



(Clockwise from left) Hautes-Côtes de Nuits in Burgundy, the 2019 Grands Jours de Bourgogne wine show, and the Hospices de Beaune auction • SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

•• RUMA SINGH

On one Sunday every November, all roads in Burgundy lead to the small town of Beaune. Here, the Hospices de Beaune, a charitable almshouse built in the 15th century, is the site of the world's most famous wine auction. This year, however, things will be a little different. Covid-19 will change the scale, size and excitement of the 160th edition of the auction, but the magnificent wines of Bourgogne (the preferred French name for Burgundy) will remain the same.

2020 has been a difficult year for wine producers, yet the Hospices' team has soldiered on with vinifying the wines, to be sold in 228 litre barrels (called *pièce*) at the auction. In fact, the volume this year will be slightly higher than last year's, with 633 barrels, and, according to Ludvine Griveau, winemaker for the Hospices, all "the ingredients of a great vintage".

Missing the buzz

Last November, I had watched an entirely different Beaune at work and play. On the Hospices de Beaune weekend, there had been festivity in the air: the small town bursting at the seams with weekend visitors, the hotels sold out, the wine bars and restaurants jammed with tourists sipping Chablis and eating *jambon persillé*. Revellers had spilled on to the

The Beaune identity

A socially-distanced Hospices de Beaune kicks off, with live streaming, limited tastings, and 633 barrels up for auction



streets, wine glasses in hand, disregarding the cold, drizzly weather.

This year there will be no massive crowds thronging the courtyard of the Hotel Dieu with its multi-hued tiled roof, the site of

the Hospices de Beaune museum. Instead, the auction will happen with strict protocols in place for appointments, seating of the buyers (limited to 250 instead of the usual 600) and social distancing. And to keep the fans happy,



Sampling fine Bourgogne

In 2019, Bichot, the biggest buyer, had swept up 20% of the barrels (at nearly €3 million) – a remarkable quantity of Grand Cru and Premier Cru destined for their cellars. Their clients usually fly in from around the world. But this time, many have decided to stay away. So, to bring the Hospices experience home, the Bichot team has placed a range of virtual experiences on their website, from tasting videos to guidance on how to buy a barrel. Not keen on a barrel? Just one bottle is possible, too. On offer for the first time is a literal taste of the Hospices experience: a hand-picked box of five sample wines (pictured left) selected from the Bichot family's private collection, available for €25 (approx ₹2,500). The special coffret (of 20 ml bottles) offers a taste of the 2017 and 2018 vintages.

the event will be live streamed. "There will definitely be great interest in the live streaming," predicts Christian Ciamos, export director of Domaines Albert Bichot, the major Bourgogne *négociant*, adding, "The demand for barrels is still high as the vintage 2020 offers great structure and freshness."

Rules and toasts

Last year's activities had commenced with a mega tasting – 3,000 wines from every Bourgogne appellation – at the massive Palais des Congrès. This was a precursor to the grand tasting of the wines up for auction in the wood-panelled Salle Saint-Nicolas inside Hôtel Dieu the next day. This time, the numbers are to be scaled down. "The tastings are limited, with pre-appointments to be confirmed for six people every 15 minutes," says Ciamos. Among the new rules: compulsory masks, strict on-time arrival by potential buyers, socially-distanced seating, and restricted numbers of staff.

What will remain constant is the Christie's team of auctioneers who will once again work in well-oiled tandem through the marathon auction in the grand hall of Hôtel Dieu, exhorting buyers to pay just a little more. The high point will be the sale of the *Pièce de Présidents* or 'President's Barrel', to raise funds for charity. The 2020 wine will be from the *climat*

(specific vineyard site) of Les Froichots in the Grand Cru vineyard of Clos de la Roche and the proceeds will go to support French medical staff and care workers.

Bearing through the tough times

I asked Ciamos about the greater impact of Covid-19 on Bourgogne wine, given that the wine industry has been struggling to stay afloat in almost every part of the world. With its premium image and limited production, the region has hitherto been considered Teflon-like: there is always someone, somewhere buying a bottle. Ciamos is upbeat. "The impact of Covid is limited at the moment in Bourgogne. Both the domestic and export markets have supported our wines over the last six months, with some major changes in distribution. While the on-trade has suffered during lockdown, the off-trade has been moving up, as well as online sales."

Still, the buzz of the weekend will be missed. I recall sitting at a packed wine bar that final evening in Beaune last year, a glass of white in hand, contemplating how the high-octane day exemplified the unity of Bourgogne. Here were the world's superstar producers whose wines individually fetch mind-boggling sums of money, yet there was a simplicity of functioning and a devotion to quality above all else. At a gala lunch hosted by the Bourgogne Wine Board a day earlier, I had watched as the biggest names of Bourgogne – from Domaine de la Romanée-Conti's icon Aubert de Villaine to Guillaume, Marquis d'Angerville – arrived to celebrate the Hospices, sitting together, laughing, quaffing wine and exchanging notes. As the MC took the dais, the entire room burst into song, the 'Ban Bourguignon', a rousing anthem sung accompanied by the vigorous waving of white napkins and hands.

It was a joyous sight. May that be reality again.

The Hospices de Beaune auction is tomorrow. Details: hospices-beaune.com