



On a white wine sipping trip in sunny Burgundy

The tiny town of Puligny-Montrachet in Burgundy is the place to sample some of the world's best white wines as well as go wine biking

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The greatest white wine commune on earth." So did Clive Coates MW describe the 230-hectare commune of Puligny-Montrachet in Burgundy. Winemakers able to make wine on this slice of land, a heartbeat away from Beaune, Burgundy's wine capital, regard themselves as inheritors of a rare legacy. And so it is with Olivier Leflaive, a name widely recognized in the region.

The story began when Olivier Leflaive, scion of the multi-generational Leflaive wine family, returned to Burgundy after a stint in Paris to join the family business at Domaine Leflaive. In 1984, he decided to set up an eponymous négociant (merchant) house, Maison Olivier Leflaive and buy-in grapes from other select vineyards even as he developed his own. Today, his wines represent 82 different Burgundy *climats* or land parcels, and over 100 hectares of vines, including 26 of his own, concentrated around Puligny-Montrachet, Chassagne-Montrachet and Meursault. The focus is on whites.

Though officially retired, Olivier Leflaive remains very much connected to the business, making surprise appearances to interact with visitors to his cellars, much to their delight. The maison opened a 4-star boutique hotel in 2007, the Olivier Leflaive Hotel, run by his daughter Julie. Housed within a 17th century building overlooking the peaceful town square, the hotel forms the star attraction for visitors to the tiny town of Puligny-Montrachet, population 400. Puligny-Montrachet is a 12-minute drive from Beaune, the wine capital of Burgundy. The Leflaive wines are served at the hotel's pair of restaurants—the fine-dining Restaurant Klima helmed by Chef Lionel Freitas, and the more relaxed casual Bistro de l'Olivier that abuts a gleaming marble-topped green and gold Art Deco style bar.

While the exterior of the hotel is old and historic, no expense has been spared to create a luxurious ambience within the 17 rooms. Julie Leflaive who has played a decisive role in designing the interiors, has chosen to keep the décor eclectic, predominantly Art Deco that was beloved of her grandmother for "its timeless style," while adding a sprinkling of contemporary and retro touches.

Each room is named after a different family member, Julie explains. The modern Signature Olivier Leflaive suite done in turquoise green—his favourite colour—with discreet velvet and gold accents and dotted with memorabilia from his personal collection—a guitar, hats, vinyl records and photographs from his youth. "Room Nicole is named after Nicole Vallée, who married Claude Leflaive in 1717, the first woman in the family to bring vineyards as part of her



Guests on a wine bike tour hosted by Maison Olivier Leflaive; (below) Julie and Olivier Leflaive.

MAISON TRAFALGAR & ROMAIN CHAMBOUDOT

dowry. You can feel the family's presence in every room," she says. This is deliberately done to echo Burgundy's long tradition of family-run and owned estates, where winemaking tradition is handed down from one generation to the next—Julie herself is a 19th generation Leflaive. "In Burgundy we are very clan-like, and we want it to continue this way. We are proud of Burgundy's heritage of transition, savoir faire and passionate protection of its terroir."

Burgundy wines are not just considered among the world's the best but increasingly command eye-wateringly high prices. "Burgundy is a very small region compared to Bordeaux, Champagne, Alsace or the Loire," Julie explains. "This makes the wines rarer, and

Burgundy's white wines get their distinct taste from the clay and limestone soils that are layered like *mille feuille*

drives up prices and resulting demand. Also, over the last 15 years, harvest sizes have decreased due to climate change and weather-related events, resulting in less wines produced in this already small area. Finally, the rising fame of Burgundy's wines and constantly improving quality of the winemaking has added to the increase."

It follows that pioneers in premium wine production might lead in wine tourism. "My father was the first producer in France to start wine tourism as we know it—in 1997, he created the concept of a tasting table or *table d'hôte* where guests were guided by the sommelier and Olivier himself. Guests had the option of buying the wines after the tasting." This won them the first ever award from the Chambre d'Agriculture and Atout France in 2009. More recently, Olivier Leflaive was awarded a special jury award for pioneering oenotourism in 2019 from the *Terre de vin les Trophées de l'Oenotourisme*. "This had a massive effect on Burgundy tourism as we



became a point of reference for other producers in Burgundy."

