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Poet finds his muse in the vines

By David Shaw, Los Angeles Times

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Pascal MARCHAND grew up in Montreal wanting to be a writer -- a poet. Since his family is French Canadian and his first language is French, he decided that if he wanted to be a good French poet, he had to spend a year in France, "immersing myself in French culture."

The best way to do that, he figured when he turned 21, was to "get close to something truly important in French culture - Wine."

Through family friends in Quebec, he wangled an introduction to Bruno Clair, who ran a small but highly regarded northern Burgundy domaine, and Clair gave him a job working in his vineyard.

"The first day he gave me a hoe, pointed to the ground and left me there all day alone," Marchand recalled recently on a visit to Los Angeles.

It didn't take long for Marchand to abandon poetry for winemaking, and it was winemaking -- and promoting his own wine -- that brought him here.

Marchand, 41, is now a partner in Domaine de la Vougeraie, a new Burgundy domaine with six white wines, 23 reds and a modest but growing production of 12,000 cases total. The wines are just coming on the U.S. market, and the 1999 and 2000 vintages are available in several Los Angeles area wine shops and restaurants.

Early reviews on his newest wines, from the seductively good 2002 vintage, which will be shipped this fall, have been excellent. Wine Spectator gave 90 points or more to seven of his '02s -- and four of those earned 95 to 100 points.

Pinot Noir is a notoriously fickle grape, and Burgundy -- and Burgundians -- are notoriously resistant to change of any sort. Burgundy expert Allen Meadows, who reviews wines online at burghound.com, says that for Marchand to have produced such "extremely impressive wines" and to have made so much progress in "such a short period of time is amazing."

Marchand's wines are distinctively Burgundian, and each of his wines is different from the others in that uniquely Burgundian fashion.

So how did Marchand go from rhyme-in-mind to hoe-in-hand to joint proprietorship of a respected, 91-acre winery?

Three months after he started to work for Clair, in 1984, he enrolled in a six-month wine studies program in Beaune, and a few months later, he met Comte Armand, the proprietor of a venerable Pommard vineyard in the Cote de Beaune, also in northern Burgundy.

As Marchand tells the tale, he and Armand hit it off immediately.

"Burgundy was at a turning point then," he says. "Many [Burgundy] growers hadn't traveled yet. They were doing things the way they'd always been done, without understanding what was happening around the world, how their wines were being received. Comte Armand could see that I was eager to learn, eager to travel, open to new ideas. It was my attitude, not my knowledge, he wanted.

"Too many men in Burgundy were making wine then only because their fathers and their fathers' fathers had made wine, not because they had the passion for winemaking themselves," Marchand says.

After so brief a time in the vineyard and in his wine studies program, he wasn't really a winemaker yet. But the passion he'd once felt for poetry he now felt for wine. Grapes and soil had replaced words and rhyme in his personal vocabulary, and the process of writing was about to be replaced by a different process, that special, highly personalized alchemy that ultimately leads to fine wine.

Armand hired Marchand -- before he'd even finished his wine education -- and for the next 15 years, Marchand was his winemaker.

He improved the wines enormously, and by 1990, Robert Parker was describing his flagship wine, the Pommard Clos des Epeneaux, as "a monster wine

It was at Comte Armand that I first met Marchand, almost six years ago, when I visited Burgundy to interview winemakers for a story I was writing about Parker. Marchand and I spent a couple of hours together, and I was impressed with his praise of Parker (at a time when many Burgundians were virulently critical of him) and his own criticisms of Parker (despite having won that lofty praise and a raft of high scores from him). I was also struck by his willingness to criticize (and name) fellow Burgundians who had decided to "change their whole line" in an effort to please Parker.

But what impressed me the most, even though it wasn't particularly relevant to my inquiry at the time, was his dismissal of those Burgundians who, in trying to recover from the "many bad wines of the 1960s and '70s.

Getting lucky

Marchand had introduced organic farming to Comte Armand's vineyards at a time when only a handful of small Burgundy producers had joined that nascent movement, and he hinted that at some point in the not-too-distant future, he would move further in that direction on his own.

Five months later he left Comte Armand to do just that.

He visited vineyards in South Africa and New Zealand and Argentina and read about Napa and Sonoma valleys. He wanted to buy a vineyard, to start over, but "I was spoiled by the terroir and the old vines in Burgundy. Where was I going to find that in the new world?"

Besides, he had a wife and two young sons and didn't want to uproot them.

Uncertain what to do, he got lucky. Again. He met Jean-Charles Boisset, son of a Burgundy negociant whose name had long been associated with generally mediocre wines.

"Most people didn't even know they had their own vineyards," Marchand says. "But Jean-Charles wanted to do something with those vineyards, and when I saw the list of those vineyards, I knew I could do it."

As with Comte Armand 15 years earlier, Marchand quickly discovered that he and Boisset fils had similar thoughts about making wine -- low yields, minimal interference, organic, bio-dynamic farming.

Marchand is telling me his story over lunch at Patina, where we've been drinking his 1999 Clos Blanc de Vougeot. It's rich without being overpowering, and its minerality makes it the ideal companion to our first two courses, a small lobster claw with Asian pears and a turbot with gnocchi and asparagus.

"Our white wines come from land that has grown white grapes since the 13th century, when the monks from Citeaux Abbey planted them," Marchand says.

And the reds? Well to make his best reds, his grands crus -- Musigny, Bonnes-Mares and Charmes-Chambertin among them -- Marchand goes one step beyond biodynamic farming.

"We plow those vineyards with horses, not tractors," he says. "The soil in those vineyards is clay and limestone, and it's very fragile. We want to avoid the damage that can come from compaction with tractors."

I tasted only one of his grands crus -- the '99 Vougeot from Clos de Vougeot, served alongside Patina's veal cheeks and pork tenderloin. Clos de Vougeot has never been among my favorite grand crus, and although I liked his better than most, I liked several of his other wines even more. My absolute favorite, in fact, was his premier cru 2000 Gevrey-Chambertin, Les Evocelles, a presumably lesser wine from a demonstrably lesser vintage, but with lush, bright red fruit flavors that made it a perfect match for Patina's squab and risotto in a Madeira sauce.

Since red Burgundy is my favorite wine -- and Burgundy my favorite region in France -- I felt an additional frisson of satisfaction when Marchand responded to my praise of the wine by smiling broadly and telling me, "It comes from land M. Boisset bought in 1961 and planted himself. It is a wine that true Burgundians appreciate."

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