

A weathered stone cross stands vertically in the center of the frame. The cross is made of dark, textured stone with a simple design. The background is a soft-focus field of autumn foliage in shades of yellow, orange, and red. The sky is a pale, overcast white.

LE DOMAINE DE LA
ROMANÉE
CONTI

GERT CRUM
JAN BARTELSMAN
Photography

LANNOO





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CONTI

GERT CRUM

Photography **JAN BARTELSMAN**

With an interview
of Aubert de Villaine
by Jasper Morris

 | LANNOO



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MONOPOLE
1966

MAISON CIVILE DU DOMAINE DE LA ROMANÉE-CONTI
PROPRIÉTAIRE A VOSNE-ROMANÉE (CÔTE-D'OR)

PRODUCE OF FRANCE

ROMANÉE-CONTI

APPELLATION ROMANÉE-CONTI CONTRÔLÉE

124 Bouteilles Recoltes

N° 04885

L'ASSOCIÉ-GÉRANT

ANNÉE 1966

H. de Villain

Bouteille au Domaine

SPIRIT

By Aubert de Villaine

In the celebrated panegyric of the orator Eumenes, dated in 312, we are told that some 2000 years ago, wines much sought after by Roman and Gallo-Roman connoisseurs were already being produced. And from this period also began the long and great history of *climats* and of viticulture unique to Burgundy which have taken to its absolute limit the desire to anchor wine to its specific origin.

There are hundreds of *climats* in Burgundy identified by name. Their history unites the traditions and practices of the human spirit with the characteristics and limitations of a natural ecosystem.

Some of these *climats* have always been noted, recognized and praised for their ability, year after year to produce the most perfect wines.

On the hills that embrace them, they occupy the most favoured sites in the heart of the Côte de Beaune and Côte de Nuits, where the soils and weather conditions are the most auspicious. It gives them a special ability to absorb and make the best of the climatic vagaries in which the region is not lacking and allows them to attain, year after year and more than any of the other vineyards that surround them, a complete and harmonious ripening.

These are the Grand crus, exceptional vineyards that enjoy vast respect and which represent in both red and white wines, barely 1% of the surface and less than 1% of Burgundy's production.

This respect would of course not be merited without the specific and critical understanding that the vigneron's work is focussed solely on realising their full potential.

This is the mission the Domaine sets itself: from generation to generation and guided by a restless pursuit of excellence to effect and perpetuate the means to make their Grand crus, the greatest in Burgundy: Romanée-Conti, La Tache, Richebourg, Romanée-St-Vivant, Grands-Échézeaux, Échézeaux, Montrachet and since 2009 Corton – producing wines of a quality worthy of their potential and their reputation.

The terms of reference in this work are both simple and complex but entail as a priority:

- › Respect for the soil and a keen awareness of a precious but fragile patrimony of natural conditions the balance of which alone can express this gift. A *climat* is a living thing bound to an extraordinarily precise dynamic which you must respect and preserve in a spirit of profound humility.
- › The selection and propagation of Pinot Noir 'très fin' inherited from the old Romanée-Conti vineyard is an incomparable genetic legacy whose finesse and complexity determine the purity of the wines produced.
- › The quality of the team of men and women to whom have been entrusted the work and whose key words are: thoroughness, attention to detail, control of the practices, precision, patience and possibly above all, humility.

INTRODUCTION

By Philippe Claudel

As a child I was already familiar with the name Romanée-Conti. The terraced pathways on which I used to play every Thursday till I was breathless were maintained by an elderly roadman, Jules Guinsel, part local council employee, part poacher, whose habit in the torrid days of summer was to take a leisurely siesta in the shade of the walnut trees – thus mocking the regional superstition that death himself sought out their deep umbrage. While we tried to lob little clay balls into that gaping mouth, he was doubtless dreaming of snares full of plump hares or braces of enormous partridge... and wine. Yes, wine of course, it was the wife he had never had, the significant other half of his life. Strangely I cannot remember ever having seen him eat, only drink. His blue cloth satchel always held three or four litre bottles, packed in fistfuls of lucerne to keep them cool, from which he drew, with metronomic regularity, courage and oblivion. And I remember his incessant whistling, always the same tune, a lively little ditty, of that slightly risqué variety popular in the nineteenth hundreds, and that one can imagine being danced to on long-ago summer evenings, under the fringed awning of some country café, at a time when that century of horrors was yet in its infancy, innocent and bouncy and as full of promise as all new-born things. From time to time, when excessive heat or excessive drink condemned him to inactivity, Jules would lie as if felled on a roadside bank, his gaze vague, his eyes moist, and hum to his habitual air a few snatches of lyric, dredged from the uncertain depths of murky memory:

*“Just a glass of Romanée Conti
And I could leave in peace
To live my life in Paradise
For eternity at least”*

He would repeat this refrain a few times over, laughing to himself, and rolling his ‘r’s in the Vaudeville style, before descending into a heavy sleep, the satchel full of empties clutched in his embrace.

