

COLUMN



RUMASINGH

Says Pinot Noir maybe a capricious grape but in the right hands it is worth tasting all its different styles

An ode to the diva grape

It is worth tasting Pinot Noir in all its varied roles – from the shy, delicate ingénue, and simple yet intense New World newbie to the full-on Grand Cru prima donna

Pinot Noir. The black grape that calls Burgundy home has been referred to by dozens of names and adjectives. Most commonly, it is known as the “heartbreak grape”, due to the challenges it presents its winemakers in the cellar or in the vineyards. It is also called fussy, capricious and beguiling – much like a Hollywood superstar – a diva grape. Capricious it may be, but in the right hands, in the right vintage and in the right terroir, it sings.

This is why it is worth tasting Pinot Noir in all its varied roles – from the shy, delicate ingénue, and simple yet intense New World newbie to the full-on Grand Cru prima donna.

Unsurprisingly, few other grapes can match it in terms of accolades earned. Clive Coates, MW in his book on Burgundy, likens Pinot Noir to a gypsy, a “temperamental Carmen”. Jancis Robinson describes it thus: “It tends to be fruity, perfumed and haunting. It dances on the palate rather than overpowering it.” In the definitive tome on ampelography, “Wine Grapes” by Jancis Robinson, Julia Harding and José Vouillamoz, there are 21 pages devoted to Pinot Noir alone, its siblings and its colour mutations and it also lists a whopping 27 principal synonyms for the grape.

Of late its wines, especially Burgundy’s highly-rated Grand Crus, have reached stratospheric levels in terms of pricing. “Bonkers,” described a British MW in a recent podcast on Burgundy – I must agree. And still, there are Burgundy Pinot Noir lovers who are willing to sell a vital organ to acquire a bottle of Grand Cru from a

top vintage. Let us look at possible reasons why.

Leading Indian importer Sonarys’s founder, Sanjay Menon puts it down to better modern winemaking practices and the fact that Burgundy production is very restricted. “Pinot Noir has achieved superstar status, and now the wine is being made better than ever. The vineyards are no longer corrupted by fertilizers, as they were decades earlier; today things are different.”

With a growing trend of organic and biodynamic winemaking at all levels (ergo, the rejection of fertilizers and pesticides) and an increasing understanding of the terroir and the importance of treating it with the reverence it deserves, “Burgundy is presently producing incredibly nuanced fine wines,” he adds, “especially those from top villages that are less prone to catastrophic climate events.”

Idiscovered this during my recent visit to Burgundy when I visited the 18th-century Château de Pommard. Impressive as the majestic château was, it was all but overshadowed by their wines – a clutch of excellent Pinot Noirs. The biodynamic estate produces wine from its Clos Marey-Monge, a unique UNESCO-protected monopole vineyard, renowned for its diverse soil composition. Here, winemaker Paul Negrerie makes three Clos wines from Morey-Mange’s seven unique terroirs. I did a tasting which made me instantly discard my preconceived notions about the profile of Pommard wines. The wines ran the gamut from delicate and ethereal to more

structured and rounded. All showed remarkable balance and complexity, even though they were still very young.

Negrerie acknowledges that climate change has forced them to adjust their handling of the grape. “Every year presents a new challenge, with increasingly high temperatures and seasonal changes that complicate our ability to anticipate. It is essential to preserve the finesse and elegance of Burgundy wines.” Biodynamics has helped strengthen the vines’ resistance to difficulties in climate.

What of those Pinot Noir lovers who cannot afford Burgundy prices? The good news is that there are options available. New Zealand, California, Oregon, Tasmania, Germany, Austria and several other regions are known for making quality versions of Pinot Noir wines. Within Burgundy, several lesser known appellations are finally gaining recognition: Saint-Romain, Monthélie, Givry and the Hautes-Côtes.

While there is no disputing the grape’s quality, the Pinot boom can largely be attributed to the 2004 movie, “Sideways”. Based on Rex Pickett’s book, the movie boosted Pinot sales by 170%. Ten years ago, I interviewed Pickett, shortly after the movie hit the headlines with five Oscar nominations in 2005. He confessed that like Miles, he had an ongoing love affair with Pinot.

