



This page, the sommeliers poured the wines with delicacy and attention to details, a testimony to their values and uniqueness. Right page, throughout the evening, the guests were enchanted by the wine's sublime bouquet. (In order to preserve the privacy of the participants, the editorial has decided to refrain from exposing their names in the following captions.)



A treasured experience

Tasting any wines from Domaine de la Romanée-Conti is a wonderful journey. The Fine Wine Experience hosted an absolutely one-of-a-kind dinner at Grand Hyatt to share this unique experience

by **Linden Wilkie** photos by **Keith Sin**



Have you ever been to a class reunion? All those years passed. Did your classmates turn out as you expected? What have the years done? Tasting the range at the Domaine de la Romanée-Conti from barrel, or at a trade tasting when the wines are first released to market is fascinating, but a difficult exercise.

Here, at twenty, we decided to catch up with the class of 1996 – all six reds made by the Domaine de la Romanée Conti, as well as the sole white. The dinner was organized by The Fine Wine Experience at the Grand Hyatt in Hong Kong. We hosted this as part of our series of Burgundy events with Allen Meadows – now an annual symposium. Two assortment cases were opened, as well as three bottles of the Montrachet and an additional two bottles of the Grands Echezeaux. These wines had been stored professionally and immaculately since release, and were without exception pristine high-fill bottles. Meadows led us expertly through the history of The Domaine de la Romanée-Conti (referred to in Burgundy as ‘The Domaine’), the individual vineyards, and wines. Much has been written about The Domaine. To go deeper, I recommend Allen Meadows’ *The Pearl of the Côte*, Gert Grum’s *Le Domaine de la Romanée-Conti*, and Richard Olney’s *Romanée-Conti*.

The Grand Hyatt handled the wines expertly, the carefully conceived menu was served with aplomb, guests assembled. Lights, camera, action... How were the wines?

It’s hard to avoid hyperbole because the experience itself is hyperbolic. There are many wines that are very good, that are enticing, appetizing. There are wines that tick a lot of technical boxes – good balance, length, intensity, complexity and so on. They can leave you satisfied, pair well with food, lubricate the evening if you will. But there is nothing transcendental going on. Very rarely though, a wine does just that, and how can you describe it? Describing it as an object (red fruit, fine acidity and so on) won’t do. It can only be described as an experience, and a fleeting, elusive one at that, one that leaves us with the feeling of deep wonder and pleasure. Take, for example, Vermeer’s *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. It

could be described as a young woman wearing a blue scarf and a pearl earring. From there, an art historian might lead us into a more technical study of technique and context. But this is not the same as standing in front of it, and that scarf and that earring only play a minor supporting role – it’s really about the emotion we feel from her expression. We are part of the experience, which ultimately makes it personal, and that much harder to actually describe. I would simply describe that emotional impact as transcendental.

Very few wines can transport you beyond satisfaction and deliver you – even momentarily – into that transcendental state. It is a reflexive, emotional response. But here, with our ‘class of ‘96’, it happened to me, and more than once.

Why? The starting point is of course what the French refer to as *terroir* – that combination of climate, micro-climate, soil, and vine. It’s a concept that infers immutability derived from nature, the ‘DNA’ of the wine. Much can be done in the vineyard to give each crop its best chance to produce high quality grapes, and much can be done at harvest and in the winery to preserve that quality, but the *terroir* provides a basis for quality and personality. At Domaine de la Romanée Conti, all the reds are from grand cru vineyards – including the very best of all.

The second point, is a scale advantage. Burgundy land ownership is highly fragmented. The grand cru vineyard Clos de Vougeot has over 80 owners. But at the Domaine de la Romanée Conti, they own

all of La Romanée Conti, all of La Tâche, and they are the largest owner in each of the four* other grands crus, and all are in very close proximity. This simplifies vineyard management, but also provides The Domaine with flexibility. Wines from young vines, poorer performing plots, or individual barrels can be edited out (either by declassifying wine – as The Domaine does, into a 1er Cru label, or by selling wine off to the trade to appear anonymously under negociant labels). It’s a luxury few domaines can afford. But there are technical advantages to scale too. Temperature during fermentation can be controlled better when there is sufficient



Left page, top left, participants were delighted to be a part of this once-in-a-lifetime tasting; right, 1996 La Tâche was appreciated during the dinner as it displayed extraordinary complexity. Bottom left, 1996 Echezeaux, another star of the evening; right, a guest was mesmerized by one of these beautiful wines. This page, guests raised the toast to this unique experience.



This page, this wonderful dinner was taken place at the Drawing Room, Grand Hyatt Hotel. Special food menu was designed particularly for the seven Domaine de la Romanée Conti wines being served (opposite, the tasting). With the heaven sent and wonderful dishes, the guests enjoyed thoroughly and were immersed in the exceptional Domaine de la Romanée Conti wines even more.

