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Robert Kacher Wine Trip 2009

Pour de France

For the first time in my life I got to experience the rush, fear, and excitement of knowing that no matter how long my day was going to be, it would be the most rewarding of all days.

The most rewarding part of this trip was the fact that I was able to be me; passionate, professional, and thirsty for more wine knowledge. I felt I had control over everything I could; my wine tastings, building new and strong relationships, but overall, enjoying every single minute of my experience in France. For me food and wine is one part addiction and one part obsession, a never-ending adventure and satisfaction.

I began my trip in Paris, a city to which I had looked forward with pleasant anticipation. I have never seen such beautiful masterpieces combined in one city. Paris is more elegant than romantic, but by far one of the most beautiful cities in the world.

As soon as I arrived and settled, I lost no time in finding my way around the city. I immediately looked for a quick lunch and ended up at an Alsatian restaurant right next to the Hotel. Definitely not my cup of tea. I decided to treat myself to a huge plate of foie gras and quince jam, my eyes where definitely bigger than my appetite, if I only knew all the foie gras that was waiting for me throughout the trip. It surprised me that foie could be enjoyed so much and at any time during the day in France.

After a quick and fatty lunch I decided to walk a bit and enjoy some that cold and damp weather everyone was talking about. Ears freezing, watery eyes, your tongue for some reason

decides to quit on you making it barely possible to speak broken French. I decided to head on and look for the fourth most famous tourist attraction in Paris, Jim Morrison's grave site at the Cemetiere du Pere- Lachaise. Located on the hill of Champ Eveque, where a very wealthy merchant first build his home in 1430, and later on converted into the hospice by the Jesuits. Now the Pere-Lachaise is a symbol of the rich and famous as well as an affirmation of the role of government.

Jim Morrison was buried on division six at the cemetery. Fan farewells have flocked his grave for years, and my pictures and testimony can prove it. I wish someone would have told me how easy was to find his grave. If anyone would have asked me for directions I would say "Just follow the punk rock looking kids and the smell of cigarettes, you will be there in no time".

The first night in Paris was an early night for me; I had to thank my old friend jetlag, foie gras, and the Pere-Lachaise Cemetery. I had to save my energy for more productive and exciting experiences, by far one of the most enjoyable most cultural experiences of my life.

Sunrise is very late in Paris during the wintertime, 9am. I thought I was early for my early bird morning special, a nice walk to the Eiffel tower and a nice "pain au chocolate". My internal clock and my wake up call failed me on my first morning in town, I was not only late to see most of the things I have planned for, but I also had the coldest "pain au chocolate" in town. I had no time to waste at this point, I had to find my way around the metro, and quick if I wanted to make the whole day worthwhile. The Metro system in Paris is very easy to get around, just make sure you are paying attention to everything that is going on around you. You might get trapped between the guy playing the accordion or the one reciting some kind of monstrosity version of Shakespeare, they might ask you for more than just one euro. You don't want to be in that position, you may feel like the least welcomed tourist in town.

I found myself in a challenging time frame that day since I was meeting with the rest of the Robert Kacher group that afternoon at the Gare de L'est. I was excited and quite nervous since I did not know who I was meeting with and where exactly the meeting point was. It did not take that long. I just had to look for the most exciting and anxious people at the train station, and that's exactly where I found them.

It was a big group, all of them anxiously introducing themselves and sharing some of their background, most of them managers, sales representatives, but most important, wine connoisseurs; passionate just like myself. I joined the crowd and introduced myself to every single person, until it was time to get on the train and head to Alsace; a long ride through the beautiful countryside of France, everything was so perfect.

Colmar, Alsace was by far one of my favorite places during this trip, the region stretches from Strasbourg all the way down to Mulhouse in the south, running along the foothills of the Vosges mountains, so close to the German border you can practically smell the fresh pretzels. Alsace, unlike any other French region, is rich in French, German, and Swiss influences. It is by far one the smallest regions in France, but a wonderful place to enjoy the beauty of its architecture and diverse culture. It is such a beautiful town with very narrow streets and lined with bright color timbered houses. The towns and streets have small canals running through, that were used by tanners back in the day.

The wines are not as highly filtered as German wines, but they are still nice and refreshing full of flavor and fruitiness. The wines from this region are still traditionally sold under the name of the grape varietal and whites are still mostly produced, but reds such as Pinot Noirs are coming along very well. Most wine areas in Alsace are protected from the west winds of the mountains, providing sunny climate and very low precipitation. Most of the soil is limestone and clay, creating great soil for successful grapes such as Riesling, Pinot Noir, Gewürztraminer, Pinot Gris, Muscat, Sylvaner and Pinot Blanc.

