

ROMANÉE CONTI

Living The Legend

BY JEAN-VINCENT RIDON
(Vice Best Sommelier of South Africa 2016)

It all started with a rumour. At first, I could not believe it, as I have been in the wine industry for long enough to avoid wasting time on urban legends. However, when reliable sources started spreading the word, the level of excitement could no longer be ignored. An improbable event might take place in a few months time; a *Romanée Conti* tasting in South Africa!

Great Domaines, the sole importer of the wines from Domaine de la Romanée-Conti (DRC) in South Africa, confirmed the incredible news that not only a tasting, but a 'pairing dinner' would take place at the Mosaic Restaurant in Pretoria. Furthermore, Monsieur Aubert de Villaine, the co-owner and co-director of the Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, the most prestigious wine estate in the world, will be present.

My excitement at the prospect of joining a *Romanée Conti* dinner could be compared to a Buddhist meeting the Dalai Lama. At this

once-in-a-lifetime opportunity there will be no half measures and I was ready to do anything to secure a seat at this dinner – even though it was not going to be cheap. The current vintage of *Romanée Conti* sells for around 10 000 euros per bottle, but the announced 2009 vintage is often traded at over 15 000 euros per bottle, pricing a 60ml tasting sip at R20 000.

Joining de Villaine for the tasting of 12 wines from the DRC paired by celebrity chef, Chantel Dartnall, might be the equivalent of the cost of a human kidney transplant, but for a wine lover, it would be similar to becoming a Jedi master.

Once my ticket was confirmed, memories reminded me of why the mere name of *Romanée Conti* creates so much anticipation. *Romanée Conti* is the name of one of the first wines that I remember from my childhood. It was spoken about almost religiously, with admiration and reverence. Many wines can inspire respect, but the

Romanée Conti attracts worship. This wine attracted so much passion that the Heir to the Kingdom of France renamed it with his noble title. The 1,81 hectare *Romanée Conti* estate eventually became the property of the de Villaine family who also manages other Grand Cru estates. With *Romanée Conti's* legacy of 500 years of documented history, de Villaine regards himself as the custodian of this legacy rather than just a winemaker. At the age of 77, de Villaine fully appreciates his responsibility of protecting this terroir, recently classified as a UNESCO Heritage Site.

De Villaine is concerned by the recent trend whereby his wines have become investment vessels for collectors and bankers. *Romanée Conti* is extremely rare and very famous, so collectors around the world aspire to own a bottle. For some, it is an ego trip, but for others it is an investment, as they are confident that such rare wines can only increase in value, as will a Picasso or a rare Lamborghini. The last sales achieved for the most sought after bottles reached >

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astounding heights, with many good vintages being auctioned at over 20 000 euros each and sometimes even more. 'The first reason for this wine's existence is to be drunk,' he says and, 'this applies to all the Grand Cru, including the Conti.'

Due to the rarity and demand for Conti, the number of forged bottles has skyrocketed. Despite efforts from DRC to control the market, copies are regularly offered to gullible buyers. As an example, the 1945 vintage only produced 620 bottles, but more than 3 000 are found in different wine listings. With a price of \$123 899 paid at auction for a 1945 Conti in Geneva, it is very tempting for criminals to take a chance.

With an average production of only 5 000 bottles, the key is the rarity factor. If you want one bottle, you have to dig deep into your pockets. Compared to other famous wines, the numbers of *Romanée Conti* produced are tiny. In comparison, 'Chateau Lafite Rothschild' or 'Chateau Margaux' produce on average of over 300 000 bottles while a world famous luxury brand like Dom Perignon bottles millions of each vintage. Therefore, the 5 000 Romanée Conti numbered bottles are the ultimate collector's dream.

It has not always been this way. When I was a young wine broker, a bottle of Romanée Conti sold on average for a price similar to that of the French minimum wage earned in two or three weeks. In 2015,

a bottle cost about one year of minimum wages, if you could find one. The wine is sold only to selected importers or distributors, such as Great Domaines in South Africa and all clients are on waiting lists. So, any bottles becoming available on the open market are snapped up at the seller's price.

For all these reasons, a tasting comprised of genuine wines from the Domaine de la Romanée-Conti is an extremely rare occurrence and 12 wines from the Domaine served on the same evening is unique. And I was going to be part of it. As these wines are so precious, the venue also had to be extraordinary.

Located a few kilometres west of Pretoria, the Orient Hotel provided the perfect setting for this extravaganza. Some might compare it to Xanadu, a palace surrounded by zebras, giraffes and antelopes. The Mosaic Restaurant, run by Chantel Dartnall, arguably the most talented chef of her generation at The Orient Hotel, has one of the most comprehensive wine lists in Africa. So it was the natural choice that their in-house sommelier Germain Lehodey would supervise the event together with de Villaine.