HONG KONG (UNIQUE WINE DINNER)



98 | 1996 MONTRACHET
Bright gold; a fine rich nose of toasted bread, a touch of struck match, intense dried citrus peel, spice. This opened up aromatically as the evening went on; on the palate an immediate sense of concentration aligned to great purity, a layered texture revealing different facets of flavor, fine phenolics, super tanginess and freshness. Every sense that this Montrachet is still on its way up, having revealed much but still not all. At twenty it is barely stretching its legs. A monumental Montrachet, with a dazzlingly near flawless diamond-like radance, purity and energy.

91 | 1996 ECHEZEUX
Fine-hued garnet with a developed colour to the rim; a smoky savoury sort of aroma, sweet roasted meats, candied raspberries, spice and a touch of florals; satisfyingly fleshy on the palate, ample, lush-fruited, with a lovely crisp underlying acidity, a touch of firmness to the finish. This shows good flow, good interest, a little green pea-like coolness, but not real unripeness. A wine that would offer great pleasure on its own – ready to drink, but tasting in this line up – and returning to it later – clearly on a more terrestrial plane than its neighbouring grands crus.

94 | 1996 GRANDS ECHEZEUX
Bright very clear garnet, with colour development right at the rim's edge; bacon fat, perfume, spice immediately on the detailed nose. More lift than the Echezeaux; a fine-boned texture, more precise than the Echezeaux, a wild note, a touch of green herb – the sense of stem flavor lingers in the finish too. This has crystalline purity and a fine marriage of acidity and fruit. Expresses itself like a jewel. This is still vivacious and youth-

ful. A great wine typifying Grands Echezeaux's propensity for slow cellar development and long life. It's not ready yet, but if you don't own it, find it – someone has done 20 years of waiting for you already.

94 | 1996 ROMANÉE-ST-VIVANT
Fine, bright clear garnet; after the potency of the Grands Echezeaux, this offers a quieter, more discrete aroma that is nonetheless pretty in its floral notes, and enticing in its notes of fine spices; the immediate impression on the palate is the super fine elegant structure and texture. Bright, perfumed, with filigree-layered slender shape. This is all about delicacy, elegance. Fine, very mineral-laden tannins. The structure is there if you consciously consider it, but the overall impression is of airiness, a lofty perfumed indulgence of refinement. Lovely wine, and so different to the Grands Echezeaux.

96 | 1996 RICHEBOURG
A slightly deeper shade of colour after the Romanée-St-Vivant; a lovely aroma, very floral, a deeper sense of fruit, into the blue spectrum fruit aromas with a more candied sense of sweetness; a silky-textured mouthcoating attack, crystalline fruit, more breadth and flesh compared to the Romanée-St-Vivant. Darker spectrum flavor too. Floral. A firmer structure, but beautifully phenolically ripe. Real depth of fruit here – well structured but also well upholstered. The Richebourg took quite some time in the glass to open up, revealing even more layers of spice and perfume on the nose and a sense of expansiveness on the palate. A pleasure to drink today, but not yet at its apogee. Say 2021+?

96 | 1996 LA TÂCHE
Six bottles of this were opened and served. All were fine but despite coming from two assortment cases of impeccable provenance, there was discernible bottle variation in the La Tâche. Three bottles opened showed a little brett together with a more elevated impression of austerity. Three bottles were pristine. At its best the 1996 La Tâche displayed an extraordinarily complex array of aromas, red and dark berry fruits, spices, and a hint of sous bois; sensational on the palate, with velvet texture, head-spinning spice and complexity. This is less opulent than the Richebourg, but shares something of its fine but mineral-laden structure. Head in the clouds but feet on the ground.

98 | 1996 LA ROMANÉE-CONTI
A paler colour than the La Tâche, fine appearance; a simply gorgeous nose, so aromatic, fine, spicy, ethereal, open, and with just a hint of cool-year stem pepperiness; silky on the palate, super fine, texture between that of La Tâche and the ultimate silk of Romanée-St-Vivant. A sublime, airy, effortless flow and expression. Very fine grip, acidity, red fruit spectrum, a touch of wet soil aroma. Only the third highest sense of concentration or power by the mid-palate (after Richebourg and Grands Echezeaux respectively), the most extraordinary aspect to this is the full peacock's tail of aromas that carry for almost impossible length on the finish. Like an opera diva holding a note defiantly without breath. The experience is elevating, elating, and exquisite.

*Since the 2009 vintage The Domaine has produced a seventh red grand cru – a Corton

volume in the tank, and during élevage (barrel ageing) – the mix of oak types, and the mix of old and new barrels, can be fine tuned. Finally, I feel, The Domaine translates these clear advantages well – quality work in the vineyards (now biodynamic), fastidious selection, and a very moderate hand in the winery. The style feels understated, stylish without ever being flashy. It's an approach that – as we saw this evening – really lets the terroir speak after sufficient time in the cellar. Here, six reds and one white sat in our wine glasses (large Zalto glasses with large pours so we could really savour the wines over the evening). The six reds were all Pinot Noir, from the same vintage, all farmed the same, made the same, and cellared the same, and from vineyards mere metres apart, yet like siblings, all displayed their own distinct personalities. We chose 1996, in part because at twenty, all of the wines would either be fully mature, or approaching it, and partly because the characteristics of the vintage itself. Some vintages – like the blisteringly hot 2003 – are so distinct that the stamp of the season can dominate.