Our first tasting was with Domaine Ehrhart and Domaine Rene Mure. Ehrhart is a small estate of only 20 hectares, all the wines are certified organic, and most of the work is done by the family members. The members of this family are very committed to their work, everything is done by hand and they have a lot of pride when it comes to their wines. I tried a few Grand Crus such as "Scholssberg", "Hengst", and Pinot Gris Grand Cru Brand 06,' a few Gewuztraminers Grand Crus and Vendage Tardives. Most of these wines had a similar bouquet with aromas of mandarin, oranges, pear, and tropical fruit. It makes your mouth water just to think how many wonderful oyster and fish dishes you could pair with them.

Domaine Rene Mure is a little more traditional when it comes to the style of wine and techniques used to produce them, a wine can tell so much about the wine maker. Mure and his children represent the 11th and 12th generations of wine growers in their family, and believe in high –density plantations, no chemical products, fermentation with wild yeast, and limitation of the work in the cellar to keep the quality of their work at its best. Their main priority is working with the soil and having good biological activity with it, this ensures that the “terroir” will make wines rich in minerals.

I found the flavor profile of their wines a little riper than and as elegant as Domaine Ehrhart. I had a chance to try their Pinot Noir and it was delightful, pure French oak and full of ripe cherries. I could drink this wine forever. I found these wines are a little drier but full of citrus, apples, and dried fruits, a perfect match for any hot or spicy food. The tradition still persists in most of their wines, and hopefully this tradition will never end.

We finished our first wine tasting with a wonderful buffet, with a “baked in oven” dish that was perfect for the weather. It was a wonderful dish with a combination of pork, lamb, beef, potatoes, and carrots that “hit the spot” immediately. It was explained that this dish is made traditionally for the people working the fields during harvest time. It keeps their bellies full and their bodies running on hearty proteins and carbohydrates during a long harvest day; exactly what I needed after a whole day inside a train and a few hours behind schedule with my sleep. Unfortunately our Alsace day was over and we had to move on to Burgundy.

The region of Burgundy is long and narrow, and is divided into a few departments: Chablis, Cote de Nuits, Cote de Beaune (Cote de Nuits and Cote de Beaune are known as the Cote d’ Or), Macon, Chalonnaise, and Beaujolais. We stayed in the nerve centre of Burgundy; Beaune, a very medieval town with very narrow roads and ancient buildings. Beaune is a very quiet town full of hidden alleys, small local businesses and Renaissance courtyards. Is the third largest commune in the Cote-d’Or, and the soil is very complex; especially on the steeper parts of the slopes. This explains why most of the wines that I tried during my stay there are so firm, full, and solid. They were definitely wines that need to be left alone and be matured for a few years.

We started our tastings in Beaune with Domaine Albert Morot and Domaine Denis Pommier. Morot was a divine wine experience, the quality of their wines is indescribable, truly delicious wines. His estate only contains Premier Cru wines and for good reason. Their hard work and diligent attitude ensures only the finest quality of wines at a much higher level. They take

harvest very seriously and are often the last ones to collect grapes during harvest to ensure full ripeness of the fruit. The result is a higher quality wine, rich on the palate and perfect for aging. On the other hand, Domaine Denis Pommier concentrates on whites that are 100% Chardonnay, since the Domaine is situated in Chablis. His estate is only 11 hectares and this also includes some Petit Chablis. He produces very complex whites that are full in bouquet and aromatics, using only natural products when taking care of the vines.

I can remember that night being by far one of the coldest nights during the trip. As soon as the tasting was over we decided to move on to a small room where we all introduced ourselves once again. What saved us that night was a beautiful beef consommé with vegetables that was prepared by Morot's wife, what a great lady. The French are renowned for their culinary techniques and inventions, but even more cultural than that is the sensual point of view behind it, that is not entirely about their food and their cuisine is more about their existence. Everyone thanked her so much for her hospitality, but especially for the soup, she saved our lives that night. Later on during the dinner Morot and Bobby decided to play "Guess the Vintage" with us and provided us with a 1970 Pinot Noir that was colorless but the flavor was still there. I guessed 1972; close enough to impress Bobby who later on shared many secrets with me about wine making.

