



WINNEY

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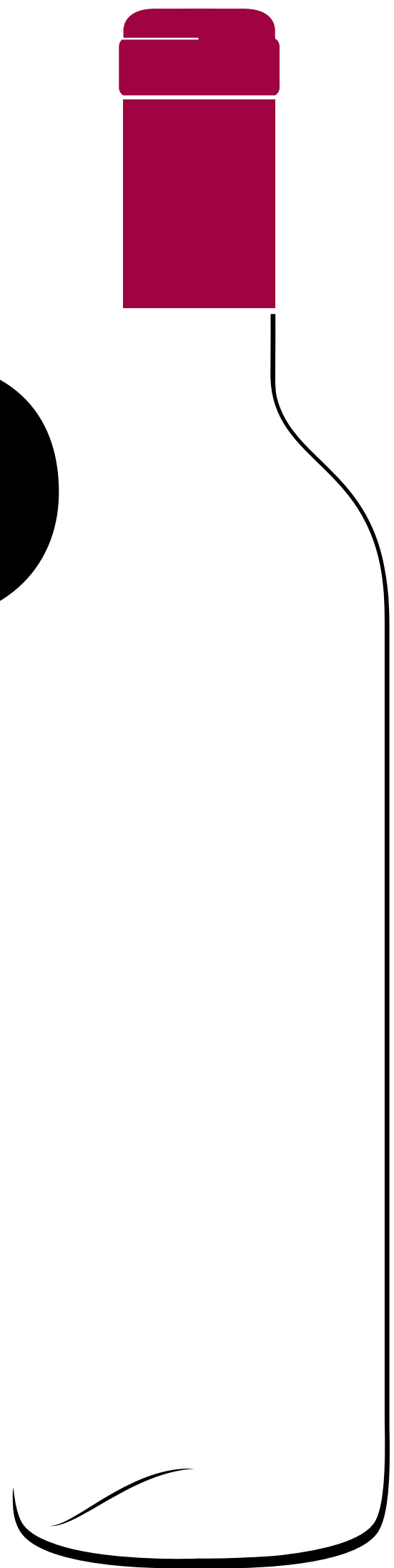
Belgians producing
top European wines

Dirk De Mesmaeker

PHOTOS

Andrew Verschetze

 | LANNOO







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INTRO

*B*elgians are determined to prove themselves, very much aware that they can capture a place in the wine landscape only by delivering top quality. Which is precisely why our winegrowers, wherever they are at work in Europe, are so passionate about their profession.'

The above quote is not mine. It comes from one of the fifteen winegrowers who tell their stories in this book. But for me it is an important statement, as it really applies to all the growers whom I visited to write this book. What drivenness! What determination to make wines of excellence! What an incredible passion for their craft!

For me this is typically Belgian. Refusal to give up, hard work and the determination to prove oneself and succeed in what one has set out to do, these characteristics run like a common thread through all these stories of Belgian winegrowers. This boundless commitment undoubtedly explains their success. Because wherever they have settled, Belgian winegrowers have written success stories with the wine they produce.

It takes guts to do this: to gain respect in a part of the world where you are often viewed first with suspicion and scepticism. And your wine really has to be very good for you to strike roots as a successful immigrant winemaker in Europe's best wine regions.

To draw level with Italian winemakers in the heart of Tuscany or Sicily. To compete with the best Spanish winegrowers in the Priorat. And to make wine that is as good or even better than the one of your Portuguese colleagues in the Douro, Dão or Bairrada. This is something given only to the few, but the winegrowers with Belgian roots in this book are living proof that it is indeed possible.

Nor must I forget all those winemakers who are pioneers in their field in Belgium itself, and are putting wine from Belgian soil onto the map. Thanks to them,

the days when wine from Belgium was sneered at are now long gone.

But more is needed to make the grade as a winegrower. Hard work alone is not enough. Especially in a new and unfamiliar environment where different rules and laws apply, it is important to set to work tactically, and to keep out of the limelight. You have to earn people's trust and also give trust: a process that requires patience and that can sometimes take years.

Belgian winemakers have understood better than anyone that a headstrong, self-willed approach makes absolutely no sense. In most cases, it is precisely thanks to and with the cooperation of local people that the Belgian wine stories have been a success.