Their oenotourism offerings include interaction with the domaine's sommeliers not only in the restaurant but also the vineyards. The vineyard tour includes a 1.5 hour walk through the vineyards, and an explanation of Burgundy's unique pyramid classification system. "To understand the importance of Burgundy, it is important to understand its terroir—the minerality the runs through our wine comes from the soils," Julie explains. "Our clay and limestone soils are layered like *mille feuille*, imparting a special taste to our wines."

Another major draw is their famous 'wine bike tour' through the Puligny-Montrachet vineyards on a large custom-made e-bike fea-

turing a wine bar—the guests get to taste a selection of Olivier Leflaive wines while basking in the sunshine. "The feeling of being surrounded by nature in the vineyards makes you feel alive like nothing else," she says. Hotel guests can also picnic in the vineyards, carrying hampers of food prepared by the chef and a bottle of Leflaive wine in their bicycle baskets. For the less outdoorsy is the weekend cellar tour option. Guests have often been surprised to find the convivial Olivier Leflaive and his brother Patrick present—they love chatting with visitors.

The hotel's relaxed Le Bistro d'Olivier serves a seasonal and frequently-changing menu of French classics, while the elegant Restaurant Klima has a walled glass cellar filled with wines. Matthieu, one of the four Leflaive sommeliers, pours three wines from the Olivier Leflaive portfolio. The first, the Olivier Leflaive Bourgogne Les Sétilles 2020 offers a fresh and fruity nose leading to a creamy palate. About 20% grapes are from the cooler Hautes Côtes area, giving a fresh mouthfeel, with the rest from vineyards situated below the super-premium Meursault and Puligny-Montrachet vineyards. About 65% of the wine is barrel-fermented and lees-aged for richness and elegance.

The second wine is the approachable Olivier Leflaive Saint-Romain 2020, from a Côte de Beaune village located at a height of 400m, imparting a fresh fruit-driven profile to the wine. It boasts of layered citrus and green apple flavours. Finally, I taste the Olivier Leflaive Volnay 1er Cru 2019, Clos des Angles from Volnay, the village famous for its elegant reds. Vinified in 30% new oak, it displays violets and black cherries with silken tannins. The weighty *livre des carte* or wine list goes beyond Burgundy to include wines from many other wine regions. How many wines on the list? I ask Julie. "A lot" she smiles.

Ruma Singh is a Bengaluru-based wine and travel writer.



The Light and Legacy art show is on in Chennai.

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CHENNAI

LIGHT AND LEGACY: PRE-MODERN ART AND PLEIN AIR PAINTING IN MADRAS

Till 20 April

Curated by Ashvin E. Rajagopalan, this art exhibition by gallery Ashvita's seeks to highlight the foundational elements of the Madras Art Movement and features artworks that according to the press note "demonstrate the mastery of line and watercolor techniques, alongside the broader influence of modernism." On display at the group show are paintings by renowned artists like D.P. Roy Chowdhury, K.C.S. Paniker, S. Dhanapal along with early Bengal School artists like Abanindranath Tagore and Nandalal Bose.

11am—7pm. First Floor, Lalit Kala Akademi, Chennai.

BENGALURU

THE BIRTHDAY PARTY

April 12

April is Autism Awareness Month and Bengaluru-based NGO Colours Centre for Learning is staging this simple yet visually engaging puppet show to raise autism awareness while offering an inclusive theatre experience for autistic individuals and their families.

12pm to 1pm. Museum of Art and Photography, Kasturba Road, Bengaluru.

THE VOICE NOTES CONCERT

April 12

Singer-songwriter, composer and actor Paresh Pahuja brings his eponymous 'The Voice Notes Concert by Paresh Pahuja & Friends' tour to Bengaluru. Featuring 12 original compositions interwoven with six carefully curated voice notes, the 120-minute performance narrates an emotionally resonant story of love's evolution and its enduring power.

7pm. Prestige Centre for Performing Arts, Konanakunte, Bengaluru. For tickets, visit in.bookmyshow.com.



Paresh Pahuja

DELHI

KINDRED DICHOTOMIES

Till 27 April

Black Cube Gallery's second exhibition features the works of contemporary artists Sudhanshu Sutar and Andrea Zucchi. Curated by Sanya Malik, the exhibition, as per the press note, "explores themes of historical continuity, identity, memory, and reinterpretation."

12pm-6pm. Black Cube Gallery, G12A, Hauz Khas, New Delhi. For details, visit www.blackcube.in.

HANDWOUND

Will the biggest market for Swiss watches turn on them?

The US is the biggest and most vital market for Swiss watch brands. But is it an empire built on sand?

