

Burgundy's Drouhins Keep Winemaking All in the Family

The Drouhins have been making wine in Burgundy since 1880, but their celebrated domaine is anything but fusty



CLAN WITH A PLAN | Philippe and Robert Drouhin at Beaune Clos des Mouches Photo: Michel Joly for The Wall Street Journal



By
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WHEN VÉRONIQUE Drouhin-Boss declared her desire to become a winemaker at her family's celebrated Burgundy domaine, [Maison Joseph Drouhin](#), her father wasn't disappointed that none of his sons wanted the job. Instead, Robert Drouhin told his daughter, " 'You are the guardian of the style of the family,' " Véronique recalled as we stood before Beaune Clos des Mouches, arguably the Drouhins' most famous vineyard, a few weeks ago.

Hers was an unusual ambition in Burgundy some 30 years ago. Véronique, now 53 years old, was the only woman in her class of 22 at enology school in Dijon. But she was the sibling best suited to the role of head winemaker. Her eldest brother, Philippe, was slated to become president of the Beaune-based company but preferred the position of vineyard manager, so the youngest in the family, Frédéric, a business school graduate, became president instead. Another of Véronique's younger brothers, Laurent, became brand ambassador and North American sales and marketing director, moving from France to New York.

It all sounded so seamless. Were Burgundian winemaking families really that evolved, free of jealousies and petty resentments? "We each have our areas of expertise, and we each do what we like," said Véronique.

Whether by temperament or luck, or a felicitous combination of both, the Drouhins have achieved what many family-run companies find difficult—even impossible—to pull off: They have not only maintained the family business but have expanded and improved upon it, in terms of land and wines, as well as sales.

Of course, the siblings had the significant advantage of taking on an already large and well-regarded portfolio of wines (currently around 90) from a wide range of vineyards (439 acres in total), including many grand and premier crus in the Côte d’Or.

The domaine was founded in 1880 by their great-grandfather, Joseph Drouhin, who was all of 22 when he moved from Chablis to Beaune. Though he never purchased any vineyards, only grapes, his son Maurice acquired quite a few, starting in 1919. One of those was Beaune Clos des Mouches.

Maurice was also the broker of [Domaine de la Romanée-Conti](#) wines, some of the most sought-after in Burgundy, and was even given the chance to buy a portion of the fabled estate in 1942. Alas, at the time he was imprisoned by the Nazis and so, uncertain of his fate, Maurice declined the offer. He remained a broker for the domaine for many years.

In 1957, his nephew Robert took control of Domaine Joseph Drouhin. Robert, who retired in 2003 but still acts as president of the board, oversaw the domaine’s greatest expansion, acquiring more vineyards in the Côte d’Or and Chablis. In 1987, he extended the family’s reach into the U.S., founding [Domaine Drouhin](#) in Oregon.

Now 83, Robert Drouhin described his Oregon adventure in almost giddy terms when we met recently in Beaune. “I felt like a young boy asking ‘Why? Why? Why?’ ” he recalled. The venture gave Robert the opportunity to question many of the things winemakers in Burgundy take for granted, things they do according to tradition, not to mention rules and regulations. “Here, we are entangled in so many laws it is hard to escape,” he said.



Robert, left, with Véronique, Philippe and Frédéric Photo: Michel Joly for The Wall Street Journal

The Drouhins recently expanded their Oregon holdings, debuting new wines under the Roserock label earlier this month. The wines are produced from vineyards in the state’s Eola-Amity Hills region, which Véronique described as “the Chambolle-Musigny of Oregon,” drawing a parallel between the finesse and elegance of the two regions’ wines.

Although Robert made substantial acquisitions over the years, he expressed regret that he didn’t buy even more. “The price of land has become a problem,” he said, which is a rather large understatement considering the overheated real-estate market in Burgundy today. A hectare (2.47 acres) of a grand cru Côte d’Or vineyard can cost as much as €30 million (\$34 million). The cost of great Burgundy wines is

correspondingly high, with four-figure prices commonplace, especially for bottles from esteemed domaines such as Rousseau and Coche-Dury, [which have become collector favorites at auction](#) in the past decade or so. Robert alluded to this recent celebrity when he observed that, in Burgundy, once “reputation was built very slowly. It was not built on fashion.”

Slow, careful growth is a Drouhin principle. “I believe in history and progress, but one has to be very careful,” said Robert, a theme he repeated over and over again in the course of our conversation. The Drouhins’ buying habits reflect this. For example, they have been investing in Chablis—where Frédéric noted that quality vineyards can still be found for reasonable prices—but not in Beaujolais, because, as Frédéric explained, “the wines are very hard to sell.” Instead, they have a partnership there with Hospices de Belleville.

It isn’t that the Drouhins are risk-averse. When they adopted organic and biodynamic practices in their vineyards 30 years ago—long before it became fashionable—they were “denounced,” according to Robert.

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The Drouhins have also been unabashed about championing their line of *négociant* wines, made from a mix of purchased and estate fruit. *Négociants* are merchants who traditionally buy grapes or finished wines but don’t usually own vineyards. Burgundians have long regarded these wines as inferior to those made by growers or domaines. Today, however, good *négociant* wines are commonplace and, as Véronique pointed out, just about every grower in Burgundy is also now a *négociant*, making wines from purchased grapes on the side. “They call themselves a micro-*négoce*,” she said. It sounds better. “A *négociant* is a grower who has been successful,” Frédéric added, with a laugh.



The family’s premier cru wine Photo: Michel Joly for The Wall Street Journal

Véronique and Frédéric put together a small tasting for me in the domaine’s cellar in Beaune. It offered compelling evidence that the Drouhins could make high-quality wines at both ends of the price spectrum. When it came to the Burgundies, I was impressed by the rich and generous 2014 Drouhin Rully (\$20) and the 2014 Drouhin-Vaudon Chablis Premier Cru Mont de Milieu (\$40), which was taut with a terrific persistence and firm mineral note. The 2014 Drouhin Puligny-Montrachet Folatières (\$65) was elegant and precise. Though “only” a village wine, not a grand or premier cru, it is a “benchmark” of the Drouhin style, said Véronique. Other expressions of their style include the gloriously unctuous 2014 Drouhin Beaune Clos des Mouches Blanc (\$165) and the 2013 Vosne-Romanée Les Petits Monts (\$360).

From the Oregon side, the 2014 Roserock Chardonnay (\$30) was bright and clean, while the 2014 Roserock Zéphérine Pinot Noir (\$65) was elegant and supple, and the 2012 Domaine Drouhin Pinot Noir was powerful and lush (\$35).

Will the next generation of Drouhins prove as capable and united as the one now running the show? With Laurent's children having spent much of their lives in the U.S., Robert Drouhin is concerned that the young Drouhin cousins won't be as close to one another as his children are. "They should know each other more," he said. "They should go back to their roots."

But with vineyards in all corners of Burgundy and in various places around Oregon, and with Drouhin wines sold in around 80 countries, where are the Drouhins' roots? In a single place or all over the world?