Burgundy’s new breed of micro-négociant is just as likely to be found in the field or cellar as in a plush office in Beaune, resulting in a fascinating variety of cuvées. Benjamin Lewin MW reports

‘WHAT DOES “NEGOCIANT” mean in Burgundy? Nothing. Some buy grapes, some mature wine, and some just put their name on the label. But they are all called the same,’ says Olivier Leflaive, who has grown Maison Leflaive to a sizeable operation in Puligny-Montrachet. Leflaive is a forerunner of the new breed of micro-négociants in Burgundy, and takes a typical view of the micro-négociant: ‘I see myself as a winemaker, not a négociant, as I make the wine, from the beginning of vinification through to bottling.’

More than half of Burgundy is made by traditional négociants, whose average size is 10 times that of the average domaine. Owning no vineyards, their expertise tends to be in maturing and blending wine to achieve a certain style. By contrast, domaines make wine only from estate vineyards, and usually on a small scale (average less than 8ha). Between négociants and domains, some of the best-known producers started as négociants, but then bought vineyards, turning into négociant-growers, and now their production includes wines made from both estate and purchased grapes.

The distinction isn’t always overt, but the word ‘Domaine’ can be used on the label only for production from estate grapes, while ‘Maison’ is often used to describe wines made from grapes which have been purchased.

Bespoke cuvées

The micro-négociants are so-called partly because they function on the small scale of the domaine, but also because they often make micro-cuvées. ‘I make about 60 wines. Many are only one to three barrels. If we were anywhere else it would be a total nonsense, but that’s how it is in Burgundy,’ says Pascal Marchand, who was at Comte Armand in Pommard, and with Domaine de la Vougeraie in Nuits-St-Georges, before striking out on his own in 2006. ‘I am more of a grower by background,’ he continues. ‘All the wines I made before, I was farming the vineyards from the beginning.’ Like many micro-négociants, Marchand’s emphasis is on the high end, with half of his production in premiers and grands crus. His wines from the Côtes de Nuits show an unusual level of refinement.

It’s not just scale that distinguishes micro-négociants: most function like domaines in trying to control production from vineyard through to bottling. The focus is on representing individual vineyard sites. ‘Big négociants blend many lots, but I don’t have that capacity. I have to get it right at the beginning,’ says Jeremy Seysses, now Dujac’s winemaker. Dujac Père et Fils is a négociant.
activity which encompasses Domaine Dujac, which his father created. ‘Most micro-négociants focus on the high end, but we have the domaine so I focus on village wines,’ he says, as we taste his Chambolle-Musigny, Morey-St-Denis and Gevrey Chambertin.

We compare Morey-St-Denis from the domaine and the négociant, and although Seysses says, ‘I don’t really believe a négociant can be as good as a domaine, because you can’t control the vineyards,’ I would say the distinction is more a difference in style than quality. The négociant wines come out softer, more fruit-forward and less structured. ‘That’s the driving force for the micro-négociants in Beaune,’ he says, as we visit Domaine de Bellene. Wines from the maison are intended to be easier drinking than those from the domaine. ‘The biggest single factor behind the creation of the négociant breed is the high price of land,’ says winemaker Brian Seve. The whites show a counterpart elegance to the reds, with a similar touch of reserve or austerity when young.

The superficial advantage of a négociant is flexibility: not being bound to specific vineyards, it’s possible in principle to adjust production to market conditions or to compensate for loss of supply resulting from adverse climatic conditions. But in practice it rarely works like that. Most micro-négociants purchase grapes from the same vineyard blocks in most years – in fact, that’s one of their assurances of quality.

And there’s an almost atavistic force driving them back to the land. Most micro-négociants have managed to buy some vineyards (sometimes vineyards from which they previously purchased the grapes). ‘The lines between traditional domaines and négociants have become blurred,’ says Alex Gambal, who started as a classic négociant buying semi-finished wine in 1997, then switched to buying grapes, and now owns some vineyards. His wines extend from Bourgogne to grand cru level, and are characterised by a crisp, clear style. ‘I’ve never bought into the idea that because it’s a domaine it’s better. Plenty of people are good farmers but bad winemakers. That was why the négociant was so important,’ Gambal says.

