

A DOWN-TO-EARTH COUPLE

When it comes to digging the dirt on famous châteaux, Claude and Lydia Bourguignon know it all. CARLA CAPALBO meets them and their clients

It's easy to think proprietors know all there is to know about their property. But imagine they want to expand. Or their wines are underperforming. They're not sure if a particular spot can deliver top-notch wines. Who do they call to find out? An oenologist can help in the vineyards and cellars, but will he know what the terrain is – and isn't – capable of?

'These days there's a lot of talk about *vins de terroir*, but few people understand what they are,' says Stéphane Derenoncourt, the Bordeaux-based consultant winemaker whose work is centred around terroir wines. 'To make a unique wine that expresses the character of a particular place – its climate, grape varieties and soils – it's not enough to throw money into fancy cellars or equipment. You must begin at the beginning, by understanding the quality and health of the vineyards. And for that, the experts are Claude and Lydia Bourguignon. That's who I call.'

He's not alone. The Bourguignons have found their niche at the wine world's pinnacle, consulting at estates whose owners are tirelessly striving to improve their prestigious wines. Their client list is impressive (see box p70): an all-star cast of award-winning vigneron. So what makes such cutting-edge producers choose to work with this modest, good-natured couple from Burgundy, who are as comfortable digging for worms as they are giving lectures on the plight of the planet's soils?

'The Bourguignons bring ideas, that's their role,' says Alain Vauthier of St-Emilion's Château Ausone. 'And often, their ideas shake you up. But if you're willing to listen, and act on their findings, the results can be exceptional. Claude and Lydia have pushed every winery they work with up the quality ladder. Once you accept that what is going on under a vineyard is just as important as what's going on above, you can start improving.' >

Who you gonna call? Soil busters Claude (right) and Lydia Bourguignon with Jeremy Seysses of Burgundy's Domaine Dujac

‘The Bourguignons are the interface
between the plants and the place’

Anselme Selosse, Domaine Jacques Selosse, Champagne





Above: Alain Vauthier of Château Ausone. Right: The Bourguignons test soil samples for microbiological activity



The Bourguignons' message goes beyond the limits of any single estate. 'In 1992, at a conference in Burgundy, we explained that the soils there no longer had any more activity to them than the sands of the Sahara,' says Claude Bourguignon. 'That caused a furore. It came as a shock to realise the toll that the over-use of pesticides and herbicides has caused. Afterwards we were approached by several leading Burgundian estates wanting to reverse that process, with whom we still work.'

'We're driven by our enthusiasm for the natural world and the realisation that the planet is under attack'

Lydia Bourguignon

Among the first were Domaines Leflaive, Lafon and Romanée-Conti. 'Small, privately owned domaines could take risks: they believed in our ideas and put us to work on their top crus,' he says. The Bourguignons look at the bigger picture of a vineyard: Is the soil alive? Are the vines healthy? Are they feeding deeply? Are they getting the right amount of water? What kind of terroir is it? What variety should be planted? At what density?

'The Bourguignons bring depth in their work, in both senses of the word,' says Champagne producer Anselme Selosse, of Domaine Jacques Selosse, who has worked with them since 1993. 'Not only do they do a complex audit of each vineyard, but they uncover its original or "native" state as well as revealing what is original and unique about it.' Selosse began working

with them on two special parcels, and has since expanded their reach to cover all the estate. Jeremy Seysses of Domaine Dujac in Burgundy heard Claude Bourguignon speak about terroir, and immediately realised that 'we'd forgotten about the soil and that it needed to be taken into consideration,' he says. 'We started working with Claude and Lydia four years ago on some top crus, and the results are already showing in our wines. It's an ongoing relationship, like family. They are unusual as, unlike many scientists, they are open-minded and never reject empirical evidence.'

Often a client will seek the Bourguignons' advice before buying a property. When the owner of Mas Amiel, Olivier Decelle, was contemplating acquiring Château Jean Faure he asked them to analyse the soil. 'This property is well positioned, near Cheval Blanc on St-Emilion's plateau,' says Decelle, 'but the estate was in ruins. The buildings and cellars were crumbling, and I needed to know what condition the vineyards were in.' The Bourguignons showed that the soil and vines were healthy but the vineyards were not draining properly. 'That was enough,' says Decelle. 'I bought the château and we fixed the drainage channels, and now the vines are once more producing excellent grapes.'

