Burgundy's forgotten gem

The tart Aligoté grape lived for a long time in the shadow of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. Today it is celebrated by top producers and has achieved cult status in Burgundy. Meet the winemakers and enthusiasts behind the Aligoté grape's rehabilitation.

Text and photo | Claes Löfgren

The Aligoté grape normally produces large harvests depending on how it is grown and the location of the vineyard. Its high acidity complements Chardonnay in the sparkling wine Crémant de Bourgogne. Aligoté wine has also been popular in French bars, where it was sold by the glass for a few cents.

Its acidity has also made it the main ingredient in kir, a mixture of white wine and sweet blackcurrant liqueur. It was invented after the war by Mayor Félix Kir in Dijon to help farmers sell their wine. Those of us who are a little older remember ready-mixed kir as one of Systembolaget's best sellers in the 1970s – much to the delight of the old men on the park bench and the teenage drunks.

Aligoté is a cross between the Pinot Noir and Gouais Blanc grapes and has been around for hundreds of years, often planted together with Chardonnay. After the ravages of phylloxera in the 19th century, it was mainly Chardonnay and Pinot Noir that were replanted in Burgundy. Aligoté was relegated to slightly poorer growing areas, often down on

the plains or high up on the hills. The result was a

grape with high yields and high acidity, which meant low

income for the winegrowers.

There used to be over 400 clones of Aligoté, but today there are only two.

The slightly simpler Aligoté Vert is the most common and widespread on the 1,600 hectares where the grape grows in Burgundy.

The slightly more complex Aligoté Doré is the one mainly behind

the renewed interest. One difference is that

the appellation allows a slightly higher yield for Aligoté

vert than for Aligoté doré. The grape also has a slightly larger

harvest window – it is not as sensitive as Chardonnay,

which is an advantage when the climate changes rapidly.

Aligoté naturally has a slightly lower sugar content than Chardonnay.

As the climate has changed, the heat

has increased ripeness and the acidity of the grape balances

pleasantly. Therefore, the alcohol content is not as high. It

also has higher resistance to diseases such as

oidium. Better cultivation methods, lower yields, and

more favorable growing locations have now made Aligoté popular,

and a few true enthusiasts have fought to give

it the recognition it deserves.

The group Les Aligoteurs, which includes many well-known names,

is now working together to spread the word

about the excellence of Aligoté, something that has made an impression

on wine lovers around the world. The name Les Aligoteurs

is a play on the words aligoté, alligator, and auteur in

the French manner. Funnily enough, the group was not started

by a winemaker but by a famous chef, Philippe

Delacourcelle, who moved to Burgundy and in 2018
gathered a group of enthusiasts around him to form
the association. Their first joint event was
a veritable success, and now they hold small fairs
every year where they jointly let people taste aligoté
of the highest quality. Delacourcelle's restaurant Boisrouge
in Flagey-Échézeaux has become a gathering place for
aligoté fans.

Sylvain Pataille is one of the original co-founders
of the group and is based in Marsannay-la-Côte. For several years, he
has been producing biodynamically grown aligoté doré
from four different vineyards with vines that are almost a hundred years old.
He is often referred to as the master of aligoté.
“We producers can sell aligoté at a higher price
and make money on the wines,” he says. This makes
it possible to improve quality by avoiding high
yields, chemical pesticides, and mechanical
harvesting. At the same time, aligoté is affordable considering how
prices for other Burgundy wines are rising.

I met another of the leading figures by chance
when I visited Burgundy last fall. Marange
is the southernmost commune in the Côte de Beaune
before you enter the Côte Chalonnaise. In the village of
Cheilly-lès-Maranges, there was a sign saying “Portes Ouvert,”
and the arrows led me to Domaine de Chevrot
where there was an open house and lots of activity with visitors.
Of course, I stopped by. You could buy a glass and
walk around tasting what the house produced.

Neighbors had prepared food and the grill spread a wonderful
aroma. Across the street, a horse plowed the vineyard
to the delight of the children and the photographer.
Here I met brothers Pablo and Vincent Chevrot,
who kindly welcomed me and showed me around. Domaine
Chevrot has been in the family since 1830,
and the brothers have been in charge for the past ten years. They work
organically on the 20-hectare vineyard, completely without
chemicals, and use two horses for the work in the
most sensitive parts of the vineyards. Cover crops
are an important part of this, with different varieties planted to
nourish the soil. Biodynamic methods
are also used, but they are not certified.
They make two different versions of Aligoté, aged in
steel tanks and aged for twelve months in small older oak barrels.
In the Quatre Terroirs wine, they use 50 percent Aligoté
Doré and 50 percent Aligoté Vert, which they believe provides a
good balance.
The wines I got to try showed really good
craftsmanship, plus at a price point that reminded me of
the Burgundy of old. Pablo is one of the co-founders
of Les Aligoteurs and its vice president. He's really passionate
about the grape's revival and loves to talk
about all its benefits.
Bouzeron, the most important
village in Burgundy for Aligoté, is located in the Côte Chalonnaise. It is the only village with
its own AOC for the grape – largely thanks to one of

Burgundy's most important celebrities, Aubert de Villaine

who, together with his wife Pam, has owned a vineyard

in the village, Domaine de Villaine, since the 1970s.

de Villaine is not just anyone. He is a partner

and has been responsible for the world's most expensive and

mythical wine, Domaine de la Romanée-Conti

in Vosne-Romanée. In Bouzeron, he mainly produces

Aligoté, and it is undoubtedly thanks to him that the

small village has now achieved cult status.