Influencing viticulture
When you can’t buy the land, you can try to influence viticulture. Micro-négociants’ roles extend from actually farming vineyards to keeping an eye on them and (almost always) determining the date of harvest. ‘There are three different métiers – farming, winemaking and élevage – and a traditional négociant only gets involved with the last,’ says Olivier Bernstein, whose first vintage was 2007. ‘But in my opinion you have to control all three. Some control two, they buy grapes. We are not really a micro-négociant because we are farming and doing the same work as the domaine,’ he says. He produces between four and eight barrels of each of 10 wines, all red. The style follows a finely structured, tight precision, from a light, elegant Chambolle, to a remarkably pure Gevrey-Chambertin, a tight Clos de Bèze, and a Clos Vougeot, with that characteristic fleshiness only just poking out.

One micro-négociant who remains resolutely in the négociant category is Lucien Le Moine, a creation of Mourat and Rotem Sauma, who have been making premiers and grands crus

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Above: Jeremy Seysses, is happy to focus on village wines for Dujac Fils & Père

Top: Leflaive’s domaine wines encompass fruit from its own fields, while fruit from other parcels go into the Maison wines
since 1998. Mounir does not believe in trying to micro-manage his growers, but trusts them to give him grapes from which he produces some of the most exquisite Burgundies. The winemaking is deceptively simple, but the wines are complicated. Today's production of 112 barrels is divided into 75 appellations, making an average of about 40 cases of each wine. If I were to try to find some sort of metaphor to describe the winemaking here, I would say it defies gravity, it never gets in the way of expressing terroir. ‘People say I’m a visionary, but I’m not, I’m just making wine in a simple way,’ says Mounir. This ‘simple way’ involves very slow alcoholic fermentation, very late malolactic fermentation, and then long ageing with full lees in barrique. Use of sulphur is restricted to a very low dose a couple of months before bottling. Ageing lasts almost two years, so his wines are usually released late. ‘I saw there was a place for a library of Pinot Noirs. I call it “a library” because we wanted to show that terroir exists,’ is how Mounir explains his objectives, and he makes his point by explaining that there is an intersection where four grands crus from three villages come together. ‘We are going to taste these four side by side, they are completely different. We will go from the very powerful to the weak, because for me, weak is strong.’

Distinctive approach

Mounir’s Vougeot has something of the usual fleshiness, with a warm, nutty background, but the house elegance comes through; the Echézeaux is broader with liquorice on the finish and an impression of roasted nuts; the Grand Echézeaux makes a lighter, more elegant impression, more precise and mineral; finally Musigny is the height of elegance, classic femininity, almost delicate, infinitely refined, the antithesis of Clos Vougeot although it’s only a few yards away. As it happens, all these samples came from barriques of new oak, but this is not at all evident. ‘If a wine comes from new oak without showing the oak, it’s a sign of purity of terroir,’ says Mounir. Small-scale production is scarcely a new concept in Burgundy, but the focus on micro-cuvées of premiers and grands crus from producers who don’t own the vineyards is novel. These micro-négociants are free to innovate in whatever way they feel best showcases the terroirs. ‘When you inherit a domaine, you are totally influenced by the heritage. I can have a new approach,’ observes Bernstein. Recent grape shortages resulting from hail and other problems have caused sharp price increases that may change the relationship with land prices. ‘This year will be complicated for some domains, and there may be land for sale,’ predicts Potel. ‘So perhaps some of the micro-négociants will turn into-domaines. But their success shows it doesn’t matter so much who actually owns the vineyards what matters is the quality of viticulture and winemaking. Different micro-négociants achieve this in different ways, but Olivier Leflaive’s words at the end of our conversation perhaps speak for all micro-négociants. I am not a négociant, I remind you, I am a winemaker.’

Benjamin Lewin MW specialises in classic wine regions. His most recent books include Claret & Cabs and In Search of Pinot Noir
Lewin’s selection from Burgundy’s micro-négociants

Lucien Le Moine, Abbaye de Morgeots 1er Cru, Chassagne-Montrachet 2012
18.25/20 (94/100)
£61.70 Jeroboams
Initial impression of liquorice followed by a complex palate of peaches and cream offset by nuts and more liquorice, this has a fine, granular texture with a nutty aftertaste. The epitome of Morgeots. Drink 2014-2032 Alcohol 13.5%

Deux Montille, St-Romain 2012
16.75 (89)
£23 (2009) Armit, Exel Wines
Classic Côte de Beaune nose with fruits showing a citrus edge. Nice tension on the palate between stone and citrus fruits, with smoky minerality in the background. Good expression of Côte d’Or without going to top appellations. Drink 2014-2022 Alcohol 13%

