

# Beaune showcases Burgundy's legacy of wine, art and culture

With historic cellars, medieval architecture and fantastic dining options, Beaune offers more than just fine wines

Ruma Singh

**W**hat do you do in Beaune, Burgundy's "wine capital", besides savouring its wine?

Plenty.

The small town is filled with delicious dining options, from Michelin-starred restaurants to hip wine bars. And, of course there is the ever-popular "velo", or cycling around the Burgundy vineyards on e-bikes.

Wine remains an integral part of Beaune, surrounded as it is by some of the most famous vineyards in the world. Strategically located in the heart of Burgundy, it offers wine lovers a perfect base from which to visit the vineyards. It also draws tourists curious to explore its storied history who wander its cobbled streets and centuries-old medieval ramparts.

Inevitably, the first attraction for visitors is the emblematic Hôtel-Dieu or the Hôtel-Dieu des Hospices Civils de Beaune, to give it its full name. A charitable medical institution that survived for nearly six centuries thanks to the generosity of its benefactors, it remained in operation until 1971. Founded in 1443 by Nicholas Rolin, the chancellor of the powerful duchy of Burgundy, the Hospices remains the most-visited tourist site in all of Burgundy. The buildings with their famous glazed mosaic tiled and slate roofs surround a cobbled courtyard and are considered architectural masterpieces. Inside, a spectacular 15th century polyptych altarpiece of *The Last Judgement* by Flemish artist Rogier van der Weyden is worth a visit by itself. Aude Ralison, the communications manager of the Hospices, says in 2023 alone it drew over 460,000 visitors.

In a historical twist, the Hospices tops the list of the richest of vineyard owners in Burgundy because of donations of land from wealthy, grateful patients. The first donation of a vineyard parcel was made in 1457 and the latest in 2024. Its holdings stand at 60 hectares. It also vinifies its own wines, which are sold at a grand charity auction held annually in the third week of November. That weekend, Beaune springs to life as crowds throng its restaurants and hotels to watch the celebrity-studded auction conducted by Christies, on a giant screen outside the Hospices.

## BEAUNE'S BEST KEPT SECRET

Most fascinating though lesser known are its maze of ancient underground cellars,



(above) Tourists cycle through Beaune's vineyards; and Joseph Drouhin Beaune Clos des Mouches 1er Cru.

many dating back to Roman times. The town is headquarters to many Burgundy producers and merchants, famous names behind some of the world's most revered wines who own networks of underground caves for ageing their wines. The hidden caves snake for miles under Beaune's walled streets and cobbled walkways.

I made this discovery during a previous trip to Beaune, when I visited the *négociant* or wine merchant Bouchard Aîné & Fils and experienced their underground cellar tastings at the 18th century Hôtel du Conseiller du Roy. The immersive tour was based on the theme of exploration of the five senses—sound, touch, sight and smell of vineyards and wines.

On my recent trip, my first appointment was a visit to renowned *négociant-éleveur* or merchant-grower Maison Joseph Drouhin. Fourth-generation family-owned, Drouhin owns 2.5 acres of wine cellars running beneath their headquarters adjoining the 12th-century Collégiale Notre-Dame. The cellars date back to the 4th-century Gallo-Roman remains and have been acquired in stages by the Drouhins over a span of 140 years of ownership.

The size of the *domaine's* holdings makes it one of Burgundy's largest, covering over 100 hectares across Burgundy. Over 90% are notified as Premier and Grand Cru vineyards—the very top of Burgundy's quality pyramid.

Mathieu Buvel, marketing head of the *domaine*, recounts the Drouhin history for me. It all began in 1880 when founder



Joseph Drouhin settled in Beaune and decided to stamp his own name on the bottles of wines he traded as a guarantee of quality. "Over time, as Maison Joseph Drouhin expanded its vineyards, it also extended its network of cellars," Buvel adds.