I was seven, the age of fabulous tales and sparkling things, of memories that burn like red-hot poker. A picture-book world full of marvels. The name Romanée-Conti remained for me shrouded with mystery for many years, a mystery that I neither wished to share with anyone, nor even have elucidated. It was enough just to pronounce the name, that blend of soft and brittle inflections, to reawaken the burning heat of summer long ago, Jules’ leathered face, the scent of fresh grass and of early fallen fruit, the music of the wasps and crickets and the bubbling gossip of freshwater springs.



Later, of course, I was to realise what magic really lay concealed in the Romanée-Conti name. It was a mystery far, far from the tepid ferment that nourished Jules in his hobo drunkenness. And yet both were part of the same miracle and were worshipped in the same church. How can any of us live without dreams and legends?

Wines from the Romanée-Conti Domaine are often referred to in legendary terms. This is above all true of the vintage that carries the Domaine's own label. What strikes me most in the expression 'the wine of legend' is that it links us to an important truth, the ability of these wines to construct, as much as their own matter, the stuff of their own legends, the reputation which binds them and enshrines them. It's not as if they need the kudos. But, just as great art is useless but indispensable, so the legends that surround Romanée Conti – legends of its origin, legends of succession, legendary secrets of production – bring to the wines themselves a supplement of soul, a jewelled nobility which is sufficient to place them, uncontested, at the highest level, that of mystery incarnate of which one speaks in whispers and whose promise extends to whole continents.

When one makes the journey to Vosne, one is touched by the simplicity of the place. A little village, surrounded by its vineyards, against the gentle slope of the hillside. Whether it is the style of the houses, the layout of the streets, the rows of vine stocks, all is unpretentious. The Domaine seems to concentrate all this modest self-effacement into itself. One would not imagine that the simple gates that front the narrow rue Derrière-le-four could open onto a place of such centennial fascination. What is striking here, and which I value perhaps above all else, is that the spectacular is not catered for here. It would be quite out of place. This is a patently different game, one that is stripped to essentials, whose prime feature is discretion, and which carries the depth of profile, quiet dignity and refined seriousness associated with important causes. Some names and reputations have ruined those who have inherited them. Indeed, history is marked by the hubris that has brought once mighty empires, which held the world in the palm of their hands, down into misfortune and dishonour. And nothing is more devastating than the sleep of the conceited. Modesty is quickly overlooked when the trumpets of fame start to blare in our ears. But here there is none of that.

Wines are like men. But which one makes the other? Everything is there, that almost mystic marriage between grapes and knowledge, the fruit and the man, not forgetting, of course, the earth with its unknown entrails. You have to climb a few hundred metres above the last houses in the village in order to realise that the whole drama is acted out, in intimacy, between these three players. Only up there does one get