“I fell in love with Pinot Noir. I think as a grape variety, it is entirely different from all the other red grapes. I love the aura of mystery that oenophiles seem to cloak it in. I love how it can produce rapturous and rhapsodic orations and prose,” he said. He vocalises this love via his lead character, Miles. Miles waxes eloquent about his love for Pinot, describing its flavours as, “the most haunting and brilliant and thrilling and subtle and ancient on the planet”.

When I started researching ‘other’ Pinots, I quickly realised the importance of understanding the role location plays. Pinot Noir is a 100% terroir-driven grape. In warmer



Hand-picked Pinot Noir grapes from the Henri Gouges estate in Burgundy

climates it will produce riper, more full-bodied wines with higher alcohol, while cooler climates would see light-bodied, more delicate versions. So, heads up, Pinot explorers, do not expect the same profile as Burgundy, for instance, if you are drinking a Pinot from a warmer climate.

Several leading Indian producers have also added Pinot Noir to their portfolio of late. One of them is Sula Vineyards, who included Pinot Noir in its popular range, ‘The Source’ a couple of years ago. Vintages sold out within months, showing a high degree of acceptance from the more well-travelled consumer.

“We pick early, when it is still very cool,” says Karan Vasani, COO, Sula Vineyards. “Our Pinot Noir is light to medium bodied, with moderate acidity and is fruit-driven. It is not a big Pinot.” The company is in the process of importing special clones from France that should give quality an additional boost.

Vasani agrees with the ‘diva’ moniker for the grape. “Pinot Noir, like Nebbiolo, is more terroir-driven than, say, Cabernet Sauvignon. So, to find exceptional terroir to grow outstanding Pinot Noir is far harder than for most other grapes.”

For Menon, drinking Pinot Noir in the form of Burgundy can be an emotional experience. “You just have to put your nose in a glass of Burgundy from a good producer and a good vintage. It can have the power to choke you with emotion.” ♦

Pinot Noir is a 100% terroir-driven grape. In warmer climates it will produce riper, more full-bodied wines with higher alcohol, while cooler climates would see light-bodied, more delicate versions

SOMMELIER SPEAK

“I have opened the door: I will hold it for others to enter”

Master Sommelier, Kamal Malik is the first Indian to pass the top qualification of the Court of Master Sommeliers. His story, as he tells it to **Ruma Singh** is both inspiring and dramatic

Master Sommelier. Two words that carry considerable weight in the wine world. So much so, that there are a mere 281 in the world today who are entitled to append this post-nominal after their name. The highest qualification of the Court of Master Sommeliers' 4-tier qualification has seen more heartbreak stories than success.

Kamal Malik, with a long and successful career in hospitality, won his MS pin the hard way in August 2024. His story is fascinating – the ultimate Indian success story. Coming from a family of agriculturalists based in a village near Delhi to becoming a top Sommelier and expert in wine, spirits and sake is no mean achievement.

Based in the Maldives, Kamal works for Asia's largest wine distribution company, Maritime and Mercantile International, a subsidiary of Emirates. He spoke at length about his background, his introduction to wine, and the obstacles and difficulties he encountered on his journey to becoming a Master Sommelier. A man of composure and quiet intelligence,

his fortitude shone through along with his quiet humour.

Excerpts from the interview:

It is known that to achieve the level of Master Sommelier is a long, arduous journey. Can you trace this journey in brief? What was your first reaction when you heard you had become India's first MS and one of only 281 in the world?

After I got my Advanced Sommelier pin, I was offered a seat for the Master Sommelier exam in 2018 – someone dropped out at the last minute. I took it, as seats are hard to come by. This helped me understand the format and prepare for the next time. 2019 came and was a heartbreak year: I was unable to pass any part. Then 2020 and 2021 were Covid years, when I was unable to travel to the UK for the exam. I considered giving it all up, but my wife and friends pushed me to continue.