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On 9 April, Donald Trump backed down. Probably spooked by domestic stock market meltdown, the US president put a 90 day pause on his reciprocal tariffs plan. While this will help global trade avoid immediate disfunction, it is a threat that will not go away soon. This is truer than ever for Swiss watchmakers. After all, the Swiss watch industry has just gone through a traumatic week.

Between 1-7 April, Geneva was supposed to be abuzz with the world's biggest annual watch fair—Watches and Wonders. And it indeed was, but not because of the Land-Dweller, the first new Rolex watch model in years, or the countless other new wristwatch launches from the who's who of Swiss luxury watchmaking. It was abuzz instead with anxiety, growing to dread. Donald Trump had declared

'Liberation Day', and tariffs and a growing fear of global trade wars the new normal. While trade turmoil between the US and China was to be expected, nobody expected neutral old Switzerland to get caught with a 31% tariff, on top of the universal 10% tariff.

Watch publications, which are more comfortable publishing reviews of new releases, instead found themselves having to do some ground reportage on the state of the industry instead. Because it is a big deal—if the US does indeed carry through with the threat of 31% tariffs on Swiss products, then the Alpine country's famed watch industry will be hit, and quite badly at that.

The economics of this is quite simple. Ever since the covid-19 pandemic, the US has become by far the biggest market for Swiss watches, across the spectrum from entry- and mid-level brands like Hamilton and Longines to über-luxury high horology like Rolex and Patek Philippe. Swiss watch industry figures bear this out quite strongly. Between 2022-2024, Swiss watch sales figures in the US rose from CHF 3,891million (about \$4,546 million) to CHF 4,373 (about \$5,109 million).

Before the pandemic, much of the talk was about how China would develop into the largest market for Swiss watches, but



The Rolex booth at Watches and Wonders in Geneva.

REUTERS

sales there have actually declined significantly. While the US market share rose by 12.4% between 2022-24, China's declined by 20.1%. Sales in the European and other Asian markets are decent, but US buyers now account for about 16.8% of all Swiss watch exports—that is about 1 in each 6 watches sold. According to recent

research published by Switzerland's Votobel Group, the US market has accounted for 46% of the growth in Swiss watch exports between 2019-2023. Simply put, Swiss watchmakers need the US market, and the tariffs put a major spanner in the works.

There are many strange irrationalities

to the entire Trump tariff plan, and for a country like Switzerland, it becomes more surreal. The main Swiss exports to the US are packaged pharmaceuticals and watches. For the latter, the US has next to no domestic industry. There are plenty of American micro-and boutique brands, for sure, but it's not as if there's a large scale manufacture of watch components (like cases or movements) in the US. Nearly all American watch brands use Swiss, Japanese and Chinese movements—both mechanical and quartz—for their watches, and the tariffs are going to harm them too.

If the tariffs ever come, there are just a few options open for Swiss brands, none of them pleasant. One is to pass on the cost of the tariffs to American buyers, which means a massive hike in the retail price of watches in the US. Such an increase would almost certainly result in a precipitous fall in sales, not something the industry can afford. "It's been tense. Some meetings with Americans have been cancelled. Sales will surely be down. The year ahead doesn't look very promising for the watch industry," said Clement Fehrenbacher of Le Cercle des Horlogers to Reuters at Watches and Wonders.

The second option would be for brands to absorb the cost of the tariffs and watch already thin margins contract even fur-

ther. While the likes of Audemars Piguet, Rolex and Patek Philippe could do so, at least for a while, a Hamilton, a Tissot, or even an Omega cannot. In fact, the Swatch Group, which owns brands across various price points, like Swatch, Omega, Tissot, Longines, Blancpain and Hamilton, among others, could see their bottom line being really squeezed by the tariffs. This is in large part because a decline in sales in China saw the group post a 14% decline in net sales in 2024.

"Exclusive luxury brands such as Patek Philippe, Audemars Piguet and Richard Mille have little to worry about. They can reduce their (highly profitable) margins somewhat and pass on part of the increase in the selling price," watch industry specialist Pierre-Yves Donzé told Fortune. "On the other hand, it is a blow for mid-range or exclusive luxury brands, for which the selling price is a determining factor."

The final option would be to raise prices across geographies, either overtly or otherwise, and this would certainly not go down well with non-US markets. Whether Trump changes his stance again or not, it is clear that Switzerland's storied brands need to re-think their strategy.

Handwound is a monthly column on watches and watchmaking.