The cellars incorporate every aspect of Beaune's history—there are sections of cellar walls dating to Beaune's 4th century ancient Roman *castrum* or fort, constructed using "fishbone" or interwoven stone patterns for added strength, and modern sections supported by metal beams. The cellars also have many stories. One is of a small cellar with a hidden door

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RUMA SINGH

Sculpture by Art in Situ in the cellars of Patriarche Père et Fils.

through which Maurice Drouhin, a member of a resistance network during World War II, escaped his pursuers to find refuge at the Hospices de Beaune. After the war, he donated 2.69 hectares of vineyards to the Hospices.

The cellar of the Burgundy Parliament is the largest. Almost street level, facing the Collégiale, it benefits from natural light and serves as the entrance to the deeper cellars where a 14th-century statue of Saint-Vincent, patron saint of wine-makers, stands. Directly above this cellar was once the great hall of the powerful Burgundy Parliament. Burgundy—once a kingdom—became a powerful duchy in the ninth century.

After the brightness of the Parliament Cellar, I walked into the adjacent dimly lit cellar, traversing a low, wide-arched vaulted cellar dating to the time of the duchy. This is where the dukes aged the wines from their vineyards, after vinifying them in the winery above.

The winery above the cellars is dominated by an ancient wine press, still in use on special occasions today.

## ART, UNDERGROUND

However, if you want to lose yourself in a melange of wine and art, the cellars of Maison Patriarche Père & Fils, the most extensive in all Burgundy, are a must-do. Located within a 17th-century convent that was home to the Sisters of the Visitation until the French Revolution, it was acquired by the Patriarche family in 1796, changing hands frequently thereafter but retaining its original name. Patriarche is famous for its 5km of wine caves that hold over two million bottles of wine, with vintages dating back to 1904. Patriarche functions as a merchant-grower, producing wine from its own vineyards besides also buying grapes from select Burgundy growers.

On the morning of my visit, assistant wine tourism manager Pierre Borsato walked me through the convent and its adjoining chapel down into the cellars. From the vast rooms of the convent, to the chapel and into the dimly lit maze of cellars, rows of bottles lined the nooks and

alcoves. Amidst them, I spotted several cleverly-lit pieces of art, installed as part of the innovative Art in Situ Burgundy trail that runs from Beaune down the Route des Grands Crus. Art in Situ was created three years ago to juxtapose contemporary art by international artists (sculptor Alessandro Montalbano's works are at Patriarche) with wines produced from the famous Route des Grands Crus.

For many visitors to Beaune, the treasure within the bottles is its biggest lure. "Some of these wines belong to our collection," says Borsato. "We do, however, sell some of our post-World War II wines to a few customers. These have been stored in the perfect conditions of humidity, temperature and darkness in our cellars."

Patriarche notches up some impressive numbers—over 45,000 visitors a year, peaking during the busy November weekend of the charity auction, where numbers touch 2,000 a day. This weekend is when the cellars of Burgundy are thrown open to visitors to Beaune for exploration, wine tasting and a brush with history. Options range from tasting flights of wines from €25-65 per head. "We act as ambassadors of our terroirs," Borsato says. "It's important for us to explain about complex subjects, such as the Climats de Bourgogne, for instance." On the other hand, it is possible to simply enjoy a tasting of Burgundy's top crus, as I did, or book an exclusive candlelit wine-paired lunch or dinner in one of the alcoves.

The maze of underground cellars might be Beaune's most unique offering, but to its inhabitants like Borsato, it is simply a way to highlight Burgundy's unique culture. As Borsato explains, "The famous Climats de Bourgogne is a Unesco World Heritage Site since 2015: underscoring the perfect combination of geology, meteorology, and human intervention. Since then, its wines have never ceased to amaze and shine on the finest tables of the world."

*Ruma Singh is a Bengaluru-based wine and travel writer. (The writer's Burgundy visit was planned in conjunction with Beaune Tourism and Atout France).*

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