – Bouchard Père et Fils/Château de Vosne-Romanée: (from a bottle hand carried directly from the domaine). The color is beginning to lighten and there is obvious bricking. Noticeable volatile acidity frames otherwise pretty, earthy and gamey aromas followed by sweet, rich, completely resolved flavors that display a touch of vegetal character on the soft but nicely long finish. This is actually quite satisfying for the vintage and while by no means a great wine, it is enjoyable in its fashion. 87/Drink up

1986 La Romanée – Bouchard Père et Fils/Château de Vosne-Romanée: (from a bottle hand carried directly from the domaine). Plenty of bricking but still with a ruby center. A very expressive nose of earth, spice, game and ample *sous bois* notes plus notable complexity precede sweet, delicious, nicely intense and still focused flavors and some finishing structure on the moderately long finish. This delivers excellent quality in the context of the vintage and while it will continue to hold, I suspect the finish will begin to lean out and the presently unresolved tannins will come to dominate. 89/Drink up

1985 La Romanée – Bouchard Père et Fils/Château de Vosne-Romanée: Bricking with a ruby core. A wonderfully elegant, expressively perfumed nose soars from the glass and this has real vibrancy to it that provides more lift to the nose compared to those of several of the prior vintages. There is however a slightly annoying hint of volatile acidity in the background and while it probably is too subtle for many to notice, it is clearly there is you're sensitive to it. The flavors are light but very rich and deliciously sweet with plenty of sap on the long finish. There is still some finishing tannin to resolve though this is nearing its apogee. In short, this is particular in style and while the VA is not enough to really be intrusive, it prevents a higher score. 90/now

1982 La Romanée – Bouchard Père et Fils/Château de Vosne-Romanée: Limited bricking. A beautifully fresh and impressively expressive nose that also has a subtle background hint of VA though here it is very much a nuance. The medium weight flavors offer good complexity and in this format, there is still a healthy dollop of underlying structure and excellent length. This is quite reminiscent of the '86 in both style and development because it is not a great wine but certainly a very fine effort in the context of the vintage. This is drinking well now though it will hold for years in this format though I suspect that from 750 ml, it should be drunk sooner than later. 88/now

1979 La Romanée – Bouchard Père et Fils/Château de Vosne-Romanée: Deep bricking with only remnants of a ruby core. A completely mature nose with abundant *sous bois* and caramel aromas merge into sweet, completely resolved flavors and while there is good length, the overall effect suffers from an absence of precision and vibrancy. In short, this is tiring but drinkable and should be consumed immediately as it's frankly post-mature if not unpleasant. 85/Past its best

1978 La Romanée – Bouchard Père et Fils/Château de Vosne-Romanée: Still medium ruby with no bricking at all in evidence. Stunningly complex with perfumed, intense and superbly elegant spice and earth aromas blending seamlessly into marvelously sweet, round, velvety and pure flavors that offer impeccable balance and plenty of cassis-infused extract on the extraordinarily long finish. This continued to develop for some two hours in the glass and bottles in this condition will last another 20 years without difficulty. A real stunner of a wine. 94/now

1972 La Romanée – Maison Bichot/Château de Vosne-Romanée: (from magnum). Still quite deeply colored with remarkably little bricking for the vintage, undoubtedly due to good storage and the large size format. Very high-toned, mostly secondary fruit aromas framed in noticeable *sous bois* and traces of volatile acidity are followed by round, intense and beautifully complex flavors underpinned by firm, slightly under ripe tannins and pungent, powerful acidity that is decidedly more than the sap can comfortably buffer. As such, the overall impression is an expressively aromatic wine that is rather strict if not downright severe on the palate. While this could be held for years, there is no reason to wait and it's a wine that will do best with food to help buffer the strong acidity. 87/now

1971 La Romanée – Maison Bichot/Château de Vosne-Romanée: Strong bricking with a ruby core. This is an extraordinarily elegant wine that simply exudes class and refinement from the explosive and utterly seductive nose to the powerfully long finish. Perfumed and lusciously spiced black fruit aromas that are a beguiling mix of primary and secondary fruit notes lead to sweet, intense, mouth coating and superbly delineated flavors of awe inspiring complexity and there is still some moderate structure on the unbelievably long finish. This is perhaps not quite as spicy as the '78 but this is a more complete wine with a bit more of everything, in particular harmony of expression. In fact, this is such a complete wine that it reminds me in its fashion of a great vintage of Romanée-Conti. Flat out great and a wine that should drink well for years to come. 96/now

1966 La Romanée – Maison Bichot/Château de Vosne-Romanée: Like the '71, there is strong bricking with a ruby center. The personality here is more reserved but this too just exudes class and refinement with a fully mature nose of earth, spice and wonderfully complex aromas that are secondary in character but evidences no hint of *sous bois* at this point. The flavors are beautifully defined and almost regal with a lovely inner mouth perfume and a textured, rather linear quality to the stupendously long finish. This isn't a seductive wine but I was knocked out by the sheer elegance, enormous depth and awe-inspiring purity of expression. Drinking perfectly now but well stored bottles should last for another two decades. 95/now

1964 La Romanée – Maison Royé-LaBaume: (from a bottle hand carried directly from the domaine that was recorked in 1999). This required fully 30 minutes to really open up but when it finally did, it was a blend of the wonderful expressiveness of the '71 and the knockout intensity, elegance and rigor of the '66. The sweet, ripe, deep and superbly powerful flavors are still moderately firm and this is one of those rare wines that can be incredibly rich on the finish yet maintain near perfect delineation and focus. A great effort that should drink well for another 20 years. 94/now to 2020

