

A YEAR ON THE CÔTE D'OR

Driven by an urge to reconnect with nature and deepen her understanding of viticulture, Catherine Petrie MW swapped her deskbound job at a London fine-wine importer for 12 months of backbreaking—but ultimately enriching—work among the vines at Domaine Comte Armand in Pommard

Rising with the sun and hard farm labor are, it turns out, a recipe for destressing. With no arbitrary deadlines, no futile meetings, and plenty of laughs, 2019 was the toughest but most rewarding year of my career.

I went expecting the elements to challenge me. For those like me who usually work in an office, the walks to work, navigating the hurly burly of the public transport system, and acclimatizing to the extremes of office heating or air-conditioning systems might give the illusion that our bodies are in rhythm with the seasons. But it is a far cry from the brutal, raw, but in many ways healing rhythm you experience when you work outside all day, every day, all year round.

When professional buyers and others in the wine trade talk to winemakers, we often discuss vinification techniques and *élevage*. The conversation often continues with the vigneron insisting that the real work is done in the vineyard. Well, of course, this seems a given, we all think. We might briefly discuss pruning, though most of us do not really understand the technicalities of this highly skilled practice. Green-harvesting or leaf-plucking might get a cursory mention, but the conversation usually reverts swiftly to vinification. Even as a buyer for a fine-wine merchant in London, I had harbored a feeling of ignorance around viticulture for too long. I needed to fill in the gaps.

I had resigned from my buying role at Christmas 2018. Feeling a bit deskbound, frustrated and furious about Brexit, a little frazzled by London life as a 30-something, and looking for a change, I wanted to experience what goes into the making of the product I have been buying and selling in my career.

Since 2016 I had spent a few weeks every autumn helping to make wine at Domaine Comte Armand. It is an exciting domaine in the Côte de Beaune with a longstanding reputation and, under the talented *régisseur* Paul Zinetti, a bright future. I knew the wild, adrenaline-fueled weeks of harvest would be a world apart from the daily grind in the vineyard through the bone-chilling winter and the hellish heat of the summer. Domaine Comte Armand in Pommard was the perfect place to get a rounded, no-special-treatment experience in the vineyard.

There were moments when some around me wondered if I would see it through to the end. There were days when my body hurt so much that I also wondered if I would. And if I had been working on my own, I am fairly certain I would have quit. But when you work in a small vineyard team, you carry each other—no questions are asked, no favors bestowed or thanks demanded. There is a job to do, and it must be done before Mother Nature has galloped ahead.

The 2019 season in Burgundy started with a cold but not unusually bleak winter. Save for an unseasonably warm two-week spell in February, spring was cool and windy. Summer seemed to take an age to arrive. But despite its slow start, the year will be remembered for its exceptional double heatwave in the peak of summer.

Was it all worth it? This is the story of my year.

January to March: Pruning, clearing, burning, and tying

The domaine is organically farmed, and over the course of the year I learned how to do every manual vineyard job with the small, tight team of Paul, three permanent vineyard staff, and an expanding team of *saisonnaires* who would join us. In early January, I began to learn the art of pruning. I cannot emphasize enough how slow this learning curve is.

The aim of pruning is to remove almost all of the previous year's growth, retaining only what is desired for the coming season's growth, keeping in mind the second season following that, since these nascent buds will be born of the current year's growth. This is every bit as complicated as it sounds, and it is little wonder people say it takes at least three seasons to gain informed confidence and skill as a pruner.

The domaine's largest and most important vineyard is the Clos des Epeneaux, a 5.23ha (13-acre) premier cru monopole in Pommard. The vines here range from 36 to 100 years old, meaning they have lived through many pruning fashions, so a range of techniques are found here. Furthermore, no two vines are the same, and many are a fair way off textbook examples. The pruner has to use good judgment based on experience to decide which canes and spurs to select and which to lop off.

It meant a slow advancement for me along the rows, because I frequently paused in front of a vine in puzzlement, deliberating how to prune it, often asking for advice. One of my colleagues would come over and swiftly execute with deft precision the clear and simple solution. Either that, or three of them would come over and debate three different, all clearly correct ways of pruning it. So, maybe it wasn't always as simple as they made it look...

Fortunately, the weather was mercifully mild to start with. But the clement conditions were not to last. By late January, we had plunged to below freezing temperatures, with flurries of snow. I was sent out to pull the pruned canes off the vines and burn them: *tirer les sarments*. This job might not be as technical

Opposite: Pruned canes being burned in an old oil-drum wheelbarrow, which helps keep the vineyard tidy and the vineyard workers warm during the cold of January.