But 1996 – as Meadows explained – had good flowering, and then it was cool. It was a year characterized by La bise – the cool north wind that evaporates humidity, concentrated the sugars, but also the acidity in the grapes. Over-cropped wines in 1996 can taste acidic, but The Domaine never over-crops – the 1996s show real clarity, brightness and intensity. Critically, 1996 has allowed each vineyard its clear individual expression. So what did this collection of sextuplets, and its white wine cousin show?

The Montrachet – The Domaine's rarest wine, with 'only' a 0.67ha share – was close to prototypically perfect. The interesting thing about the 1996 – as Meadows pointed out – is that it is closer in expression to the more typical ideal of Montrachet, but not typical for The Domaine, which tends to pick quite late here and which sometimes show a more exotic aroma and texture. The intense mineral acidity of 1996 seems to have overridden this imprint. It is hard to imagine a better Montrachet than The Domaine's 1996, and perhaps when fully mature it will flirt with perfection.

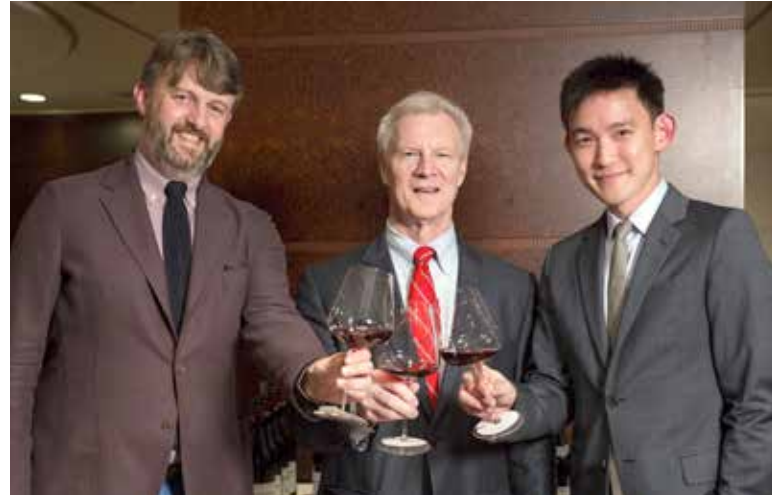
The Echezeaux was lovely, a high quality, expressive wine now in its apogee. In recent vintages the quality has lifted, but in 1996 I could feel its sixth out of six rank clearly. It was the only wine that when I returned to it after tasting the others, felt a bit rustic. It's a very good wine, but it lacks magic. There is a similarity in the Grands Echezeaux, but here there is more refinement, more depth of fruit, more detail and clarity, and the most Peter Pan-like expression of youth amongst all six. It is a deeply impressive wine, though with both feet firmly in the soil. No transcendence yet. The biggest contrast of the whole experience is to taste Romanée-St-Vivant immediately

after Grands Echezeaux. They could not be more different. After the dramatic, masculine Grands Echezeaux comes a quieter, more tender voice.

The Romanée-St-Vivant is all about elegance and grace. In 1996 The Domaine was still in a quality ascendancy with this vineyard. In more recent vintages there is a little more depth to it than in 1996. But stylistically the Romanée-St-Vivant came tantalizingly close to delivering that transcendental feeling and at many dinners would provide the 'wow' wine of the night. Recent vintages will do so I believe when they are mature. The Richebourg, I felt, had the most sensually pleasing sense of fruit and fine spices of all six reds. It is utterly seductive. La Tâche and La Romanée-Conti are qualitatively close. Both are astonishingly complex. The La Tâche is a little firmer,

while the Romanée-Conti has that rare quality or airiness, delivering real impact without any sense of weight. It's an experience that left me – for a moment – floating above my chair.

Tasting any of these wines on their own would present a fantastic treat. To taste the full range was also a lesson (if only all education was like this!). It left me – as the steadily noisier crescendo of euphoria that filled our dining room eased into memory and reflection in the days that followed – with a renewed sense of respect for the concept of terroir, so clear to see when the wines can be compared like this, side by side, and admiration for the Domaine de la Romanée-Conti. 🍷



This page, top, the stars of the evening; bottom, Linden Wilkie, Allen Meadows and Michael Wu were proud to host the evening. Right page, top left, a guest contemplated the intensity of 1996 La Tâche; right, 1996 La Romanée-Conti. Bottom left, participant recording his emotions; right, extremely focused, a guest examined the exceptional gold color of 1996 Montrachet.