Patrick Piuze, Montée de Tonnerre 1er Cru, Chablis 2012
17.75 (92)
£56.40 (2009) Fine & Rare
Faint sense of austerity with the palate, with more tension than other premiers crus. Lacy filigree acidity and fine texture to the palate convey a sense of terroir. Drink 2014-2024 Alcohol 12.5%

Deux Montille, Bourgogne 2012
16.5 (88)
£13.33 (in bond) Armit Wines
Fruits much in the Puligny style, with citrus notes and a touch of steel. Very good for Bourgogne. The de Montille domaine owns the vineyards, just below Puligny. Drink 2014-2019 Alcohol 12.5%

Maison Olivier Leflaive Frères, Morgeots 1er Cru, Chassagne-Montrachet 2012
17.5 (91)
£49.95 (2011) Corney & Barrow
Smoky impression with a sense of peaches and apricots cut by lime. A broader flavour spectrum than Puligny, but not as rich as Meursault. There’s a textured impression to the palate, with hints of oak just evident on the finish. Drink 2014-2022 Alcohol 13.5%

Deux Montille, St-Romain 2012
16.75 (89)
£23 (2009) Armit, Exel Wines
Classic Côte de Beaune nose with fruits showing a citrus edge. Nice tension on the palate between stone and citrus fruits, with smoky minerality in the background. Good expression of Côte d’Or without going to top appellations. Drink 2014-2022 Alcohol 13%

Lucien Le Moine, Cazetiers, Gevrey-Chambertin 2011
17.75 (92)
£70-£82 (2012 ib) Farr Vintners, Ministry of Drinks
Earthy and nutty, this is infinitely elegant balance with fine precise fruits, almost perfumed, plus fine, tea-like tannins. One of the most elegant wines in the portfolio. Drink 2017-2029 Alcohol 13%

Maison Morey-Blanc, Les Narvaux, Meursault 2011
17 (90)
£36.80 Fine & Rare
Mineral smoky impression with hints of butter and nuts on the nose, this is still showing a little oak with citrus fruits underneath. A very fine modern interpretation of the tradition of Meursault. Drink 2014-2020 Alcohol 13%

Slightly nutty impression, with tightly structured black cherry fruits showing Gevrey character. Ripe impression with chocolatey tannins, and a smooth sense of restrained power characterises the house style. Drink 2018-2030 Alcohol 13%

Benjamin Leroux, Les Vireuls, Meursault 2010
16.75 (89)
£33.50 Howard Ripley
Good fruit concentration makes this seem more like the richness of 2009 than the leanness of 2010. There’s a good compromise between richness and minerality, with more stone fruit than citrus, and a nose turning towards tobacco and chocolate. Some oak still needs another year to fully integrate. Drink 2015-2023 Alcohol 13%

Pascal Marchand, Gevrey-Chambertin 2012
17 (90)
£40.15 Jeroboams
Rich and round on the nose, this is smooth rather than full, but generous on the palate, still with that silky elegant sheen characteristic of the house. Nuts intensify on a long, lovely finish. Drink 2014-2024 Alcohol 13.5%

Deux Montille, Bourgogne 2012
16.5 (88)
£13.33 (in bond) Armit Wines
Fruits much in the Puligny style, with citrus notes and a touch of steel. Very good for Bourgogne. The de Montille domaine owns the vineyards, just below Puligny. Drink 2014-2019 Alcohol 12.5%

Maison Alex Gambal, Grands Picotins, Savigny-lès-Beaune 2012
16.75 (89)
£29.95 (2012) Berry Bros & Rudd
Elegant nose and palate of smooth, earthy, wild strawberries, with a stony finish supported by fresh acidity and some tea-like tannins. This is well above the quality of the appellation; I wouldn’t have been surprised if this had come from Beaune itself.

Bonnefond, Nuits-St-Georges 2012
16.5 (88)
£35.20 Denis 2011
Denis 2011
Dujac Fils & Père, Morey-St-Denis 2010
16.5 (88)
£35.20 Fine & Rare
Initial mix of red and black fruits leads into that sense of power typifying Volnay-Romanée, but offset by silky elegance with hints of nuts at the end. Similar in style to Nuits-St-Georges, but more refined, silky and powerful. Drink 2014-2022 Alcohol 13%

Maison Roche de Bellene, Les Boudots 1er Cru, Nuits-St-Georges 2012
17 (90)
£48.20 Fine & Rare, Goedhuis
Soft buttery notes developing on the palate, with fine precise fruits, almost perfumed, plus fine, tea-like tannins. One of the most elegant wines in the portfolio. Drink 2017-2029 Alcohol 13%

For full details of UK stockists, see p102