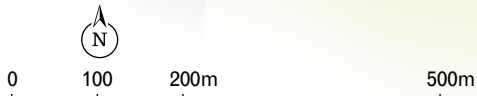
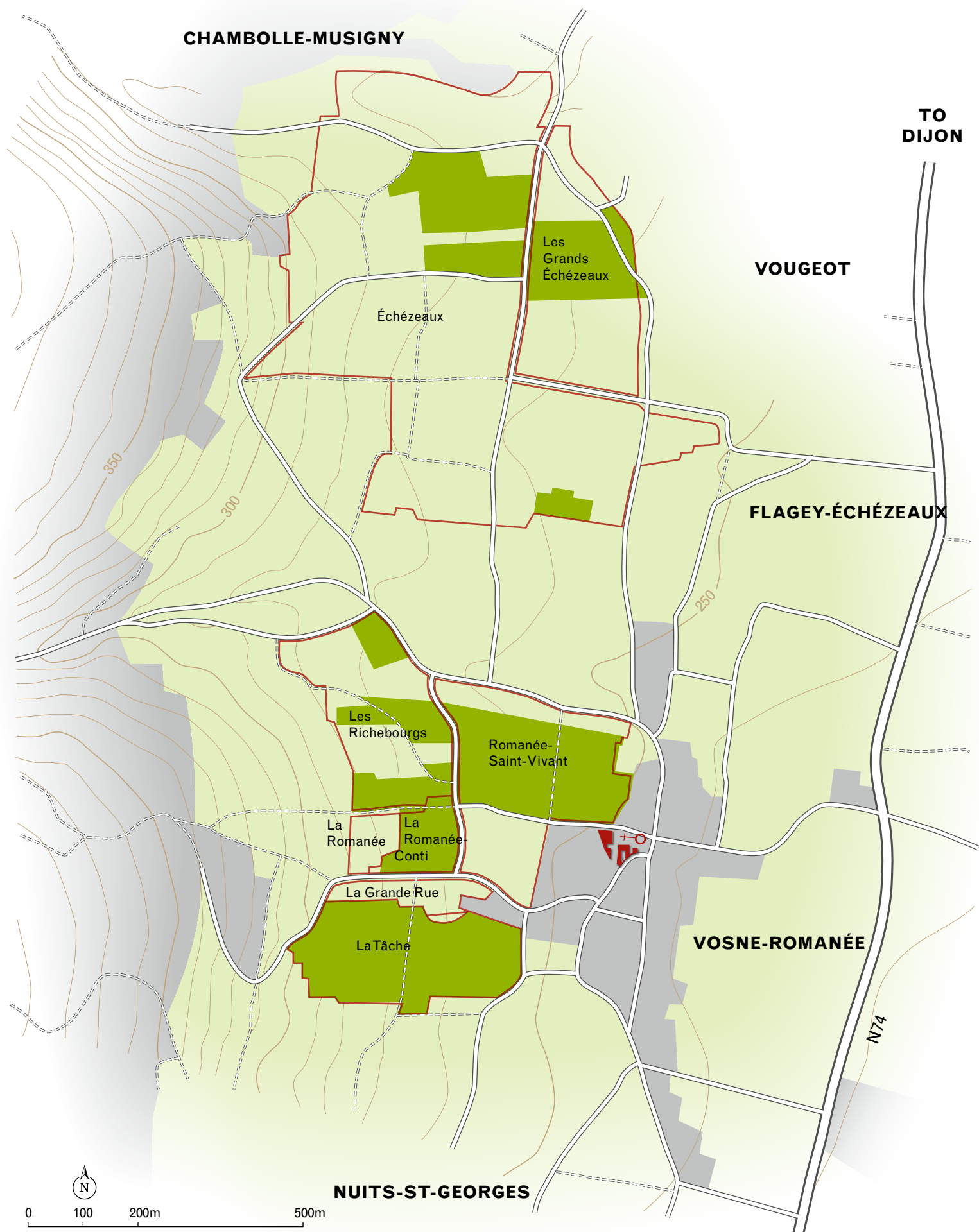
the measure of things: nothing is immense, everything is on a human scale. Everything, or almost, can be held in your palm: Romanée-Conti, La Tâche, Romanée-Saint-Vivant, Richebourg, and a little further away, the Échézeaux. It's like a garden. Just a garden, sometimes enclosed, sometimes open, but always on a human scale.



That wines can be created of such diverse personality from within such a small space, and all taking the same black pinot grape as their muse, is witness to the broad palette of the human soul. Living next door to my neighbour does not necessarily make us similar. Sharing the same flesh, the same skeleton, does not exclude differences. Once again, after all, we are tempted to compare wine and humanity: the peaceful richness of the one seems to give wings to the dreams of the other. And in this spirit, the wines of the Romanée-Conti Domaine are of that rare breed, the enlightened preacher.

The rarity of these wines is often advanced, not without a certain tinge of regret or arrogance in the speaker's voice, depending on whether he has or has not a few bottles tucked away. But rarity alone does not make for quality, it is simply its consequence. To suffer the praises of the entire planet's connoisseurs is a heavy burden for a bottle to bear: the responsibility of never failing, of providing not just the best, but the sublime. To attain that standard on the terrain itself, every little gesture must be the absolute model and template of rightness. In this manner, the alchemy which takes place on the Domaine, from every act of husbandry in the vineyard right up to the final corking, reflects those unwritten rules of the 'conservatoire of wine', to which everyone, in Vosne and elsewhere, may strive to attain, as if reaching towards some enigmatic yet sumptuous mathematical limit.

