

BURGUNDY

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LIFE TO THE
FULLEST

Cream-coloured Charolais cows with curious eyes look up at us from the meadows that whizz past our car like colour photographs. The smells of wildflowers and freshly-mown hay simultaneously hit our nostrils. Our mouths begin to water in anticipation of crunchy baguettes, godly cheeses and glasses of fruity Burgundy wine. Indeed, the French region of Burgundy is a wonderful place to experience the vast French countryside and visit some of the world's most renowned vineyards.



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One of the most picturesque and best-known
Grand cru vineyards in Burgundy –
Chevaliers-Montrachet

Our trip to France begins at Paris' busy Charles de Gaulle Airport – a convenient starting point for renting a car (preferably a convertible) and setting off on a three-and-a-half-hour drive southeast to Burgundy. As we leave the airport, our adrenaline level picks up as we enter the thick flow of traffic, which winds around Paris in a half-circle, like a column of ants from a busy colony.

We soon feel hunger pangs coming on, but we don't want to fill our bellies with fast food. It turns out that only ten minutes from the main road, in Paris' 20th arrondissement, is a fantastic pizzeria. It can be found in the stylish *Mama Shelter* hotel (109 rue de Bagnolet), which was designed by Philippe Starck. At lunchtime, the place is brimming with activity, like a kettle of bolognese sauce. It's teeming with business people, shopping-weary housewives, creative types working on *iPads* and laptops, and charming octogenarian grandmothers, who never fail to drink a daily glass of wine together with their lunch meal. An hour-and-a-half is enough for us to recharge our batteries, and we head off to the peaceful countryside, which is dotted by small and romantic villages.

Life in a postcard

A perfect plan for getting to know Burgundy is to stay in one place for several nights in a row, and go out on planned and unplanned exploratory day trips to discover this beautiful region. We have decided to spoil ourselves and head to the luxurious Château de Villette (58170 Poil, chateaudevillette.eu), which we booked before our trip. Upon reaching the tiny village of Poil, which consists of a post office, a family restaurant and a few adjacent houses, we sense that we have nearly arrived.

The Château de Villette sits perfectly in the idyllic French countryside. A forest arcs around the manor on three sides, while to the south a majestic park reminds one of the geometrically patterned gardens of Versailles. The owners, Coen and Catherine, have good reason to say that the Château de Villette is one of the best-kept secrets in Burgundy. Seeking to realise their dream of owning a stately home in a country setting, the couple went to see countless châteaux that were up for sale before coming across this one. They immediately fell in love with the property and bought it in 2000. After celebrating their wedding there, they undertook a sweeping renovation that lasted two years.

While the château itself has only six guest rooms, there are also two cottages that can be rented on the grounds. The presence of the owners' family makes us feel like we have come to visit close friends. The park at the Château de Villette was originally designed in the 17th century by famous landscape artist André Le Nôtre, who also planned out the gardens at Versailles. The park was modified after the present owners moved in, but it still retains the French garden concepts that Le Nôtre adhered to, such as symmetrical



A Burgundy-style dinner that we prepared ourselves



Scenic park at the Château de Villette



Shady refuge in the summer heat

lines of hedges, steps that accentuate the garden's different levels, a majestic fountain, as well as lavender and rose beds. The captivating scene makes for a photograph that would fit perfectly in a shiny coffee-table book.

We choose to stay in one of the 17th-century cottages, which has been renovated just as scrupulously as the château. French country charm can be felt at every step: the massive fireplace gives off a smell of wood and wild game even in the summertime, exposed solid wood beams and charming rustic furniture create a homey feeling, while the garden beckons us to eat our breakfast outside in the company of a free-roaming rooster, whose morning "cock-a-doodle-dos" are exceptionally loud. We are also amused



The garden beckons us to eat our breakfast outside in the company of a free-roaming rooster

by a female red Cocker Spaniel named Google and her retinue of hunting dogs, and by a muster of peacocks fanning their colourful tails in one corner of the garden. All of these unexpected attributes add a wonderful touch to the beginning of our vacation, during which we hope to visit some of the world's most famous vineyards near the villages of Puligny-Montrachet, Chassagne-Montrachet and Meursault and to take in the charm of other small country villages in Burgundy.