In 2022, I went to Dubai, practised extensive tasting for a couple of weeks before the exam and managed to pass tasting and

service that year. Tasting is a massive challenge at the Masters level. It is not just timebound and oral, you need to score over 75% to pass. It means getting at least five wines out of the six blind-tasted wines correct. This is extremely tough and requires high levels of knowledge and precision. Success in theory eluded me twice before I finally managed to cross the line this year. If not, it would have been a complete reset as, per CMS rules I would need to start from zero again for the next attempt.

My reaction? The judges were good at keeping up the suspense (laughs). They called me and told me with straight faces: “You need to study even harder now... (lengthy pause) since you have passed and need to keep up your knowledge levels!”

It was an immense relief and a sense of pride that India would be listed in the few countries that are represented in the list of Master Sommeliers. We are still a very small group and the Indian hospitality sector is still learning how useful a sommelier's expertise can be. Hopefully, by reaching here I can help shine some light on this. Indian hospitality is world-renowned, we need to show the world that our skill sets match those at the very top.

The journey is like a marathon. It is not easy to find time to study and practise while working a full-time job. Discipline, passion and patience are needed in large quantities. Exams take place in Europe at the senior levels. This requires serious monetary investment and is a huge commitment to make. I'd liken it to sculpting – you need to chip away at the stone, piece by piece before it finally becomes a sculpture. It is not the result, but the journey that becomes the achievement.

What were the most significant milestones in your journey to attaining your MS pin – your memorable moments, positive or otherwise and the people and events that impacted you most?

At the start of my career, the Court of



Master Sommelier Kamal Malik works for Asia's largest wine distribution company, Maritime and Mercantile International based in the Maldives

Master Sommeliers (CMS) was not active outside of the USA and Europe. I became beverage manager and head sommelier long before I had any formal wine education. I learned on the job by diving into any books that I could lay my hands on. Sales and Service for Wine Professionals by Brian Julyan MS, Sotheby's wine encyclopaedia, The World Atlas of Wine and the Oxford Companion to Wine were primary resources, all amazing resources even now. Most significant was the

A sommelier is not only a person who knows wines, he must be the pinnacle of commercial acumen in hospitality and beverage sales

Certified Sommelier exam I passed in 2011, since that was the first badge of recognition I got. I was Head Sommelier of Waldorf Astoria, Maldives at that time.

What were the key learnings you took away from your early career with some of the top hospitality brands in the world?

Experience counts. A sommelier is not only a person who knows wines, he must be the pinnacle of commercial acumen in hospitality and beverage sales, service, and product knowledge. To achieve that, you need to find jobs that push you to strive to be the best. I was lucky to be able to work with such hotels and bosses. I learnt sales skills, inventory management, sourcing, crafting menus and training a motivated team – all on the job.

For example, at the Waldorf Astoria and Conrad Maldives, the wine cellar dinners would have sommeliers seated at the head of the table, hosting the dinner. You could not get away with half-baked knowledge or conversational skills; you needed first-hand expertise on wine and food pairing. I hosted hundreds of those dinners over five years, twice a week on average.

You now work with Maritime and Mercantile International, one of Asia's largest wine distribution companies. How does it differ from a career in hotels? Can there be career options beyond hospitality and wine marketing for sommeliers?

My work today is slightly different but similar to my earlier work. I used to sell wines and spirits from table to table, I now sell from



Kamal Malik – pictured in a wine cellar – says master sommeliers are first and foremost hospitality professionals

hotel to hotel. The scope widens and you become a shared resource for many in the industry. The commercial learnings are more significant and you experience the challenges of sourcing and logistics. The impact of Customs legislation on pricing becomes clearer.

For career choices, there is also wine education and journalism, but all these still support the main goal of driving quality consumption in bars and hospitality outlets.

Master Sommeliers are first and foremost hospitality professionals, before they are anything else.

The leap from Advanced to Master Sommelier is a big one. Could you share some pointers on how to address the knowledge gap before attempting the MS exam, as well as practical pointers on how to go about it, especially for people who have jobs?