We continued our wine tasting the next day with Domaine Marc Morey, Domaine Joblot, Domanie Xavier Monnot, and finished our day with Domaine Louis Dupont Calvados. Domaine Marc Morey is located in the village of Chassagne-Montrachet. The town of Chassagne-Montrachet produces both red and white wines. Historically the vineyards were planted with Pinot Noir, but today Chardonnay is the leading grape. The town is known for their high quality whites, but the reds are very good as well, very rustic and I found them a little similar to the ones in Pommard. The soils are very complex in this area; they have rocky soils full of limestone. Marc Morey's whites are full of perfume and finesse, and most of them had a beautiful bouquet of fresh baked apples and a touch of dried peaches, a living example of a perfect Montrachet white. Marc Morey's estate is only 10 hectares, half Premier Cru and half Grand Cru vineyards, still proud of their wines after five generations.

We followed our tasting with Domaine Joblot, located in the small town of Givry, in the Cote Chalonnaise located further south, and producing nearly all red wines. The soils are very rich in limestone. Both Pinot Noirs that we tried from his estate were rich and full bodied, full of fruit,

good color and nice length, a little young but with tremendous potential. It was explained to us that Joblot is producing some of the finest wines in the appellation, no doubt about it.

That night we headed to Xavier Monnot's winery. I had the opportunity to meet him personally and ask him questions about his Domaine. Xavier's estate is 17 hectare estate located in Meursault. He produces mostly whites (about 65% of total production) and is very proud of his success. His wines are firm and rich in minerals. After our white wine tasting we decided to move to the tank fermentation area where we had a small buffet with the best chestnut soup ever. Pleasure is found in unexpected places; just follow your instincts when it comes to French food, what can possibly go wrong? I knew I was getting a little tired of the same menu, foie gras and ham and parsley terrine, but how many times a year do you get to enjoy these little pleasures in life?

We also tasted some of Xavier's reds, nice and light but full of fruit and pride. Xavier treated everyone with a nice surprise, he invited a group of men to join our wine tasting, who later on joined us at the hotel for a fabulous Calvados tasting. They call themselves "Les Cadets de Bourgogne" or the Cadets of Burgundy, the singing soul of the Confrerie des Chevaliers du Tastevin, the "always drinkers and never drunkards". They sing a wide repertoire of Burgundian songs and wear cellar men's clothes. It couldn't get more local and cultural. We had such an amazing time with them we decided to invite them to join us afterwards. They continued their repertoire at the hotel and even sang "New York, New York" for all of us while we enjoyed a great Calvados tasting from Domaine Louis Dupont.

Calvados is produced in the department of Calvados which is located in the northern part of the country. It was explained to me by Bobby Kacher that Calvados is made by distilling fermented apple juice from apples that were specially selected to produce Calvados. The fruit is pressed and fermented into a hard cider which is distilled to make "eau de vie" and aged in oak. The youngest one we tasted was Vieille Reserve, aged 6-7 years in oak cask, which had a nice rich caramel color and baked apple aromas. The oldest were a Fine Reserve and 1989 Calvados both of which were very smooth, full of vanilla tones, and with a rich buttery nose. Calvados is a great thing it could be served as an aperitif, digestive, or with coffee. I didn't get enough of it that night, and neither did the Cadets de Bourgogne, as they continued the night with their great music and their never-ending spirit.

One sunny afternoon in Burgundy we were joined for lunch by several producers from the Loire Valley, one of my favorite areas of wine making in France. The Loire is by far the most diverse region in France, and many of their wines are underestimated. This region is highly influenced by the Loire River, which keeps the temperature a little higher making it great for winemaking. Most of the winemakers from the Loire are firm believers that "maceration pelliculaire" or cold soak is the way to go to create an outstanding refreshing wine full of flavor, therefore keeping the natural flavors of the grapes and enhancing the characteristics of their "terroir". A large variety and styles of wine are produced in this area such as dry and crisp whites, rose wines, sparkling and still wines, sweet wines and earthy red wines such as Chinon (Cabernet Franc).