Who knows the soil in Chianti better than the local Italian farmer? Who knows more about the influence of climate than the inhabitants of the small mountain village in the Priorat? Who can tell more about local customs, traditions and sensitivities than the Portuguese who for generations have known the secrets of the region where they were born and raised? It is important to be open to all that knowledge and all that wisdom, to respond to and benefit from it.

Conversely, the Belgian winemaker too is happy to give back in return. Generosity and gratitude are part of his nature. It is hard to put into exact figures, but the number of people who are directly or indirectly employed thanks to the activities of the Belgian growers is large. Through their presence Belgian growers are contributing to their local economies.

What applies to the fifteen growers in this book, undoubtedly applies equally to the many other Belgians who make wine elsewhere in Europe. Hard work and passion, resulting in quality in the glass, is what they all share. Unfortunately, it is an impossible task to gather into a single book all the Belgian winegrowers who fulfil these criteria. The absence of

certain growers says absolutely nothing about the quality of the wine they provide.

If there is one country in Europe where many Belgians have made it as winegrowers, it is France. Belgian winegrowers in France do not, however, appear in this book. Not because they do not make good wine. On the contrary. But they are so many in France, and there is so much to tell about them, that one book would not be enough to include all these fascinating stories.

Moreover, the merits of Belgian growers are appreciated not only in Europe but also in other parts of the world. Let this book be a bit of a tribute to all those growers who have made a success of wine-growing elsewhere in the world with the same mentality and attitude. Enough material for a book of other success stories, each telling of the same passion for the craft and quality in the glass.

Belgian Vineyards recounts the stories of fifteen passionate Belgian winegrowers in Europe. Fifteen

stories of men and women who have succeeded in their goal and put themselves on the map as Belgian winegrowers. Even if this has at times involved a lot of trial and error, and called for enormous amounts of patience and perseverance. But these are also precisely the typical traits that all the wine producers of this book share.

I had almost forgotten that there is something else that binds all Belgian growers, wherever they operate: they are all Burgundians, lovers of the good life who enjoy drinking good wine and who know how top class wine should taste.

Let this book tempt you to go and taste all these delicious wines, in whichever region they have been made, and wherever in Europe the grapes ripened. Enjoy the wine and the stories that go with it.

Good wine, from Belgian vineyards.

Read, taste and enjoy.

Dirk De Mesmaeker





ALDENEYCK

A TOP WINE, THANKS TO THE RIVER MEUSE

Wijndomein Aldeneyck (Wijndomein is the Dutch word for winery) lies in the little Limburg village of Aldeneik, on the border between Belgium and the Netherlands. A key feature here is the proximity of the River Meuse, to which Aldeneyck and other neighbouring wineries owe their existence. Besides the Meuse there is also the enthusiasm and passion of the winemakers themselves. At Aldeneyck these are Karel Henckens and his wife Tine Linssen. Charles has been for years a fierce fighter for a specific regional *appellation* (PDO Maasvallei Limburg). Aldeneyck is living proof that magnificent wines can also be produced in Belgium.

Karel Henckens trained originally as an architectural draftsman. His father Hein Henckens worked in the fruit sector, and was something of a pioneer. 'And today I'm actually a fruit grower in turn,' says Karel Henckens of Wijndomein Aldeneyck, which incidentally operates from exactly the same location where Hein Henckens and his wife ran a fruit company.

In the distant past, Karel, like his father, also worked as a fruit grower. But year after year, Karel and his wife became more and more involved, literally, with the taste of wine, including wine tours to France. In 1999, the couple finally took the plunge and decided to start producing wine themselves. Not in France, but in their own home base, the Meuse valley. 'For me there was more honour to be gained in wine-making than in growing apples and pears. There is also much more to it, the challenge is much bigger, every year you have to do something new: a creative side I like and find important.'

At the time Karel and Tine started out as winegrowers, there were only

a handful of winegrowers in the region. Karel and Tine were pioneers. 'Luckily my knowledge as a fruit farmer stood me in good stead for growing grapes. The farm my grandparents had built in Aldeneik could, with a few changes, be converted into a winery.'