1961 La Romanée – Maison Leroy: Heavy bricking. A softly perfumed, wonderfully complex nose with obvious *sous bois* notes introduces forward, generous, utterly delicious and impressively delineated flavors that deliver simply outstanding length. Like certain of its predecessors, this is an incredibly classy effort and one that is drinking perfectly now. 92/now

1959 La Romanée – Maison Leroy: Still deeply colored though there is some light bricking. The nose was initially somewhat musty but with air cleaned up to reveal an explosive, ripe, indeed very ripe nose of earth, smoke, game and only hints of *sous bois* followed by still relatively primary flavors that still possess noticeable structure and impressive length. There is a lovely sweetness to the finish, which when coupled with a beguiling velvety quality, makes for a lovely if not genuinely great wine. This can certainly be drunk now with pleasure but it will also hold for another 10 to 15 years. 91/now Note: another example tasted in April, 2003 and shipped by Maison P. Misserey of Nuits St. Georges was decidedly better, offering more complexity as well as more overall elegance with the same long life expectancy the above wine displayed. 93/now to 2020

1955 La Romanée – Maison Leroy: Remarkably for the vintage, there is only moderate bricking here and a still ruby center. The nose is ripe, in fact extremely ripe though it stops short of obvious torrefaction with only hints of *sous bois* and a lovely,

and subtle, spicy complexity. As the nose suggests, the flavors are extremely rich and possess a really lovely inner mouth perfume and a slightly chewy, textured quality to the finish. There is still good if not great vibrancy remaining and I would be inclined to drink this up over the next 5 to 10 years as the initial signs of decline are in evidence. 89/now

1953 La Romanée – Maison Leroy: This was unfortunately badly corked though underneath the funk, there was a lovely sweetness and depth to the flavors. I have not tasted this wine in at least a decade but at that time it ranked among the best examples of La Romanée that I had ever tasted. Not rated.

1952 La Romanée – Maison Leroy: Some bricking but still deep ruby at the center. This possesses one of the most dazzling and purest noses of the entire range, which is really saying something when one considers just how aromatically crystalline La Romanée can be at its best. Ethereal, perfumed and highly expressive with a combination of spice, earth, smoke, game and virtually no *sous bois* all wrapped in something I can only describe as superb breed leads to sweet, beautifully intense and ultra pure flavors that deliver stunning delineation and a linear yet velvety finish. This is like a concerto that uses a minimum of notes to move the listener as there is nothing flashy here yet it's an emotional and moving wine. In short, this is flat out great and is rivaled by very few wines here. 96/Now but no rush

1950 La Romanée – Maison Leroy: Bricked completely though to the center but not browning. Incredibly for what was only a fair vintage at best, this is still aromatically vibrant with ample *sous bois*, earth, smoke and an interesting hung meat quality. The round, supple and sweet flavors offer terrific depth and a brilliantly complex finish and I must observe that this is quite simply an extraordinary achievement for the vintage. I would drink this over the next 5 years and no more. 91/Immediately

1949 La Romanée – Maison Thomas-Bassot: Still deep ruby with very little bricking. This wine has always had a tremendous reputation and deservedly so with its soaring, unbelievably complex nose that is utterly spellbinding in its sheer breadth of expression and virtually unrivaled purity. The flavors are sublime, understated, focused, chiseled yet rich, generous and deep, offering almost unmatched complexity and there is still some unresolved structure remaining that should permit this to continue to hold for another 20 years, perhaps longer. Such descriptions admittedly sometimes sound affected but this is unquestionably knee-bending stuff of the highest order. In short, the '49 is an awe-inspiring La Romanée that is perhaps the greatest wine of what is arguably the greatest post-war vintage. 98/now

1937 La Romanée – Maison Jules Belin: Bricking but remarkably deep ruby center. A very ripe nose of impressive complexity is nuanced with spices, earth, leather, game, underbrush, *sous bois* and undeniable class leads to rich, expressive and deep flavors that offer superb length. The finish is powerful, sweet, slightly alcoholic and completely coats the palate in velvet. Great juice and this should continue to last for years if well stored because even though the tannins are largely resolved, there is excellent balance despite the obviously high alcohol. 93/now

1923 La Romanée – C. Marey et Comte Liger-Belair: (from a relatively high fill bottle). Heavy bricking but still ruby center. The nose is extremely ripe, wonderfully expressive fantastically complex and redolent with heavy *sous bois* leading to sweet, impressively rich flavors that display a distinct mineral component. The finish is quite persistent and still wonderfully long and there is still some finishing structure. Others present at this tasting were somewhat less impressed than I was but the overall impression was one of considerable awe. There is no point to waiting any longer though there is no particular rush. 93/now

1919 La Romanée – C. Marey et Comte Liger-Belair: Somber ruby with some moderate bricking. This was a strange wine as there is an ethyl acetate character cut with, of all things, a strong citrus component. The flavors are extremely rich, indeed over ripe yet they are also utterly delicious and wonderfully long. To be sure, this is a particular wine that manages to deliver an interesting drinking experience despite the very eccentric nose. 86/now

1915 La Romanée – Morin: Heavy bricking but remarkably, this still possesses a ruby center. Wines like this are actually difficult to write about because they completely transcend the written word. Virtually perfect in every respect with a subtle grace and flawless harmony of elements that create a complete whole, where each facet faultlessly complements another. A soaring, classic La Romanée nose of elegant spice, earth and that indescribable breed that it expresses so clearly leads to rich, supple, balanced, velvety flavors of surpassing depth all wrapped in unforgettable length. I am writing this description 5 days later and I can still taste this wine. In short, one of the greatest wines of my lifetime that should continue to hold. 99/now

In the Next Issue

2001 and 2002 Côte d'Or Whites

Double Feature Progress Report: Whither the 1997 Vintage and An In-Depth Look at Domestic Pinot Noir – 120+ Examples from Many of California's Finest Producers