But it is so difficult to talk about wines. Because wine, like music, seems to me to escape the strictures of language. It is a stranger to words and yet it has its own tongue, though often quite a simple one, which forms, like a whisper, within the soul of the one who tastes, and which is not shared easily with others. Wine often speaks to me in emotions rather than syntax and this, once again, brings me back to its human dimension. In love's chance encounter, there is an electricity in the air which precedes the first moments, the first glance, the first touch, the first kiss. Fear fights pleasure in the pit of the stomach, as that void opens up into which one falls, out of the known world of familiarity into the unknown one of the stranger senses. Exactly this febrile state was mine as I tasted a wine from the Domaine for the first time. Yes, there were all those stages of expectation, of reverie, then of fear and frisson, of trembling followed by ecstasy, fulfilment and, finally, a sense of replete and profound joy. And there it was, like a keyhole into my past, the image of the roadmender of my childhood, his face asleep at ease in siesta, his song wafted jauntily down the years to dance within my heart.

All this happened in the vertigo of a few minutes in which I drew close to the beauty, minutes which also let me understand that this wine had sought and found, within its deepest reserves and mine, through the sweat of our days and the weight of our lives, something immaterial and long forgotten, something which is the joy of this world and the very oxygen of its promises. The wines of Romanée-Conti tear apart the dark screens within to deliver us, in the lightning clarity of an instant, into all our natural light. They are pathways, luminous yet subtle, which link us to the essential. And it is doubtless in this that their true grandeur resides.



	Boundaries grand crus
	Grand crus of the Domaine de la Romanée-Conti
VOUGEOT	Name of the district





—1—

THE WINE OF MONKS,
THE WINE OF A PRINCE



DE LA ROMAN

D-MONTR

1997



The powerful bishops of Langres and Autun wasted no time when in the second half of the fifth century the Romans lost their hold on the *Pagus Arebrignus* – that part of Gaul we now call the Côte d’Or. There was rivalry between the two prelates, but they also had a common interest. Despite invading heathen hordes, the two attempted to divide between them the rich region from which the Romans had already harvested outstanding wines. In the course of time they entrusted large parts of the ‘*Côte vineuse*’ to the care of monks.

Les mingeous de tiarre, in modern French *les mangeurs de terre* (‘earth eaters’)

– the old nickname for the people of Flagey – was the name given to these monks and their associated lay brothers. As if they took a handful of earth in their mouths here and there to assess its character and potential quality and on the basis of that demarcated the land. The reality was probably rather different. After all, soil in your shoes is irritating and soil in your eyes painful, but soil – rich fuller’s earth mixed with limestone – in your mouth must be quite unpleasant. But you can also sniff at the soil and determine its possible variations, and above all you can learn a great deal by observation. And this is what these ‘*mangeurs de terre*’ will have done. With their intelligent and precise methods of work based on empiricism, and with their indomitable tenacity, they were able to understand and interpret the different plots, based on the moment when the grapes ripened, their quality, and that of the resultant wine. Systematically, investigating with curiosity and with dedication, and above all with perseverance, they identified the plots of the Côte, registering the strong, less strong and weak points of each plot in terms of soil quality, potential drainage, and their siting with respect to the sun, wind and rain. They may indeed have made the beginnings of a hierarchy, a classification. In any case they recorded the outlines of the various *climats* so accurately that we still recognize and acknowledge them today.

CLUNY STARTS SYSTEMATIC VINICULTURE

After the Gallo-Roman period, winegrowing in the region remained closely linked to the Church and continued to be so for centuries. Actually not only in the *Côte vineuse*, although here, with the arrival of the Burgundians and the establishment of their new realm, Burgundy, a new order, a hierarchy was created in which the Church, next to the nobility, sometimes even intertwined with the nobles, played a prominent role. Not least because of the presence of the abbeys of Cluny and Cîteaux and their subsidiary houses. When the Benedictines founded their new order in Cluny in 910 and quickly took control of a wide environment, ‘it could be said that the world shook off its past and cloaked itself everywhere in the white adornment of churches’, as the Burgundian monk and historian Raoul Glaber put it in the eleventh century. He was

■ Winter is approaching for La Romanée-Conti and other vineyards.

referring to the advent of a new morality and to the many churches and abbeys built in a Romanesque style and with Burgundian limestone.

