



CLUB MAGNUM

VINS ET EXPÉRIENCES

DOMAINE THIBAUT LIGER-BELAIR

NUITS-ST. GEORGES, BURGUNDY



THE NAME LIGER-BELAIR IS ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT IN BURGUNDY AND THE FAMILY'S OWN STORY COVERS SO MANY OF THE KEY NARRATIVE THEMES OF THE REGION.

In 1815, Louis Liger-Belair, a highly decorated Napoleonic general- his name can be seen inscribed on the Arc de Triomphe- purchased the Château de Vosne-Romanée. Over the next twenty years, he managed to build up the estate to around 40 hectares of prime vineyard. Honoured further under the restored monarchy of Louis XVIII and then under Charles X, the newly ennobled Comte Louis Liger-Belair was undoubtedly a national hero and after his death in 1835, his legacy was carried forward by his nephew, Louis-Charles.

Through marriage to Ludovie Marey, whose own family were prominent wine merchants and substantial owners of vineyard in Burgundy since 1720, Louis-Charles and Ludovie became important players in the region.

Their presence grew and by the time their son Edgar died, the estate totalled some 60 hectares, mainly in the Côte de Nuits, and included a roll-call of the most famous names: La Romanée, La Tâche, La Grande Rue, Les Suchots, Les Malconsorts, Les Brûlées...In 1924, Edgar's son Comte Henri died, leaving a widow and ten children.



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Times were tougher, following the phylloxera crisis and the first world war and with Napoleonic laws dictating that the estate should be divided equally, the family were reluctantly forced to sell the estate as some of the offspring preferred cash to vines. Two of the children however joined forces to buy some of the holdings back and preserve some of their heritage, leasing out the vines. Subsequent generations forged their own careers outside of wine but the connection to Burgundy remained strong. As the leases reached the end of their term, the opportunity presented itself to the young generation to choose to take back the vineyards or to lease them out further.

In Vosne-Romanée, the choice was taken by the young Vicomte Louis-Michel Liger-Belair to establish his own Domaine as a winemaking entity for the first time in 2000. A year later, his cousin Thibault took over an old family property in Nuits-St. Georges. Here too there were important vineyards. Thibault rented out a nearby cuverie as the leases on the vines expired and prepared himself for the launch of Domaine Thibault Liger-Belair.

Thibault was well qualified for the arrival of this day: his six

years of study in viticulture and oenology had been augmented by time spent working in a number of wine estates around the world. He was well used to the demands of vineyard and cellar work. Unlike many, however, he also had some business skills, having been part of a successful tech start-up for a wine website in Paris, which was sold to LVMH. In 2001, at the age of 26, he was finally able to heed his calling to the land, harvesting his own holdings for the first time in 2002. As further leases came up for renewal, these too were taken back and he has continued to grow his activities ever since, taking on his own leases as well as establishing a sister estate in Moulin à Vent.

In the vineyard, Thibault was concerned by the compacted nature and poor health of the soils when he took them back. In his eyes, there was no alternative but to go organic immediately in order to reinvigorate them. In 2004, he went a step further, becoming an adopter of biodynamics. He sees his role as an observer and a guide, rather than a dictator: it is the site that he wishes to express itself and he does everything that he can to allow it to maximise its potential.

In the cellar, he takes enormous care to ensure that his imprint remains as undetectable as possible. One such example is with his barrels. Despite Burgundy being blessed with some of the finest barrel makers in the world, true masters of their craft, Thibault likes things done to his own specification. He only chooses oak grown on limestone soils and separates out the north and south sides of the tree trunk so as to match the tighter or looser grains to the wines that will benefit from them accordingly. The toasting of the barrels is also done completely to his specification: the details really matter here.

AT HARVEST TIME, THIBAUT WILL SORT THE FRUIT RIGOROUSLY AND DESTEM EACH PARCEL ACCORDING TO HIS FEELINGS FOR IT, WHICH CAN OF COURSE BE DIFFERENT AT EACH VINTAGE. SIMILARLY, THE PERCENTAGE OF NEW OAK USED AND THE TIME SPENT IN BARREL WILL VARY TOO.



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Today, his Domaine holdings total eight hectares. He makes wine from a further ten hectares that he doesn't own but where his team do all of the work. The Domaine begins with two significant parcels in the Hautes Côtes de Nuits, one in the village of Arcenant, the other above Nuits, providing the perfect entry points to his range. There is then a lovely 0.8ha parcel of Bourgogne in the commune of Nuits. At village level, his northern outpost is a tiny 0.2ha parcel in Gevrey-Chambertin called 'La Croix des Champs' while back in Nuits he has a well-positioned lieu-dit called 'La Charmotte' which borders the 1er cru of Bousselets and Argilats. A third village holding is in neighbouring Vosne-Romanée, where he has a fantastic 0.55ha of Aux Réas.

We then move into the crus. Staying in Vosne, there is a slither of 1er cru Les Petits-Monts which is separated from Richebourg by just one metre. Then the jewel: a wonderful parcel (0.55ha) of Richebourg itself, perfectly situated in the historical southern part of the vineyard next to the holding of Domaine de la Romanée-Conti. Moving to the north, he has an important 0.75ha piece of Clos Vougeot in the southern sector across the wall from Echézeaux. Finally, back in his home village he has a substantial 2.1ha (out of a total of 7.5ha) of 1er cru Les St. Georges, the vineyard which the Nuitons have added to their name.

It is worth saying a little more about Les St. Georges. By common consent, this is the outstanding site among a very fine clutch of premiers crus in Nuits. The lack of Grand Cru in the village is the same explanation as in Volnay: when the appellation system was being designed in the 1930s, Sem d'Angerville (Volnay) and Henri Gouges (Nuits) took the selfless decision to exclude their home villages for recognition as Grand Cru, knowing all too well that accusations of self-interest would be easily aimed at them, with the likely outcome of derailing the entire process.

As a result, Les St. Georges has been denied elevation. However, more recently a dossier has been submitted and the INAO continues to chew over its merits. While we await that decision- and local politics are making it a very slow and complicated process- the market makes its own classification. As the prices indicate, there can be little doubt that this site is consistently considered to be the best, or at the very least among the best, of the village. It has been planted for at least one thousand years and sits perfectly in mid-slope, with a gentle incline, exposed to the south-east. Its combination of fine, deep clay soil and three different types of limestone together with an important iron content provide for the perfect canvas for a broad, structured yet noble wine. All of these elements give it the potential for incredible complexity, particularly when given time to age, while its top soils, which are full of small stones, aid drainage and keep it light on its feet.

Les St. Georges seems to combine the best elements of its neighbouring crus Vaucrains and Cailles but the result is higher still, certainly two plus two equals five. Thibault's parcel was planted in 1944. He has nine fellow growers in the vineyard, all of them with much longer track records of producing the wine themselves but it is Thibault's example that now has its nose in front.

IN A SHORT SPACE OF TIME, THIBAUT HAS EARNED HIS PLACE AMONG BURGUNDY'S ELITE.

Now installed in a new, state of the art, sustainable winery on the edge of Nuits, he seemingly has all of the tools at his disposal. If one has the resources though, land and buildings can be bought. What is much harder to purchase is the intelligence and humility to know what to do with it.