The Master Sommelier exam is known for its depth and breadth of knowledge. You need to be able to pin a wine to its location on a map, both in tasting and theory, and demonstrate the expertise required in sales and service. During mentoring sessions, I was told that I needed to memorise the geography and climate of a region, learn its cultivars, wine styles and appellation rules to understand what causes those wine styles to be consistent, and know the producers who make the best wines – only then are you ready. The main challenge is to be able to do all this for wines across the globe! If you plan to be a Master Sommelier, no question is 'out of the syllabus' or less important than another.

The service exam is a lot more challenging than the Advanced Sommelier's, with sections on finance and business acumen. The blind tasting focuses on classics from a global perspective and requires high precision and accuracy. There might be many ways to tackle this. I can only affirm what personally worked for me.

The exams require maintaining focus and precision over a stretch of time, which is what you train for. For example, you need to be able to answer approximately 100 different theory questions within an hour. If you do not practise rigorously, the mind tires and wanders midway through the exam. For the tasting, a set of six wines in 25 minutes is the right way to practise, not one wine in four minutes or three wines in 12 minutes.

The Master Sommelier exam is known for its depth and breadth of knowledge. You need to be able to pin a wine to its location on a map, both in tasting and theory

In India, people often need to decide between WSET and CMS qualifications. Since you have done both, and are also familiar with the Indian job market, would you share your views on the pluses and minuses of both?

It is lucky that we can now choose between the two, and that a path is available to follow in India. WSET is doing a commendable job in crafting the material for learning and creating a set of standards in wine and spirits education. It tests in-depth knowledge and information and is relevant to consumers, trade professionals and for beverage and related industries.

The CMS is geared specifically for on-trade and hospitality and tests you on skills acquired along with knowledge. Only Master Sommeliers run the course at all levels, and they find young professionals the right mentors at top of their game to guide them through the process.

Name an icon in the wine world you admire.

There are many. Of course, Jancis Robinson and Hugh Johnson for those classic and educational books, Miguel A. Torres on his pioneering efforts on tackling global warming and its impact on wine – the urgent need of the hour. Nicolas Joly on making biodynamics a hip topic; the marketing acumen of Robert Mondavi in carving a classic new world region... the list is endless.

What next? Your own plans for the future?

I am letting it all sink in. Let us see what happens next.

'With great success comes great responsibility'. What is yours now?

I believe mine is to ensure that this does not remain an isolated effort. I have opened the door; I will have to hold it for many to enter. It is a personal journey but I am ready to mentor along the way. ❖

WINES OF BURGUNDY

The legacy of Henri Gouges

The wines of Maison Henri Gouges from the commune of Nuits-Saint-Georges are considered among Burgundy's hidden gems, writes [Ruma Singh](#)



Pictured in the vineyard, Antoine and Grégory Gouges are the great-grandsons of the founder and 4th generation owners

On a warm August afternoon, I drove down the Routes des Grands Crus into the historic town of Nuits-Saint-Georges. With a population of 5,000, this small town is nestled in the heart of Burgundy's Côte d'Or within the commune of Beaune. The houses were shuttered and the streets quiet as I arrived.

The premises of Domaine Henri Gouges were quiet too, but deceptively so. As I entered the front office, I sensed a perceptible buzz of activity coming from the winery in the distance. Viviana Jaimon, communications and wine tourism manager, who had come out to greet me, explained the harvest was not far off, so it was all hands-on deck to get the winery prepped and ready to receive the fruit.

At first glance, the domaine may seem compact, but it carries a mighty reputation and a storied history. Dating back to 1919, the domaine, which owns 14 hectares of vineyards, all within the commune of Nuits-Saint-Georges, has built a reputation for making exceptional age-worthy Pinot Noir. Its portfolio today consists of eight Premier Cru wines, three regional Bourgogne wines and two village-level Cru wines. Its current premises in central Nuits-Saint-Georges once belonged to the Gendarmerie Nationale before Henri Gouges acquired them in the 1920s, shortly after he founded his domaine in 1919.