The foundation of Cluny marks a new and important stage in the expansion of viticulture, in the first instance mainly in what we now call the Mâconnais and later also in what is now the Côte d'Or. The power of Cluny was at its greatest in the eleventh century, when there were more than 1100 abbeys and priories. Viticulture could grow so strongly under the care of clergy because churches and abbeys were themselves exempt from paying tithes and other taxes, while they readily demanded their share from others. '*Partout où le vent vente, Cluny a rente*' (Wherever the wind blows, Cluny collects rents).

CÎTEAUX ASSUMES POWER

Wealth easily corrupts. Many Benedictines succumbed to a life of luxury. The French historian Georges Duby has emphasized that they played only a very modest role in the actual cultivation, because 'the Cluniacs and Benedictines of the traditional rite adopted a gentlemanly lifestyle, a life of idleness'. It cannot be denied, however, that they did a great deal of good in caring for the sick and other charitable works, and that it was thanks to the Cluniacs and Benedictines that great advances were made in this period in the management of land and water. Their monasteries were centres of intellectual activity. Nevertheless they became pampered gentlemen who lost sight of their original objectives. On a quest for sobriety and asceticism, Robert, abbot of Molesme, founded Cîteaux in 1098. The Cistercian order was born. *Cruce et aratro*, with cross and plough, the two tools of the Cistercians. *Ora et labora*, pray and work, was their motto, and the last they exercised primarily on the land. The *Côte vineuse* (and also the slopes round Pontigny/Chablis) were brought under cultivation with even greater energy.

■ The Château du Clos de Vougeot, seen from the west, with a small part of the surrounding walled vineyard. Here is particularly visible the cuverie and the cellier, the oldest parts of the building complex.

■ Part of the ruins of what was once the Prieuré de Saint Vivant, not far from Vergy.





Abbot Robert's supporters did not settle specially in Côteaux because they would then be close to the *Côte vineuse* – only two hours travel along the banks of the Vouge. First there was Côteaux, deep in the forest and marshland – *le désert* – and only afterwards did the hard-working monks discover the potential and the riches of the relatively nearby Côte. The Côte had to some extent been brought under cultivation earlier by

the Romans and the Gauls and was already quite well populated.

The Cistercians certainly did not arrive on virgin soil, but in spite of that they have rightly been called the great *défricheurs* (ground clearers) of the Côte. They planted vines from Dijon to beyond Meursault, and in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries also the hinterland, the Arrière-Côte, was cleared of trees and brought into cultivation. The hard-working ascetics of Côteaux also worked parcels of land which now enjoy a reputation under names such as Clos de Vougeot, Musigny, Grands Échézeaux and Échézeaux. In 1110 Côteaux received its first plot of land in Vougeot as a gift. It was more or less exacted by Etienne Harding, then the abbot of Côteaux, from Elisabeth de Vergy, owner of the Seigneurie of Vergy and of a great deal of land in the surrounding area. Other gifts, also often in return for indulgences, followed and barely 50 years later, in 1162, Duke Eudes II invested Côteaux with the ownership of the vineyards of Vougeot, and at the same time gave the Cistercians the right to enclose this extensive area with a wall. Eudes II also put an end to the disputes which the Cistercians had here with the Benedictines of the priory of Saint-Vivant de Vergy. So the area now called Clos de Vougeot reached its current extent of 150 *journaux*, equal to almost 51 hectares, more than 800 years ago. The monks of Côteaux made use of the right to wall in this important domain and so we can in a 1212 text already read about the '*clausum*' of Vougeot, and in another document, of 1228, mention is made of the '*grand clos de Côteaux*'. With the formation of the Clos de Vougeot the monks in fact let go here of the notion of the *climat*, the philosophy of the *terroir* – but that is another story.

MEDIEVAL MONOPOLY

Côteaux also had the requisite properties in the domain of the present-day Vosne, then Vone or Voone. They included 72 *ouvrées*, about 3 hectares, in Richebourg, and 12 *ouvrées*, about half a hectare, of Les Gaudichots, now part of the *grand cru* of La Tâche, extending over more than 6 hectares. The work the Cistercians were doing was rather like playing a game of monopoly: they bought, took over, sold and swapped with only one apparent object in mind: acquiring



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