

# CARDINAL AND KING





HE MAY BE THE PROPRIETOR OF THE LEGENDARY BURGUNDIAN VINEYARDS THAT MAKE THE WORLD'S MOST EXPENSIVE WINES, BUT 77-YEAR-OLD AUBERT DE VILLAINÉ BELIEVES THAT IT IS HIS RESPONSIBILITY TO MAKE SURE HIS WINES ARE ENJOYED BY MORE THAN JUST A HANDFUL OF BILLIONAIRES.

*by:* JANINE WALKER

**A**ffectionately called the Cardinal of Pinot Noir, De Villainé – the proprietor at Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, the centuries-old vineyard that produces what most agree is Burgundy's finest and rarest wine – was recently in South Africa to showcase his wines and reinforce the message that these are refined pleasures to be shared among wine connoisseurs who truly appreciate the finer things in life.

The legendary vineyard has a tiny output when compared to Bordeaux's Château Lafite Rothschild. However, DRC's wines have distinct personalities, each capturing its vineyard's individual terroir. However, ethereal perfection doesn't come cheap. Bottles from 2009 range in price from R11 500 to R250 000, and older years can cost thousands more, putting them among the very top of the most highly coveted, most expensive wines in the world. In late 2014, Sotheby's sold a 114 bottle set of Romanée-Conti wine for R26.5 million, setting the record for most expensive wine lot ever sold at auction.

"I am sure that it happens (that some people drink the wine only as a status symbol), but that is why we try and control our distribution as much as we can through our own distributors in France and other people we work with throughout the world. We also try and choose the right customers so as little wine as possible is sold to those who buy it only to resell it for a profit."

De Villaine was brought to South Africa by importers Great Domaines, whose goal since 2000 has been to focus on giving wine lovers in South

Africa the opportunity to buy and drink fine wine from some of the most revered domaines in Europe.

De Villaine's first stop was at the award-winning Restaurant Mosaic at Elandsfontein, outside Pretoria, where Chef Chantel Dartnall had spent months preparing a special menu to accompany some of his wines following a sold-out tasting.

One of those who attended was Cape Town based sommelier and wine maker Jean Vincent Ridon. "Some wine tastings make dates in history. You

have the famous Tasting of Paris on the 24 May 1976, Robert Parker's 50th birthday on the 23 July 1997 where only 1947 grand cru were served and Mosaic's Romanée Conti tasting on the 12 January 2016 in South Africa," he says.

De Villaine brought with him to South Africa some of the best vintages of the last 15 years. Besides the Romanée Conti 2009 with only 6465 bottles produced, the Mosaic tasting featured the Chardonnay based Montrachet 2009, twice as rare as the Conti, and





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also the most scarce of all, the 2000 Batard-Montrachet, which yields only one barrel a year and which is usually reserved for private use at the estate.

Ridon tried to put into words how he felt when trying the Romanée Conti 2009 described as the King of Pinot and the Pinot for Kings. "The silence in the tasting room was tangible as if everybody refrained from commenting to avoid the noise from influencing any subtleties of the wine. It was sublime, a wine with multiple layers; complexity put into a bottle."

However, De Villaine has done more for wine lovers around the world than just carry on the legacy of the house of Romanée Conti. He led a decade-long project that culminated in July last

year with Unesco, the United Nations' cultural arm, granting World Heritage site status to the "climats" of Burgundy – the 1 247 vineyards that make up the Côte de Beaune and the Côte de Nuits wine regions.

But for the man who says he works harder now than ever before ("You work more when you are older than when you were younger because you are more conscious that attention to detail is crucial") what would be his perfect meal? "A great steak, perfect puree de pommes (mashed potatoes made similarly to those made famously by Chef Joel Robuchon) accompanied by Domaine de la Romanée-Conti La Tâche 2009." 🍷