We enjoyed wines from different wine makers such as Chateau de Suronde located in the small area of Rochefort, located on top of the slopes. Is a small vineyard of only 6 hectares but by far one of the top ones in the area. The harvest is still done manually and harvest is as late as November. Domaine des Rochelles is located in the appellation of Anjou, a 4th generation 60 hectare estate producing Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, and some Chenin Blanc. Everything is temperature controlled, which is very important for them for the close management of malolactic fermentation and conservation of the wines. Their reds which are a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc have a generous engaging nose with complex aromas with candied black and red fruits. All their grapes are destemmed and pressed gently going through a maceration period of 20 days; all of them have an amazing finish and a captivating expression. These wines definitely will develop perfectly in a 2-10 year period of time. The whites were more sophisticated, with notes such as acacia, honey, preserves and lemon verbena. Nice and smooth to the palate with the perfect balance of fruit to achieve great elegance.

Other wines that I enjoyed during this tasting were mostly the Sauvignon Blanc and Cabernet Franc. I also would like to mention the other wine makers involved in this tasting such as Domaine Phillippe Portier, Domaine les Grandes Vignes, Chateau de Miniere, Domaine Joel Delaunay, Domaine des Hauts de Sanziers, Domaine Assadet, Domaine des Lauriers, Domaine Thomas et Fils, Domaine Herve Seguin and Champagne Jean Pierre Lamiable, whose wines were absolutely outstanding and clearly state the hard work, passion and time that every wine maker puts into them.

We returned to tasting the wines of Burgundy the next day with Domaine Gilles-Jayer, Domaine Claude Dugat, Domaine Serafin, Maison Ambroise, Domaine Chauvenet-Chopin,

Domaine Lecheneaut and Domaine Laleure-Piot. All of them are considered top producers of their own areas producing wines with outstanding fruit and body. All of them are firm believers of organic wines using the best winemaking methods possible to show the elegance and strength of every single one of their wines. Truly admirable vigneronns.

At this point I did not think my trip could get any better until we drove down through the Rhone valley, where we made our first stop in Avignon, residence of the Popes in the middle ages. Avignon is a spectacular place full of museums, chapels and churches, with plenty of small restaurants and places to eat. The whole place is enclosed with medieval walls build in 1403 by the Anti-Pope Benedict the XIII. The most impressive part about it was that my room at the Hotel was facing the big wall.

The Rhone valley is clearly divided into two parts: South and North, and wines are drastically different. Red wines still dominate the region and Roses are coming along very well. Rhone Valley takes its name from the Rhone River which begins in the Alps and ends in Jura Mountains. Twenty-three different grape varietals are grown in the Rhone and only a few of them are very important to the vigneronns. It is very easy to remember which grapes are used depending on the area of the Rhone in which you are situated; Syrah for the north and Grenache for the south.

I had the opportunity to enjoy the best of best out the Rhone Valley: Domaine Jamet, Stephane Ogier (by far one of my favorites wine makers on this trip, Stephane and Michael are very passionate wine makers) Domaine Santa Duc, Domaine Beaumalric, Domaine de la Frondeche, Domaine Andre Brunel, Domaine Font de Michelle, Domaine des Ammouriers, and last but not least Domaine Belle.

Domaine Jamet and Ogier are located more on the northern part of Rhone Valley, in the Cote Rotie or also called the "the roasted hillside", very dramatic wines full of gaminess and earthy flavors, all of them 100% Syrah.

Domaine Belle is located in the Croze Hermitage of the northern Rhone. Most of the vineyards from this area are flatlands that are spread through the hills of Hemitage, creating vibrant, peppery, and full of black fruit; complex wines. The wines are very straightforward but full of fruit and very tasty.

Domaine Santa Duc is located in the Gigondas area, just to the west of Chateauneuf du Pape in the south. The wines from this region are a little stronger and have explosive flavors, such as

spice, leather and red fruit with an unforgettable chewy bite at the end. They remind me a bit of Chateaneuf du Pape wines but their personalities are clearly different from each other.

Heading further south we paid a little visit to Domaine Beaumalric right between the Vacqueyras and Chateaneuf du Pape region some of the sturdiest, boldest wines that I have ever tried. The taste and smell is like the land itself, and those stony soils filled with dried herbs and peppers. A true Vacqueyras flavor profile.

Domaine Frondeche was a different story, we headed further south of Chateaneuf du Pape, it is only a 35 hectare winery, producing all organic wines, and most of the blends are predominantly Grenache, Syrah and Mourvedre. They make excellent wines thanks to the great climate they have, great soil with great wind and sunlight exposure. They are beautiful wines with an incredible fruit and intensity balance, great acidity, overall mellow in character and well executed.

