

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

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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

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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.

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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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