And so the apple and pear trees had to make way for vines. With lots of enthusiasm, Karel and Tine placed the winery on the map. With among other things good pruning, strict canopy management and use of the best winemaking techniques, the quality of the Aldeneyck wines rapidly came up to the mark.

Karel Henckens himself took specialist training at the wine institute in the German city of Trier in the Moselle region, graduating with a *Winzer* (winegrower) diploma. Karel trained together with Harry Vorselen, a winegrower who is the public face of Wijngoed Thorn, just across the border in the Netherlands.

Crucial to Aldeneyck's success story were the decision to opt for a limited yield and fanatical canopy management. 'By halving the number of bunches and green harvesting in August, when we cut out all excess bunches, we arrive at an average yield of maximum 50 hectolitres per hectare. This is very time consuming, but essential for quality. Our motto is: the lower the yield, the less bunches per vine, the better and the more concentrated the flavour. Additionally we harvest only very selectively and by hand.'

The choices of grape varieties fell almost immediately on Pinot, 'because the grapes with their fresh, mineral character best reflect the terroir of the region.' The first Pinot Blanc vines were planted in spring 2002, followed later by Pinot Gris and Pinot Noir.

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Winegrower Karel Henckens, enjoying a glass of wine on the banks of the Meuse, the river that is crucial for the wineries in the area.



Charles strives for a limited yield of not more than 50 hectolitres per hectare by cutting out one bunch in two.



In August every year a green harvest takes place, with surplus grapes cut out.

Obtaining good wine starts in the vineyard, which is why all bunches are harvested manually and closely monitored.









The superior quality juice from the Aldeneyck is achieved by pressing the grapes very gently under very low pressure.



After the gentle pressing, the juice clears for 24 hours and the fermentation process begins.



Fermentation lasts 4 to 5 weeks at low temperature, then follows a maturation of 6 months on the lees.



Stainless steel temperature-controlled ageing barrels and French oak barriques provide a perfect balance between tradition and the latest technologies.



INFLUENCE OF THE MEUSE

For Karel Henckens, the Aldeneyck winery would not exist without the presence of the River Meuse. 'Limburg's Meuse valley, behind the Kempen plateau, is one of the warmest and driest regions of the Benelux, always warmer and in most years drier than the rest of Belgium. One degree more or less can make a big difference. Thanks to these extra one or two degrees in the Meuse valley, we achieve an optimal ripening of the difficult Pinot Noir.'

In addition to a favourable microclimate, the terroir in the Meuse valley is excellent for vines. The subsoil consists of thick layers of gravel and pebbles, deposited by the river over many thousands of years. Along with the clay top layer, the subsoil brings a lot of mineral and fruity aromas into the wine.

'In addition, the vineyard faces south-south-east, allowing the vines to catch the sun from early morning until late in the evening.'

TOP-QUALITY WINES

Charles Henckens is firmly convinced that the changing climate is to the advantage of Belgian growers. 'Traditionally, wine is grown between latitudes 30° and 55° north. But over the last thirty years, with climate warming, this boundary has moved systematically northwards.'

With an annual precipitation of 675 litres it rains less in the Meuse valley than for example in Piedmont, one of Europe's best wine regions, with an average annual rainfall of 850 litres. And with 1,800 hours of sunshine a year, the temperature in the Meuse valley is comparable to that of Burgundy a hundred years ago, a fact confirmed for many many years by the weather station placed by the local Fruitgrowing Testing Centre (PCFruit) at the winery. No wonder that top quality wines can be made in the Meuse valley.