The best white wine in France

Many gourmands assert that Burgundy produces the best dry white wine in the world. The most famous and prestigious vineyard is Montrachet, whose name was appended in the 19th century to neighbouring vineyards that are almost as renowned, yet their price is much lower. Thus, aside from the iconic Montrachet, other names to look out for on wine bottles include Bâtard-Montrachet and Chevalier-Montrachet. This world-class white wine is made from Chardonnay grapes, and part of its refined taste stems from its *terroir* – a combination of climate, soil type, terrain and local winemaking traditions. The aforementioned vineyards can be found close to the small villages



The grapes harvested from these vineyards will be used to make some of the world's best white wine



Burgundy's most prestigious vineyards are in the *Grand cru* category



Such tempting destinations on the road signs! Which direction should we follow?

of Puligny-Montrachet and Chassagne-Montrachet. Meursault is another prominent name to take note of.

If you fancy exclusive red wines, which are made exclusively from Pinot noir grapes in Burgundy, then Gevrey-Chambertin and Vosne-Romanée are also worth visiting. The region is covered with vineyards that look very much alike, and it is hard to establish their proprietors at first glance. Sometimes property boundaries are marked by simple wooden stakes of different colours at the end of vine rows, which shows that Burgundy's winegrowers literally work shoulder to shoulder in the vineyards, making sure that pests and diseases don't get the better of their valuable plants in the changing weather conditions.

Growing on gentle slopes and surrounded by old walls of stone, the most prestigious vineyards are in the *Grand cru* category, their names often carved into their arched stone entrances. Thus, as one wanders along the small pathways that lead past these vineyards, it's easy to be transported back in time, when most of the wine in the region was produced by monks. Burgundy is one of the oldest wine regions in France, with archaeological evidence indicating that wine was produced there as early as the 2nd century.

What better place to get better acquainted with this godly drink than at the premises of a reputable winemaker? We head off to visit master winemaker Olivier Leflaive at his winery

Burgundy is one of the oldest wine regions in France

in the village of Puligny-Montrachet (Place du Monument, 21190 Puligny-Montrachet) and whose family has been making wine there for 17 generations (18 if one includes his children). For 14 years, he co-managed the *Domaine Leflaive*, which has achieved a cult status of sorts and which makes some of the most renowned wines in Burgundy. Olivier then founded another winemaking business on the side, which he named after himself.

The friendly gentleman greets us with a smile, wearing the trademark white Panama hat that has been a part of his image for many years. He jokes that although he has reached retirement age, wine remains even more jealous of his attentions than his own wife. Olivier tells us about various aspects of winemaking, and his sparkling sense of humour bubbles over just like champagne. We find out later that this comparison is quite appropriate, as champagne is another passion of his.

The house of *Olivier Leflaive* owns 15 hectares of vineyards in Chassagne and Puligny. Although it also purchases grapes from elsewhere, Olivier makes sure that his workers pick the grapes themselves and transport them to his winery, where all of the wines – mainly whites – are made. The name *Olivier Leflaive* can be found on approximately 80 different labels of white wine from the vineyards of Meursault to Corton-Charlemagne.

Instead of taking a well-deserved retirement after setting up his own winery, the elderly winemaker decided two years ago to make champagne as well. Together with his business partner Erick de Sousa, he founded the house of *Champagne Valentin Leflaive* in the region of Champagne.



The ever-charming Olivier Leflaive taking visitors on a tour of his winery

Gastronomy is no less important than wine for the French



Burgundy is known for its culinary diversity

"When two hedonists who love life and challenges meet up, nothing can stop them," laughs Olivier, whose signature white Panama hat was incorporated into the brand's logo. After a two-hour tour of his vineyards and winery, Olivier invites us to his restaurant, which he has named *La Table* (The Table).

"I like to invite people to eat at my table, which is why I gave the restaurant this name. What can be more suitable for bringing out a wine's finest nuances than a great meal?" he asks. Sitting down together with Olivier at a lunch table, I get the feeling that I have known him for years. Jovial and good-humoured, he displays the hospitality for which Burgundians are known. Conversation flows freely and the hours pass by in a flash.

The fantastic cuisine of traditional recipes with a modern twist is accompanied by a dozen of his best wines, including a selection of Premier Cru Meursault, Puligny-Montrachet and Chassagne-Montrachet. At the end of our meal, Olivier serves us Grand Cru Bâtard-Montrachet (a favourite of serial killer Hannibal Lecter in *Hannibal*) and Corton-Charlemagne.

"Wine is a message in a bottle. Starting from the soil, continuing with the climate and harvest, and ending with the traditions and goals of its maker. You have to read the wine's message yourselves," says Olivier with a wry smile at the end of the meal, before putting his white hat back on and bidding us adieu.