The day-to-day operations are managed by his nephew Pierre de

Benoist, who compares the grape to a wild horse that

must be tamed in order for its best qualities to

emerge.

"To make good Aligoté, you need low yields,

good vineyards, preferably on high ground, with good sun exposure.

Good clones are of course important, we use

exclusively Aligoté doré for our wines.

It was the monks of Cluny who planted the vines

in the Bouzeron valley in the Middle Ages. Mainly up on the

high ground, where the poor, limestone-rich soil made the vines

struggle. When Aligoté was replaced by Chardonnay and Pinot Noir in most other high-class vineyards,

the winegrowers in Bouzeron kept their favorite grape. In 1997

, the Bouzeron Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée

was created with 62 hectares planted.

My visit to Domaine de Villaine was almost sacred.

I have had the privilege of visiting Domaine de

la Romanée-Conti once, and it was a bit of the same

feeling here. They work organically, biodynamically, and with extreme attention to detail. Pierre de Benoist explains the farm's philosophy quietly but with great conviction:

"We manage to make good wines with Aligoté because we have very old vines planted in good terroir. Unlike Chardonnay, Aligoté is very aromatic, so the best qualities of the grape do not come out until after a few years. The average age of our vines is 50-60 years, with the exception of one particular vineyard that is 105 years old. Through selection massale, where the best vines are identified and replanted, we have created what we consider to be perfect vineyards.

As at Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, the grapes are grown with the utmost respect for nature. They do not advertise that they grow biodynamically, but most of the methods are used.

“We have been organic for over 40 years and I use biodynamic methods as a tool,” says Pierre de Benoist. This also includes spraying dynamized water on the concrete and yeast residues from fermenting wine on the walls before each new harvest.

In addition to Aligoté, they make various wines from Chardonnay and Pinot Noir.

The barrel cellar is spacious, and they use both small and large oak barrels for the different wines, but for Aligoté, they use foudres, large old oak barrels with a capacity of 3,000-4,000 liters.

When Benoist took over the running of the estate 25 years ago, the large barrels were already there. Nevertheless, he wanted to try other methods, such as steel tanks, small oak barrels, concrete eggs and cement tanks. It turned out that the old foudres gave the best results, so that's what they stuck with. The thick walls regulate the temperature in both summer and winter.

We try a few wines that have a purity and drive in the fruit that characterizes an exceptionally well-made wine. Great aroma, long, rich taste with a little saltiness. The price tag is not cheap for an Aligoté, but definitely a bargain for this quality.

Other well-known members of Les Aligouteurs are Domaine Thibault, Liger-Belair, Domaine Pierre Morey, Domaine Bruno Clair, Domaine Ponsot, Domaine Ramonet, Domaine Marquis d'Angerville, and Maison Jean-Claude Boisset.

A new member for the past year is Clotilde Davenne in Chablis, who has had tremendous success with her Aligoté at Systembolaget.

As another feather in her cap, she won the silver medal in the Vinordic Wine Challenge in the White Wines 120–139 SEK category. There was a lot of Aligoté in the vineyards in Saint-Bris that she bought over twenty years ago, including very old vines planted in the 1940s.

For many years, she sold some of it in bulk, but today Aligoté is a huge success, not least in Sweden. We are grateful for that!

Aligoté does not only grow in France. The grape is also

very popular in Eastern Europe, where countries such as Bulgaria, Moldova, Ukraine, and Romania have thousands of hectares planted. However, large harvests and mechanized agriculture have meant that we have not seen many wines from there. They may also be experiencing a revival now.

Captions

1. AOC Bouzeron
where Aligoté is
the only permitted
grape.
2. Aubert de Villaine,
co-owner of
Domaine de la
Romanée-Conti,
has been instrumental
in aligoté's
cult status.
3. The wine is allowed to ferment
and mature in
approximately 4,000-liter
oak barrels
that do not impart
any oak flavor,
but allow the yeast
to circulate freely.
1. Brothers

Vincent and

Pablo at

Domaine

de Chevrot

are passionate about

Aligoté.

2. Two horses

are used to

work

in Domaine

de Chevrot's

old vineyards,

which are

entirely

organically

farmed.

1. Domaine de Villaine is located

in the middle of the village of Bouzeron.

2. Pierre de Benoist has been responsible

for winemaking

and operations for more than

twenty-five years.

3. Clotilde Davenne's Aligoté

has been a huge success on

the Swedish market.

4. Aligoté has become the new

trendy grape and is now

regarded with respect by wine lovers.

This has not always been the case.

ALLT OM VIN RECOMMENDS

Bourgogne Aligoté

Clotilde Davenne 2023,

France, no. 51929,

129

Good intensity and

freshness. Notes of white

flowers, light minerality

and citrus.

Bourgogne Aligoté

Joseph Drouhin 2022,

Bourgogne, France,

no. 5500, $17.90

Clean, appetizing with

crisp fruitiness, hints

of apples, plums, herbs

and fresh citrus. Good

length with minerality

and drive in the aftertaste.