All photography by Catherine Petrie MW



as pruning, but there is a certain knack to it, which I learned with experienced *saisonnaire* Pauline in the pretty vineyards of Auxey-Duresses. You gather great bundles of pruned wood, which you put in an old oil-drum wheelbarrow. This clears the vineyard, leaving behind only a trace of ash and neatly pruned vines.

Plumes of blue-gray smoke rise up through the chilly air of the Côte d'Or throughout winter as workers busily tidy the vines. The smell of the smoke penetrates all forms of clothing, but despite the cold and smelling like a cured sausage, I enjoyed this work. At least we kept warm by the fire and had plenty of time to chatter, and we could admire how still and elegant the vineyards looked in the silence of the snow.

After an unseasonable blip of warm weather in February, when work was done in T-shirts some afternoons, chilly, windy weather returned. The winter months of 2019 had not been unusually cold, but even the usual Burgundy winter is pretty bracing if you are not used to it. Good boots are essential, as are thermals, and many, many layers. Survival seems dependent on hot, filling food at lunch and a lot of sleep. If you spend all day below zero, your body is burning so much energy just staying warm that you collapse into bed at night. If any friends were visiting the region during this time, it felt like a huge struggle to join them for dinner. All I wanted to do when I wasn't at work was sleep.

By March 7, we had finished pruning all 9ha (22 acres). With this task finished, we could get on with the rest of the season's jobs. And as the days grew longer and brighter, I entered my most physically testing moment in the vineyard.

I had cheerily and naively started the work of attaching the fruiting canes to the pruning wires with small paper-coated wires—a task that seemed simple enough. Three weeks later, I could only regard *attacher les baguettes* as a punishment I would not wish upon my worst enemy. Hell on earth. All of a sudden, various members of the team seemed to be busy with other things: replacing posts, fixing broken wires, plowing the soil. It fell to four of us to spend three weeks walking up the rows bent at a 90-degree angle, searing off our fingertips. My lower back burned in indignation; I woke up during the night in agony; I could barely stand up straight in the afternoons.

I knew vineyard work would be tough—it would be tiring, it would be cold, it would be hot—but I had not realized it would be this painful. This was when my colleague Raphaële explained that vineyard workers are wise to go to a physio at least once a year. I have never met anyone as uncomplaining, calm, and non-alarmist as Raph. Throughout the year, I became particularly reliant on her counsel in all vineyard-related matters. She has been at the domaine for seven years and has brought her natural flair for horticulture to the team. If you visit at the right time of year, you may notice her handiwork in the domaine's flower beds. And in the vineyard, I knew that she could always give me answers to my (annoying, relentless!) questions about the vines, which explained the way these plants grew, rather than being merely a "that's the way it's always been done in Burgundy" stock answer. She's the sort of person you won't meet if you visit the region as a buyer. We never speak much with the people who work in the vineyards. And what a pity, for they know so much—like Dominique, the vineyard manager; he has been at the domaine for more than 20 years and knows every trick in the book. The tools we use

are fairly basic. If you use them in the wrong way, they can make the job even harder. But Dom has special techniques for them all, which means that even the trickiest jobs are achievable, even with limited upper body strength, when you know how.

April to May: Planting, weeding, fighting frost, and debudding

From early April, we began planting the new vines. Not a new vineyard; just replacing vines that had died the previous year due to disease or accidental damage by a tractor. As we dug holes with pickaxes and couched the young grafted vines in compost and hammered in place two supporting posts either side with heavy mallets, the buds of established vines were just beginning to emerge. Witnessing the vegetative cycle of the vine as it grew through the season on a day-by-day basis made me think at once how elegant and how slow nature's development is—and also, how alarmingly quickly it can suddenly accelerate.

Despite a few bright spring days, the temperature fell again, and on April 5 the *bougies* (paraffin wax candle pots) were lit in the grands crus across Puligny- and Chassagne-Montrachet.

There was a more—shall we say?—well-attended frost on April 14, and this time we were all prepared. At 4:30 on Sunday morning, we met a small army of local vineyard workers next to the church in Pommard. The clear blue skies forecast for the morning meant that this frost posed a serious threat to the young buds. Dispatched with treasure maps—X marks the spot—we made our way into the dark to station ourselves, armed with firelighters and watering cans, at our allotted positions, where hay bales had been laid. Battle commenced just before sunrise. We lit the hay and sprinkled it with water to create as much smoke cover as possible in an effort to diffuse the rising sun's rays. The soft breeze carried the thick gray smoke in a range of directions, some, as desired, over the vineyards. The coldest we recorded in Pommard was 30°F (-1°C), and we can never really know whether our smoke had helped matters, but in the days that followed, the damage seemed not too serious. A small and notable loss, but nothing approaching the catastrophic devastation meted out by a similar frost in 2016. What that night had certainly done was bring the whole region together in one massive pyrotechnic display, captured from above by drone-mounted cameras. It was all anyone talked about for days after. The images were spectacular.