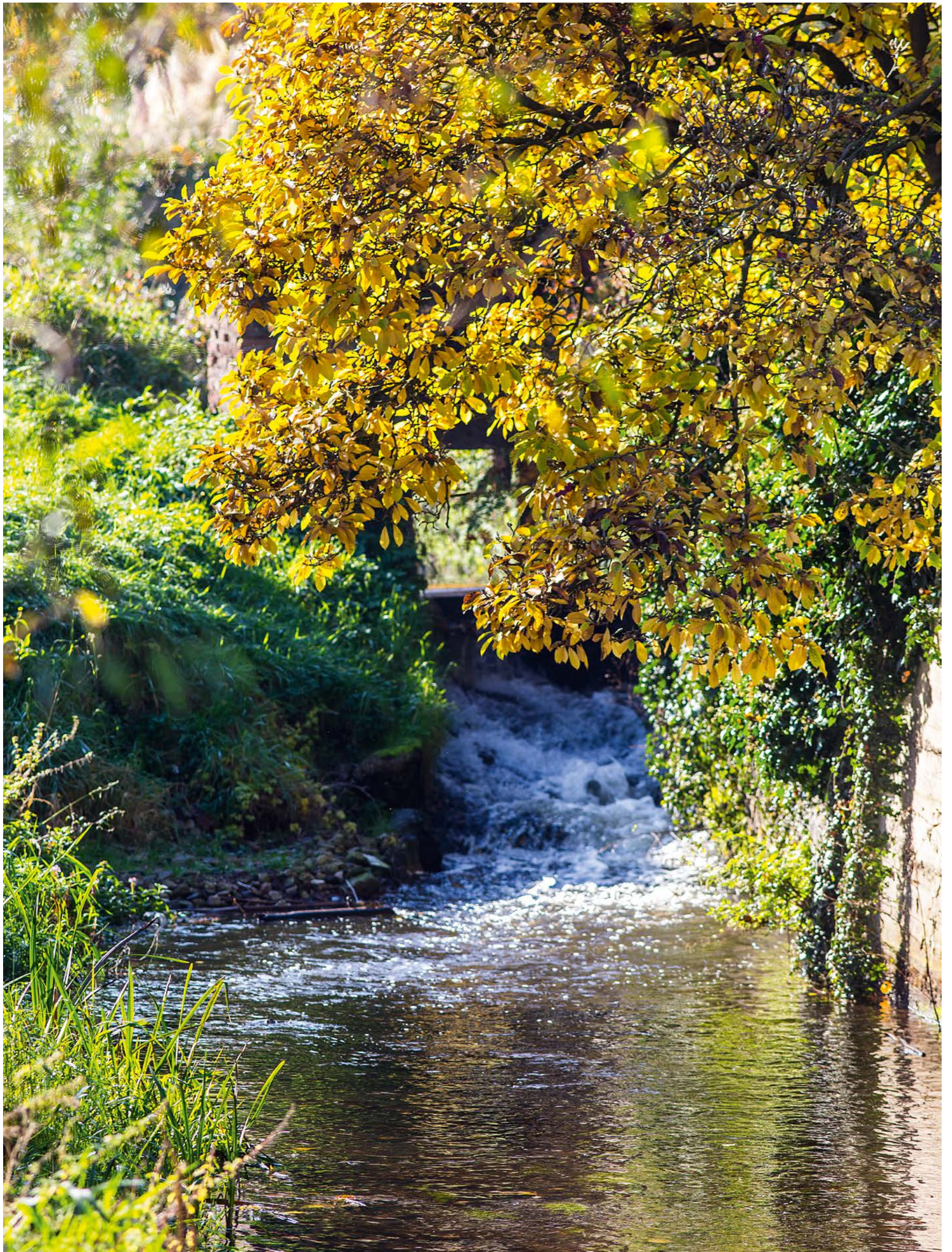


After the maturation "sur latte" follows the remuage with double gyro pallets, in order to bring the lees to the neck of the bottle.

AN OWN APPELLATION

For years Karel Henckens, along with other growers in the region, has been pressing for the recognition of a specific cross-border appellation, the PDO (Protected Designation of Origin) Maasvallei (= Meuse Valley)-Limburg. Not an easy task, as it requires the intervention of the governments of two countries, Belgium and the Netherlands. But after five years of effort, it is about to happen. If all goes to plan, PDO Maasvallei-Limburg will become reality in 2017.









Author **Dirk De Mesmaeker** is a journalist with Ring TV, the Halle-Vilvoorde regional television station. He has already written (in Dutch) on Belgian winegrowers in Bordeaux and on wine-growing in Belgium (*Belgische wijnbouwers in de Bordeaux* and *Wijnbouwers in België*).

Photographer **Andrew Verschetze** studied art and photography at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Ghent, going on to specialize in food and beverages photography. He has already worked on various wine and beer books for Lannoo, including *Geuze and Kriek*, *Spéciale Belge Ale*, *Masterclass Single Malt Whiskies of Scotland* and now the *Vineyards* series.

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