To the market for dinner

From our home base at the venerable Chateau de Villette, it takes about one hour by car to reach Burgundy's main wineries. I am almost sorry that our drive ends so soon, as postcard-perfect scenes present themselves to us time and time again along the way. We see Charolais cows resting in picturesque fields bathed by the afternoon sun, ploughed hillsides, and tiny villages in which the main building is the *boulangerie* (bakery). We also come upon Michelin-starred restaurants in the most unexpected places, as the French countryside is full of outstanding eating establishments.

After all, gastronomy is no less important than wine for the French, and visitors should try to combine the two. Local food markets are one way of doing so. About 20 kilometres from Poilly is the town of Autun. Its central square bustles with activity on Saturday mornings, when a farmers' market is held there. All kinds of local foods are on display to tempt one's taste buds, including huge rolls of cheese, freshly baked loaves of bread, herbs, spices and mounds of vegetables, not to mention countless varieties of *foie gras* and fish.

I buy a huge piece of Comté cheese from the Saône Valley at the foot of the Alps. That's followed by a freshly baked loaf of bread, whose crunchy and fragrant crust tempts me to break off and eat a piece right there on the spot. I also purchase a bunch of wild artichokes and some appetising vegetables. With the knowledge that my homemade dinner will be complemented with a chilled bottle of Puligny-Montrachet from the region's best vineyards, I think: "How can one not fall in love with Burgundy?"

We let down our car roof and drive on towards the village of Meursault on a brilliant sunny day, the wind blowing in our hair. And the smells! Oh, the smells! Think haystacks, flower meadows and cattle farms. These aromas work wonders to drive off any thoughts about my work back at home.



Going to the market is a real social event. You'll be talking with one person after another during your entire shopping trip



The Meursault bus stop is a welcome sight to visiting wine-lovers



The sun prepares to set at the end of an event-filled day in Burgundy's vineyards and wineries

A tranquil atmosphere reigns in Meursault, as in the nearby villages of Volnay and Pommard, inducing us to take a leisurely stroll along its small streets. Stepping out into the surrounding vineyards, we see people at work tending the grape vines. That's part of the scrupulous efforts that are invested into making one of the most renowned white wines in Burgundy. The weather hasn't been kind to Burgundy's winegrowers this year, starting with spring frosts and hail, and continuing with rainy days in May and June. The winegrowers predict that in Puligny-Montrachet and Chassagne-Montrachet they will be able to collect only 20-30% of this year's expected harvest.

A short five-minute drive from Meursault is Beaune, Burgundy's wine capital. Like a shot of espresso, the city wakes us up from our tranquil countryside state-of-mind, but doesn't overwhelm us with an exceedingly urban feel. The medieval walls of the romantic Old Town provide welcome shade, while wine bistros and cafés stand hidden in the quietest corners.

A little further out of the Old Town, but still in the city centre, is *La Dilettante* (11 rue du Faubourg Bretonnière), a wonderful wine bar whose owner, Lolo, spoils visitors with light, fresh and healthy meals (salads, meat and cheese selections) made from exclusively local produce. Even a simple snack like a green salad mix with sesame seed oil tastes fantastic. Wine lovers, for their part, should definitely take note of two outstanding wine stores: *Mon Millésime* (54 rue du Faubourg Madeleine) in the centre of Beaune and *Caveau de Chassagne* (7 rue Charles Paquelin) in the village of Chassagne-Montrachet. Both shops offer splendid selections of the finest Burgundy wines.

In order not to remain with an empty stomach, one has to take Burgundy's working hours into account. Restaurants are usually open from 12:00–14:00 for lunch. Then they open again at 19:00 for dinner, while practically all stores and bakeries shut their doors at seven in the evening.

Incidentally, it is worth renting bicycles in Beaune and going out for several hours to visit the surrounding vineyards and villages. Pedalling along at a leisurely pace, one can see much more than one would be able to appreciate by going on foot. The road signs are well-placed and easy to spot, making it hard to lose one's way, although getting lost in a Burgundian vineyard is definitely not the worst experience that one could have.

If you choose to travel by car from Beaune, then you can easily reach the picturesque Burgundian town of Dijon, which is due east. Bustling Lyon is further south, while Chablis is Burgundy's northernmost wine-making district. What better place to enjoy a glass of wine from that part of France than in a Chablis vineyard?

During the drive back to our charming accommodations, the vineyards again give way to typical country meadows and we are treated to a hypnotising sunset. The sun that helps the winegrowers to make the best wine in the world goes down behind a hill, and we can hear a chorus of grasshoppers chirping even over the din of our car engine as the night sets in. The sweltering heat lets up and the perfect time has come to practice a wonderful French tradition – going out for a hearty dinner with a glass of excellent wine. Santé! **BO**