I talk about legends, about money, about dreams, about men... but what about the wines? The anticipation shared by the 20 guests can be compared to children eager to open gifts under a Christmas tree. Entering the tasting room was like crossing the threshold of a



refined perfume shop. The wines from DRC are made from pinot noir, considered as the most delicate, elegant and fragrant grape. The first wine to be sampled had already been decanted into expensive Zalto glasses and its perfume was tangible in the air.

The wines from DRC are not just legends because they are rare or expensive. They are awesome wines, mind-blowing archetypes of the diversity of Burgundian terroirs. Every Grand Cru embodies a unique soil expression and similar pinot grapes grown a few metres apart will deliver very different wines. This is the reason that, since the Middle Ages, each vineyard has been demarcated to small walled blocks, sometimes less than one hectare.

Most of the Grand Crus produced by DRC are from the village of Vosne-Romanée in Burgundy. Vosne Romanée soils are the most sacred for exclusive wine lovers. All year round, wine connoisseurs gather in the narrow paths between the vines to worship the ground that creates wines that many of us will never drink. The last time I escorted the South African wine tasting team, we had to wait our turn amidst Chinese and American tourists to take pictures in front of the Conti vineyard. It is as busy as the Eiffel Tower!

All the Grand Crus poured at the tasting were from the 2009 vintage, as that year produced one of the best vintages of the last 20 years, along with 1995, 2000, 2003 and 2005. Following the Burgundian



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tradition, the white Chardonnay is served after the red pinot noir, so the subtlety of pinot noir is not overpowered.

The *Corton* is a new addition to the DRC stable, as well as being the only red Grand Cru from the Cote de Beaune. De Villaine explained that it was not the policy of the estate to increase at any cost. However, the opportunity to take over the historic old vines from the Prince Florent de Merode estate was not to be missed. The *Corton* 2009 was surprisingly appealing. The *Corton* terroir is known for producing very austere wines that require a few decades of cellaring to mature. The 2009 is velvety, with intense black fruits on the nose, followed by the typical earthy palate of *Corton*. For the first time in my life I enjoyed a young *Corton*, a true revelation!

Grands Echézeaux 2009 and *Echézeaux* 2009 are perfect examples of how the soil differences affect blocks of vines grown literally touching each other - two wines with very different identities. The deeper ground of the *Grand Echézeaux* gives silky tannins more elegance than the powerful *Echézeaux* growing on poorer rockier soil and offering more texture on the palate.

The *Romanée Saint Vivant* 2009 is perfumed! This wine is a woman, a fascinating woman displaying multiple layers of lace, hiding a delicate body and hints of violet. The lingering palate with a >

coarser texture reminds me of the power of the wine as I was misled by its elegance.

The *Richebourg* 2009 is even more perfumed than the *Saint Vivant* with a massive structure while the *La Tâche* 2009 is very shy with tobacco leaf, pencil shaving, graphite tones and an impressively textured palate.

When the King of Pinot and the Pinot for the Kings was finally presented, a religious silence came to pass in the room. *La Romanée Conti* 2009 is a wine with multiple layers, sheer complexity placed in a bottle. Not an impressive body compared to *La Tache* or *Richebourg*, but a symphony of perfumes, delicately fading and coming back onto your palate. The persistence on the palate lasts minutes, with roses, wild strawberries and Spanish Jabugo ham, all guests understood the passion this wine can spark. This is the Holy Communion.

At this level of sensual fireworks, it seems very vulgar to talk about money, because these wines ignite philosophical discussions. After drinking the 60 ml of the most expensive red wine in the world, the guests were served with another 60ml of very costly white wine, a *Montrachet* 2009, which produced only 4079 bottles. This intense lemony, flowery powerful Chardonnay sells for approximately 4000 euros per bottle.

The 2009 wines were followed by a flight of older vintages, paired with chef Chantel Dartnall's food creations. Besides *La Tâche* 2005 that can be labelled as the perfect wine, I had the privilege of tasting the *Batard-Montrachet* 2000. Only one barrel is produced every year (300 bottles) and never offered to the market. A dream that no money can buy - courtesy of Monsieur de Villaine - in his crusade to demystify the wines and remind us of the difference between value and price.

Aubert de Villaine succeeded in making us forget the cost of this evening and enjoy the value of the emotions we shared in savouring these wines and these will hopefully overcome the speculators drive to put these bottles into vaults. At his age, de Villaine understands more than anyone the value of sharing moments. A moment like this one will accompany me into the next world, with a smile.