Understanding Burgundy's complex multi-tiered system is important to recognise why much of the region's wines are so eye-wateringly expensive. Burgundy's pyramid-shaped appellation system was officially introduced in 1936. It places the largest production, the regional wines, made from grapes grown anywhere within Burgundy at the bottom. This is followed by village or commune-level wines made from grapes grown within a specific village appellation in Burgundy. Above this are the Premier Crus, and finally at the very top of the pyramid are the much-vaunted Grand Crus – representing just one percent of the region's wines and only 33 in number.



Portrait of founder Henri Gouges who established his eponymous domaine in Nuits-Saint-Georges in 2019

The domaine may seem compact at first glance but it carries a mighty reputation and storied history, dating back to 1919

Burgundy vineyards also have the reputation of being highly fragmented ever since the Middle Ages, divided into a maze of plots called *climat*. A *climat* is a specific vineyard site that consists of a parcel of vines with its own name, history and taste, identified over centuries. Despite being located close together, each *climat* has its individual identity, and the wines have their own distinct taste, offering varying degrees of age worthiness. This is unique – nowhere else in the world is wine production linked so strongly to its specific place of production.

Viviana gave me a guided tour of the domaine and explained why its wines are so revered. It all started with its founder, Henri Gouges, after whom the domaine is named.

Gouges was the vice-president as well as an influential member of the French regulatory body INAO (*Institut national de l'origine et de la qualité*) in 1936. This was the time that INAO was formalising the appellation classification system that has since defined Burgundy. In a move that was considered selfless, he proposed



A flock of sheep in the the iconic Les St Georges vineyard. The vines are approximately 50 years old and are cultivated organically

that no vineyards from the Nuits-Saint-Georges should be declared Grand Cru.

And so, it was decreed that all the highly-regarded Nuits-Saint-Georges vineyards, would remain 1er Cru. This, despite owning the commune's most famous vineyard, Les Saint Georges, which was widely considered a shoo-in for Grand Cru status. Gouges, along with Volnay's Marquis d'Angerville, was credited with

Viviana gave me a guided tour of the domaine and explained why its wines are so revered. It all started with its founder, Henri Gouges

being at the forefront of the war against fraud in Burgundy in the 1920s. These acts earned him the nickname of the 'Policeman of Burgundy'.

"He was a very charismatic man, a visionary, but also very humble," Viviana explained.

Gouges is credited with the discovery of an unusual white mutation of the Pinot Noir grape. The grape, now named Pinot Gouges, was discovered by him in 1936 during a routine visit to his vineyard before harvest. The discovery was made in his 40-year-old monopole, Clos des Porrets, where he noticed a Pinot Noir vine with white grapes. Gouges marked this vine and recovered vine branches for grafting, of which only four vines survived. They went on to produce the same white grapes

with the identical ampelographic characteristics as Pinot Noir. So, between 1940 and 1950, Gouges planted the white Pinot Gouges in the 0.4-hectare plot of Nuits-Saint-Georges 1er Cru La Perrière. This is now one of the domaine's special bottlings.

Like many European wine regions, Burgundy is also known for its family-owned estates. "In Burgundy tradition, family and history are very important values that many family wine estates try to preserve and defend," Viviana noted. "A vineyard is the story of a family of farmers from the land. Estates are often family stories. The younger generation takes over the work of their parents who themselves inherited from their ancestors. Each generation has marked its time by bringing added value to the domaine. A Burgundian vigneron is proud of his land, and humble in the face of climatic hazards."

Unsurprisingly, the running of the domaine has been passed down generations. The current owners, Antoine and Gregory, are 4th generation owners and the great-grandsons of founder Henri Gouges. "It is in their hands to take care and respect the identity of each wine and each *climat*, in the wines they produce," said Viviana.

In a nod to their history, the owners decided to revert to the old label for their flagship vineyard, Les Saint Georges by adding a wax closure from the 2019 vintage. "This is to underline its authenticity, and guarantee the quality of the wine," explained Viviana. It was a move away from the more modern labels sported by their other wines.

