



How A “Secret Door” Saved A Winery

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By Tom Marquardt and Patrick Darr



Navigating the cellars of **Maison Joseph Drouhin** in Beaune, France, is a walk through history. Once a Roman road, the below-ground cellars is actually a patchwork of four properties linked by doors and passageways just below the brick streets of this enchanting, walled village that serves as the capital of Burgundy. At the base of the cavern is a chamber with a herringbone ceiling that dates back to 4th Century Rome. Another cellar from a neighboring Collegiate Church Notre Dame was annexed in the 13th century. Oak barrels and 50,000 dust-covered bottles are sprinkled throughout the 2 ½ acres of caves.

That they still exist is a miracle.





The “Freedom Door”

The wine was confiscated by nobles during the **French Revolution** in 1789. When World War II was declared and before Nazi troops arrived, **Maurice Drouhin** and his family walled off a room containing their most valuable wines. Concealed by cobwebs and dust, the wall was never discovered. Maurice, however, was not so fortunate. A member of the Resistance, he was eventually uncloaked and fled to the cellars where he escaped through what is now called the “freedom door.”

“The Germans were told there were four doors. But there was a fifth one they didn’t know about,” said **Cyril Ponelle**, Drouhin’s brand ambassador, during our recent visit there.

Maurice ran to the **Hospice de Beaune** not far away where nuns hid him until American troops liberated the city many months later. In exchange for his life, Drouhin gave the Hospice seven acres of vineyards in a handshake deal that exists today. The profits from wines made from these vineyards are sold at an annual auction from which proceeds are used to preserve the iconic Hospice.

Drouhin is well worth a visit. The cellars have been open to the public since 2012. Above grounds are several ancient wine presses dating back to 1570.



Oldest part of the cellar

Drouhin isn’t the only producer with amazing caves underground or in the ramparts of this Roman city. Laid out in a circular style, narrow streets weave around a plethora of restaurants and shops. Bouchard, Louis Latour, Louis Jadot and others have offices and caves inside the walled city.

But Drouhin’s 193 acres makes it one of the largest estates in **Burgundy**. More than 75 percent of its production is exported all over the world with the U.S. being its largest customer. The wines, ranging from the simple **Macon-Villages** to its grand cru, are relatively easy to find.

A 24-year-old **Robert Drouhin** took over the operation from an ailing Maurice in 1957 and remains involved today. But Robert’s son **Frederic** is president and his other children are involved. Daughter **Veronique** established **Domaine Drouhin** in Oregon in



the late 1980s and balances her time between the U.S. and France.

The estate owns vineyards in the **Cote de Beaune, Cote de Nuits, Cote Chalonnaise** and **Chablis**. About half of its production are sourced from Drouhin estates.

During our visit we tasted 17 chardonnays and burgundies from the 2017 through 2020 vintages. Hail and early rain destroyed much of the crop in 2021, but it appears the current 2022 crop has produced high quality fruit in large volume.

Here are notes from some of our favorite wines:

Maison Joseph Drouhin Meursault 2020. Fermented entirely in barrels, this chardonnay has a golden color with honey and classic hazelnut notes. Round and rich mouthfeel.



Maison Joseph Drouhin Marquis de Laguiche Chassagne-Montrachet 2020. Maurice Drouhin acquired this 2-hectare parcel on a handshake from a war friend. Very elegant with subtle tropical fruit aromas, peach and citrus flavors. Long in the finish and silky, it will only get better with time.

Maison Joseph Drouhin Clos du Mouches Blanc 2020. Made since 1921, this premier cru has a full body with restrained pear and peach notes, hints of lemon and ginger.

Maison Joseph Drouhin Corton-Charlemagne 2020. A grand cru, this chardonnay has immense concentration and balance. Full bodied with bold acidity but smooth mouthfeel. One of our favorites of the tasting.

Maison Joseph Drouhin Volnay 2020. Elegant, black cherry flavors, violet aromas and a bright, young character.



Maison Joseph Drouhin Vosne-Romanee 2020. More earthy with black pepper, ripe cherry and raspberry flavors, supple mouthfeel and a hint of spice.

Maison Joseph Drouhin Gevry-Chambertin 2020. Masculine in comparison, the pinot noir has more extracted blackberry and plum flavors with hints of forest floor and spice.

Maison Joseph Drouhin Savigny-les-Beaune Clos de Godeaux 2019. Not classified a cru, this interesting wine has supple tannins, a long finish, earthy tone, flowery aromas and currant, raspberry flavors.

Maison Joseph Drouhin Clos de Vougeot 2018. A grand cru, this pinot noir has a lot of elegance with raspberry and cherry notes, an earthy mouthfeel and hints of spice and mushrooms.

Shipping wines from Europe

We're reluctant to order wines from tasting rooms because, like most people, we get caught up in the moment and eventually regret our decision. The deal is rarely good on the West Coast because producers keep their tasting room prices high out of respect for their retail partners. That's not necessarily the case in Europe.

We shipped back a couple of cases we bought from the producer and saved about \$15 on a \$100 bottle. First, you save on the mark up from the wholesaler and retailer. Second, the 20 percent French tax is eliminated. Third, the dollar is currently on parity with the euro. Even with shipping costs of about \$200 a case, you save money.

Many of these wines are hard if not impossible to find in the U.S. If you do find them, chances are you'll have to pay shipping fees to get them to your house.

Wine picks



Alain Jaume Domaine Clos Sixte Lirac 2017 (Vivino)

Chateau La Canorgue Luberon Rosé 2021 (\$26) From the southern Rhone Valley, this simple but balanced rosé is a blend of syrah and grenache. Red fruit character.

Alain Jaume Domaine Clos Sixte Lirac 2017 (\$30). A blend of grenache, syrah and mourvedre, this regular favorite of ours shows off generous, ripe black cherry and blackberry flavors with a sensuous kirsch and spice after taste. Smooth mouthfeel and long in the finish.

Guigal Cotes du Rhone Rouge 2019 (\$18). One of our perennial favorites, this syrah-based gem has oodles of black fruit and spice with good acidity and balance. We actually liked it better a day after it was opened.