After the cold snap in early April, windy and wetter weather arrived, and by April 25 we had begun on the next major vineyard task: *ébourgeonnage*, in common parlance; *échetonnage* in Pommard, *évasivage* in Morey-St-Denis, *échetinnage* in Puligny-Montrachet, and so on—the list seems endless, but all translate as debudding in English. As the days passed, I came to recognize that whatever you call it, this is one of the most important jobs of the season. Second only to pruning, this work determines the potential quantity of the crop and has no small part to play in its quality, too. The aim is to remove any double buds, any fruitless buds, and to leave an evenly spaced, upward-pointing set of roughly eight buds per vine. The work is not difficult, but it does require concentration and nimble fingers. We often went out armed with hoes to weed between the vines as we went. Organic farming requires a bit of sweat and toil after all.



June to July: Canopy management in sweltering temperatures

As spring turned to summer, the cool temperatures persisted. We began passing through the vineyards and lifting the wires, clipping them in place, tucking in the shoots, and making sure that the vegetation was not too bunched together. This is known as *accolage*. Spraying had begun in mid-May, but by now it was clear that mildew was no major threat in our parcels. Oidium, on the other hand, was troubling those with Chardonnay, and regular spraying continued through the season to guard against disease.

Flowering started in early June under fluctuating temperatures, including some cool, wet moments. A steamy, stormy weekend in mid-June marked a defining change in the year. From here on in, we would be facing a wall of heat every day, the cumulative effect of which sapped all our energy. The extreme temperatures—up to 102°F (39°C) in the shade, which felt more like 113°F (45°C) in the exposed vineyards—meant our working hours shifted from a regular morning and afternoon pattern to a 5:30am–2:15pm shift with no breaks. Hours like this for six weeks non-stop make you feel like you have perpetual jet lag, but it is the only way to get the work done and not collapse from heat exhaustion.

The heat throbbed through the vineyard during the day, and save for the small stone cabin in the middle of the Clos, there was no shade in which to seek shelter. Some mornings it had already reached 86°F (30°C) before gam, and some nights didn't dip below 77°F (25°C). In fact, the average temperature recorded in the last week of June in the Côte d'Or, including the lows at night, was 82.5°F (28°C), compared to the average for that time of year of 64°F (18°C).

These torrid conditions were an assault on the senses and unlike anything I had ever experienced. There are certain things I learned during this time: Always freeze your water bottles overnight; thin, long-sleeved cotton shirts and trousers keep you cooler than T-shirts and shorts; you can get an impressive sun tan through said cotton; always, always wear a cap; keep the windows in your apartment closed, even when you really want to open them; and €15 for a plastic fan will be the best investment you ever made.

Around this time, I was reminded what an intensive agricultural product wine is. Conventional or organic, everybody is spraying. Because of the vineyard ownership

This task was finished by late May, by which time we could all see the growing season was a little later than recent vintages. Overall, it had felt like a cool year. The relatively gentle advance of the vegetative cycle meant that the vineyard work had not been too rushed; we had the time to do things properly and, so I gathered, without the refrain of Dom ringing out on repeat, *Dépêchez-vous! Ça pousse!* ("Hurry up! It's growing!")

Above: New vines for planting in April; a hot air balloon gives tourists a bird's-eye view of the vineyards; a beautiful climbing rose in full bloom at Clos des Epeneaux.



system in Burgundy, where one vineyard may be divided into multiple parcels belonging to different domaines, you often find yourself working next to a neighbor who is spraying right when you want to be working in between your vines. You run as fast as you can and hope that the tractor driver has seen you in enough time not to spray you along with his vines.

The smell of sulfur hangs thick in the air; you can even smell it from Beaune's town center in July. When you work in the vineyards, the residual spray infiltrates all clothing and skin. If you haven't seen a loved one for a while and you give them a big hug, they will remark on the strange new scent that hangs on you for days. Sulfur and copper may be natural elements, but there's nothing pleasant about them. It made me think how many of us naively accept the word "organic" as a benign one. And just as I had learned that, untended, the vine will grow out in a ground-creeping sprawl, so, too, had I learned about the necessary but unpalatable side of the agrichemical business required to produce healthy grapes in a region, notwithstanding its extraordinary terroir, vulnerable to vineyard diseases.