Henri Gouges is credited with the discovery of an unusual white mutation of the Pinot Noir grape. The grape, now named Pinot Gouges, was discovered by him in 1936



Wine bottles resting in the Maison Henri Gouges cellar. The Les Saint Georges bottle on the left has the new 'retro' looking label, with the old-style wax seal

The Gouges vineyards are scattered around Nuits-Saint-Georges and although several are very close to each other, the wines each vineyard produces is uniquely different, a Burgundian characteristic. The domaine believes strongly in the adage, 'It is in the vineyards that the Great Wines ripen', and today, 100 years after Henri Gouges established the estate, his family continues to uphold this belief: the vineyard — a vital component of terroir — is king. As Viviana points out, "The domaine is completely focused on quality over quantity."

We sat down to a tasting as Viviana poured a selection of wines for me to taste. She explained how the **Henri Gouges Premier**

Sommelier INDIA WINE MAGAZINE



Cru Les Pruliers 2022 differs from the **Henri Gouges Premier Cru Les Vaucrains**, despite the two vineyards being a mere 900 metres apart. “The two Premiers Crus Les Pruliers and Les Vaucrains are both located in the south of Nuits-Saint-Georges, yet there are discernable differences between the two. Both are made of the same grape Pinot Noir in the same year and by the same winemaking team. These differences come from the composition of the soils and the exposure of the slopes,” Viviana explained. “Premier Cru Les Pruliers is east-facing, at an altitude of 250 to 270 metres. It is a powerful, robust wine with good ageing potential, elegant, richly-coloured and silky. Its fresh fruit makes it seductive in its youth.”

Nuits-Saint-Georges Premier Cru Les Vaucrains, on the other hand, faces northeast, at a slightly higher altitude of 260 to 280 metres. The soil at the top of the hillside is very stony, shallow and composed of red clay, while the vines themselves are 50 years old.

“The plot is located just above the famous plot of Les Saint Georges, with its upper section

Workers tending the vines in the vineyard of the estate located exclusively in Nuits Saint Georges at the heart of the Côte d’Or

marked by the edge of the forest,” Viviana explained. “In its youth, the wine shows wild red fruits and blackberries, evolving towards more vegetal notes. It is severe when young, and requires around a decade to settle down.”

Finally, we taste the iconic **Henri Gouges Les Saint Georges 2018**, which the *Decanter* wine magazine has called “a Grand Cru in all but name”. The aroma is immediately rich and concentrated, even before I put my nose to the glass. The first notes of blueberry, blackberry and cassis laden with baking spices give way to distinct undertones of violets, vanilla, leather, smoke and earth. It is instantly recognisable as a bigger, richer, more profound wine, unfurling in the glass with every passing minute, releasing new, undiscovered aromas. On the palate it is dense, rounded and layered, capable of long ageing, but approachable even when young.

As one of 13 owners – another Burgundian anomaly – Maison Henri Gouges owns a considerable 1.08 hectares of the famous vineyard, Les Saint Georges. One of the commune’s oldest vineyards, the vineyard is perched on the edge of a hill, facing east and embodies the quintessential Nuits-Saint-Georges terroir.

“This wine does not need words to be described,” says Viviana. “An application has been filed, with the request that Les Saint Georges should be re-classified as Grand Cru.” If this succeeds, this *climat* will be Burgundy’s 34th Grand Cru.” ♦

MAISON HENRI GOUGES WINES AVAILABLE IN INDIA

- Henri Gouges Nuits-Saint-Georges Villages 2019 — ₹12,495, Maharashtra. Importer: Wine Park. Vivino 4.4
- Henri Gouges 1er Cru Clos des Porrets Saint Georges 2020 (monopole) — ₹19,725, Maharashtra. Importer: Wine Park. Vivino 4.1
- Henri Gouges 1er Cru Les Vaucrains 2020 — ₹34,335, Maharashtra. Wine Park



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