Digging deep

To find out more about how the Bourguignons operate, I visited them in Bordeaux at a new client's estate – Château de Pressac in St-Emilion. Lydia Bourguignon is up to her neck in dirt, standing in a trench they have dug alongside a vineyard. With a small knife, she's scraping away at the earth around the roots of a vine, 1.5m below the surface. 'Here,' she says, passing a chunk of the yellow-brown soil up to Claude. He's hunched over a microscope set up above the trench. He pushes the earth under the lens. 'The first step is to find out what's going on in the soil,' he says – 'whether it's alive or dead. Everything springs from that. Up to 25% of the land used for agriculture in Europe is now sterile; higher in the US. The mass usage of chemicals has caused erosion and desertification. How can you grow strong

THE BOURGUIGNONS' BLACK BOOK

Burgundy: Domaines Dujac, Lafon, Leflaive, Romanée-Conti
St-Emilion: Châteaux Ausone, Canon-la-Gaffelière, Jean Faure, de Pressac, Troplong-Mondot

Graves: Domaine de Chevalier

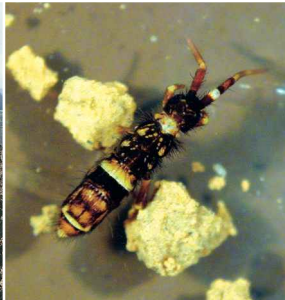
Champagne: Domaines Bedel, Selosse

Sancerre: Domaine Dagueneau

Vouvray: Domaine Huet

Alsace: Hugel, Meyer

Tuscany: Montenedoli



Top: Lydia Bourguignon with Jean-François Quenin, owner of Château de Pressac.

Left: The couple bore holes in vineyards to check soil structure and plant habits. Above and above right: soil dwellers help vines absorb minerals

plants on soils like that?’ The couple bore holes in each vineyard, checking soil structures and plant habits, and observing their findings with the excitement of explorers. Lydia can recognise fungal activity from the soil’s smell, or deduce a water-logged terrain from a vine’s root patterns. Claude measures gradients and altitudes; everything is jotted in a notebook. Samples are bagged and labelled for more analysis in their laboratory.

‘By measuring the microbiological activity of the soil’s fauna, you can tell how healthy it is,’ explains Lydia later. To the uninitiated in microbiology, it is thrilling to discover that the soil’s ‘fauna’ is actually an army of miniscule creatures that are incredibly, well, cute. Far from being dirt-brown and slow like their giant cousin the earthworm, these critters are as colourful as Jacques Cousteau’s deep-ocean dwellers. Sadly, they are invisible to the naked eye. ‘80% of the planet’s living creatures are in the soil,’ says Lydia. ‘Worms weigh more than all the earth’s other animals put together.’ Claude continues: ‘These soil-dwellers clean the soil or it would be completely

clogged with old roots. But they also exchange enzymes with the vine’s roots, helping them to absorb the mineral elements deep in the earth that give character to a wine.’

The couple are alone in measuring activity of the soils by doing a head-count of these tiny organisms under a microscope. Once they have established the state of a vineyard’s health and its causes, they offer their clients solutions. These include advice on drainage, countering the negative effects of soil compression, natural catalysts to reactivate the earth, killing vine viruses without hurting the soil, replanting existing vineyards, choosing

the best varieties for a specific terroir, and many others. Their working relationships continue for years, sometimes decades.

The Bourguignons are a remarkable duo: each one’s interests and specialisations complement the other’s. Now in their fifties, they have worked together for more than 20 years, ever since they met doing post-doctoral research at

Dijon’s National Institute for Agronomic Research. They disagreed with the institute’s policies on pesticides and food choices so they left to open LAMS (Laboratoire d’Analyse Microbiologiques des Sols) at their home near Dijon.

‘For the first 15 years, no one took our work seriously,’ says Lydia. ‘We couldn’t get a loan or afford a trainee.’ Claude added: ‘It was fashionable for wineries to spend big money on flying winemakers to raise their image, but the soil is out of sight and has less media cachet, so few estates were willing to invest in it.’ Things have changed now, and the couple are very much in demand. Most of their clients are scattered throughout France, but they also work in many other countries worldwide.

Soil crusaders

‘The Bourguignons’ knowledge is vast on so many subjects, yet they are incredibly down to earth’ says Selosse. ‘They have a way of making their observations surprisingly clear, simple almost. They make you feel more intelligent: why didn’t I understand this before, you ask yourself? This can sometimes work against them, as their critics say they are just stating the obvious and wonder why it costs so much. But you are paying for their enormous experience, backed up by lab analyses and project planning. The Bourguignons are the interface between the plants and the place so, in the long run, it’s money well spent if the results greatly improve your estate and wines.’

The couple have worked with organics and biodynamics but, as pragmatic scientists, they don’t espouse any one ideology. Pioneers in their field, they adapt their thinking to the results of their research. ‘We’re driven by our enthusiasm for the natural world and the equally strong realisation that the planet is under attack and action must be taken,’ says Lydia. ‘Soil isn’t politically correct,’ adds Claude. ‘There’s a hierarchy of terroirs. The best test of our work is to taste the wines, especially at tastings in which the grapes from several parcels of one estate have been vinified the same way. Then you can really taste the difference due exclusively to the terroir.’

‘These wines, with their elegance and individuality, are the antithesis of the many modern wines that have been “fixed” in the cellar, and which are so similar that not even their makers can tell them apart in a blind tasting,’ says Lydia. ‘What could be sadder? That’s like a parent unable to recognise their own child. We love wines that are natural, energised and seductive – and as unique as the land they are grown on.’ **D**