August: Holidays

Much appreciated this year!

September: Harvest

Yields were down compared with the fecund 2018 and 2017 vintages. This loss was due to a combination of frost, cool and wet weather during flowering causing *millerandage* (small berries), very strong winds during spring, and extreme heat and dryness during the summer. As a buyer, I had often written vintage reports that noted these kinds of things, picked up during conversations with winemakers, to help illustrate the wines and the region in question. But I knew it was always done with an inevitable detachment. It is much easier to write about cool, wet weather during flowering than to haul on your waterproofs and stand shivering in them for eight hours a day, the heavy clay mud adding 22lb (10kg) to each boot. And it is

Above: After harvest started, the Comte Armand team picked for six days straight. Opposite: The author celebrating with a glass of Champagne on the sorting table.



certainly easier to write about concentrated volumes due to high temperatures and water stress than to swelter, head pounding, in the fierce sun of a *canicule*, the likes of which France had not seen since 2003.

In spring, it had looked like a late September harvest date. But thanks to the extreme heat of the summer months, picking dates were brought forward, and we started on September 11 with our most precocious parcel, Volnay premier cru Les Frémiets, and continued in earnest from Saturday 14, with a team of around 30 pickers, for six days.

It is a humbling experience, as a qualified, professional adult, to be constantly learning things from scratch, to have to be taught (often more than once) tasks that your colleagues appear to find second nature. Being the slowest in the group in perpetuity can make you feel pretty useless, and the sight of three backsides in the distance when I would raise my head was my all too frequent view in the vineyard during the growing season. So, there was something affirming about getting back into the cellar in September as the grapes came in.

I knew harvest, and I knew I loved it. This year was particularly enjoyable because a young winemaker from Provence, Clara Fischer from Château Revelette, had just joined us for her year-long apprenticeship. Paul and I have worked together for four vintages now and have found a natural balance in the cellar. Clara clicked straight in, and the three of us quickly fell into a close team.

The hours at this time of year are long. France's beloved 35-hour week doesn't get a look in. But the story of harvest is for another time. The work is intense, often repetitive, but for me, hugely rewarding. In short, the job involves sorting, sampling, analyzing, tasting, planning, pumping over, punching down, pressing, racking into barrel, and, above all else, cleaning. And no one is better at cleaning than Boris, the domaine's tractor driver. During harvest, he seems to be everywhere: driving the vans, loading the vans, unloading the vans, on the sorting table, and helping with all the heaviest work in the cellar. And at the end of all that, he always finishes late, with his waterproofs on and the power hose in hand.

October to November: Vinification, barrels, tastings, and repairing the posts

We had picked under some very hot sunshine, but by the end of September a cool autumn calm had arrived. The pickers had all left after a blowout end-of-harvest party, and we returned to being a small team to see through the vinification.

In October and through November, we finished managing the fermentations, pressed off the tanks, and put the 2019 into barrel for its long slumber in the cool cellar. In and among this work, we caught up on general maintenance of the domaine's property, cleared and reorganized the warehouse, mended vineyard posts and wires, busied ourselves with labeling and preparing orders if the rain was falling, and welcomed visitors for tastings of the previous vintage. This is a particularly busy time for visits, and we were usually hosting between five and ten barrel tastings a week, which Paul and I divided between us. It was fascinating and revealing for me being on the other side of the *pipette*. The repetition of the questions! But also the great pleasure of tasting with those who engage with the wine, who feel it and understand it.

There is nothing quite so beautiful as the golden slopes of the Côte d'Or catching the afternoon sunlight in autumn—and nothing quite so bleak as the barren, muddy fields scored with seemingly infinite rows of vines in the winter drizzle. I had often found myself thinking at once how charmingly rural, honest, and skilled the work in the vineyards of Burgundy is, while also being shocked by the ugliness of such intensive monoculture. When you live and work in it every day, you can hold both these opinions simultaneously.

Apart from the tractors that spray and plow, little is yet mechanized in the vineyards of Burgundy. We must have passed each vine more than ten times, each time using our hands and some basic tools to bend the vines to our will. The work is intense, long, and relentless.

After an epic night of karaoke with my team, it was time for me to go back home. My year in Burgundy had opened my eyes and filled my heart. I am by no means a viticultural expert now, but I have at least had a little peak over the fence and a wonderful time along the way. ■