Domaine Andre Brunel and Domaine Font de Michelle are located in the commune of St. Genies de Comolas and the southern part of Chateaneuf du Pape, and they have a low yield vineyard as well, everything harvested and handled with the utmost care. Most of the wines are Grenache based with a bouquet of red fruits and spices. Most of these small vineyards produce the best wines since they have more time to produce quality wine rather than a big bulk. The soil is lime and clay based and you can truly taste its soil characteristics in these wines.

I had one of the greatest culinary experiences during my tasting with Domaine des Amouriers at an organic farm called Ferme Auberge del'Houmet. Everything is fresh, organic, and most importantly everything must come from their farm. From the food, to the hospitality, to the owner, this was a true culinary experience. To the French the senses are everything, just like the farm to a farmer is his whole life, and his produce is the fruit of his success. Is the soul reason for their existence, in particular the sense of taste, the taste of earth. It takes very special people to make very special things, it's just not food it's a piece of their farm.

Costieres de Nimes was my next stop during the trip, an area between Nimes and the Petit Rhone. The soils in this area are made from round red pebbles and predominately produces red

and Roses made from Carignan, Syrah, Grenache, Cinsault, and Mourvedre. I found the wines to be more fruity, some rich and some a little drier than others. The style of wine is very similar to Rhone since Costieres is right there in the middle where both Rhone and Languedoc meet. I believe Costieres wines have a big potential and are great for their value but are extremely underestimated here in the United States. Most of them had a cherry juice with freshly squeezed berries, very fruity on the nose, very explosive, super exciting components with tremendous backbone structure in most of them. Remarkable, and a shame that these are so unknown to a lot of people. I desperately and passionately would love for everyone to try a wine from this area, they will come around at some point when someone makes them known to the world.

There are so many winemakers in this area that touched my palate, but there was one that really touched all my senses and that was Chateau d'Or et de Gueules, located in Camargue. From the wines, to the winery, and specifically to the wine maker, who made me feel like women really do not have to work as hard as men to make exceptional wines, Mrs. Diane de Puymorin. She also works with organic methods and limits her yields to produce the best quality wines possible.

Her baby is "La Bolida" or small cuvee which is the estates "Prestige cuvee", was by far one of my favorites but there is one that absolutely captured me, the Costieres de Nimes/Rouge 06. A Syrah and Grenache based red wine that was literally like having a freshly baked loaf of banana bread right in front of you. I don't remember how many times I told Mrs. Puymorin how much I loved this wine but I believe I made my point loud and clear. She treated us with the best Paella in town, today I regret not eating more of that Paella because I have dreams about it; and yes, "crazy" dreams in a nerdy food enthusiast way. If there was one place that I would love to visit again if I had the chance to go back to Nimes, it would be her place. Her winery tells everything about her, she also sells artwork that matches her wines but most importantly her "Here I am" loud personality. What a passionate woman! I have to admit I love artwork and I bought one of the paintings at her winery, I could not resist the temptation at the moment.

Narbonne, Languedoc-Roussillon was our last stop. Unfortunately I did not get to see most of the things that I wanted to see in this specific place. I was told a HUGE storm had just passed by the area and we really did not have a chance to enjoy the beauty of this place at its full potential. But we were treated to a fabulous lunch at Maison du Terroir, a one star Michelin restaurant that was absolutely outstanding. Food being good is important and worth waiting, but so is who you are spending time with and the purpose of its celebration. Eating is an occasion

for joy. At the restaurant we had the chance to taste some of Mas de Lavail wines that definitely had a huge impact on me because of the Spanish influence. Nicolas the winemaker is very young and very passionate about his wines. Their wines ranged from dry to very fruity sweet dessert wines, flattering just like the winemaker himself! EGO is the wine maker's baby, full of fruit and nice velvety tannins, and trust me this wine will alter or change your EGO forever.

Something happened to me during this trip and I don't know what it is yet. But it is definitely about obsession, eating, seeing, and living with passion, a purpose; an experience that belongs to me, but also the "Kacher" group. I am a firm believer of the old saying "Don't tell me what a person says or what a person knows" in this case tell me about someone's passion, and I'll tell you that persons dream and reason to enjoy life. In my case my joy is food and wine, a cultural experience, but most importantly the joy of sharing this with other people. We all have a choice passionate people or the rest of the world. Face it, when you have beautiful people making something beautiful such as wine, you have to celebrate that with them. For me this kind of talent is pure craft, a reason to celebrate every harvest season.