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Vintage Burgundy

By Mary S. Gilbert
Published in: Travel

BEAUNE, France The warning on the menu at the restaurant at Domaine Comte Senard vineyard in the village of Aloxe-Corton gets straight to the point: "Continued consumption of wine may lead to sophistication, cultural awareness, worldly concerns, youthful ambiance and possibly severe happiness."

That's what I call positive reinforcement for my decision to visit Burgundy, one of the oldest wine regions in France and revered internationally for its exceptional chardonnays and pinot noirs.

The server has poured a glass of Grand Cru Corton les Paulands to accompany my lunch of jambon persille (a ham and parsley terrine), boeuf bourguignon and gratin dauphinois. I happily sip away, intent on fulfilling the menu's promise of self-improvement.

Wine tasting, sampling the regional cuisine and touring the small villages and lush, rolling countryside are proving to be both a gastronomic and cultural experience.

I'd chosen the picturesque medieval town of Beaune as my home base.

Dating to 400 B.C., Beaune's sense of history is pervasive. The Romans are thought to have introduced the grapevine to Burgundy, thus beginning its wine heritage. Beaune was a political and geographical stronghold ruled through the 1400s by the dukes of Burgundy. More powerful than the kings of France and possessing more land, the dukes proclaimed they also were the "lords of the best wines in Christendom."

My tour of the Hospices de Beaune, also called the Hotel-Dieu, further prompted the feeling of straddling centuries. Built in 1443, this imposing structure served as the

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Domaine Comte Senard: www.domainesenard.com/en

Chateau de Pommard: www.chateaudepommard.com

Chateau du Close de Vougeot: www.closdevougeot.fr/en

Detours in France: www.detours-in-france.com

The Cook's Atelier: www.thecooksatelier.com

Info on visiting Beaune: www.beaune-tourism.com

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hospital until as recently as 1971. The building's tile rooftop, vigorously patterned in shades of red, green and gold, is said to represent the colors of the fall harvest as conceived by Flemish artisans. This distinctive style has become a visual symbol of Burgundy.

An order of nuns administered the hospital, caring for their patients in a dormitory-like room with a soaring ceiling and parallel rows of curtained box beds. If you knocked on the door before the advent of modern medicine, hoping for admittance and a cure, a nun would say, not very reassuringly, "You're not completely dead yet."

On 'The Road'

Today, though, Beaune is best known as the heart of the Routes des Grands Crus, or Grands Crus Wine Road.

Grand Cru is an official French classification for wines and vineyards of the highest grade – a prestigious and coveted designation. This wine-growing route is about 40 miles long and relatively narrow, running from Dijon to Santenay. The vineyards of the Cote de Nuits to the north are renowned for their reds, yielding 24 grand cru wines. The Cote de Beaune to the south produces all of the region's white grand cru wines.

I learned more during a visit to Chateau de Pommard, the largest private vineyard in Burgundy. My guide explained that the monastic communities of the Middle Ages also played a key role in the wine industry. The monks recognized that different fields resulted in different wines, owing to variations in sunshine, soil composition and drainage. They built "clos" – stone walls – around the best parcels of vines to signify their superior quality. Wine aficionados still value this concept of terroir (literal sense of place) for imparting specific characteristics.

The Clos de Vougeot vineyard has the largest number of clos in the region. Now a museum, it was founded in the 12th century by monks from the nearby Abbey of Citeaux, who also made – and still make – a renowned cheese of the same name. The massive wine presses that they maneuvered by hand are preserved as national landmarks. I'm told the monks made their wines while naked.

An avid hiker, I decided an exploration of the landscape was in order. Detours in France – a family-run business in Beaune offering a variety of self-guided and customized tours – provided me with a 9-mile trail map. Beginning at the ruins of the chateau in St. Romaine le-Haut, I traipsed through a patchwork of vineyards, gazed at panoramic vistas and explored charming villages, each with degustations (tasting rooms) for their particular wines.

A taste of France

All the wines I sampled were wonderful; so was the cuisine. How, I wondered, could I replicate the Burgundian table back home?

I turned to chef Marjorie Taylor of The Cook's Atelier for one of her market tours and hands-on cooking classes. Marjorie is an American expat from Phoenix who moved to Beaune several years ago. She established the town's only cooking school with her daughter, Kendall, who studied at the viticulture school in Beaune.

We took advantage of the weekly outdoor market, a time-honored French tradition, to select ingredients for the meal we'd soon create in Marjorie's light-filled kitchen.

Marjorie's mantra: Buy and eat foods that are fresh, local and seasonal. That's definitely easy to do in Beaune, for the stands were laden with beautiful produce, meats, cheeses, olives and herbs, all cultivated in nearby farms and gardens. The head and feet of the pintade (guinea fowl) we purchased from Monsieur Vossot were still attached – to attest to the bird's freshness – just as the intense hues and crispness of Madame Loichet's miniature vegetables exemplified the earth-to-fork philosophy.

Under Marjorie's convivial tutelage, I made gougeres (cheese puffs), pintade with roasted vegetables and an impossibly flaky rustic peach tart. As I sat down to indulge in my handiwork and Kendall's perfect wine pairings, I was overcome by the French joie de vivre – cheerful enjoyment of life. Surely St. Vincent, the Burgundian patron saint of wine, was smiling down on me.

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