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Home > Blogs > Mixed Case: Opinion and Advice

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Burgundy's Comeback Kid

Nicolas Potel lost his namesake winery five years ago; he's back and making even better wines

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By Mitch Frank

The first time I met Nicolas Potel, I was legitimately concerned that his hair would burst into flame at some point during the day we spent together. I was visiting Burgundy in early 2009 to write a story on the *négociant*, and I found a man busting at the seams with energy, trying to grow his eponymous winery—which had gotten an infusion of capital from new owners—and devote some time to a few small but ambitious side projects.

I came away feeling like Potel, then 40, was going to be a success, if he could hold it all together. But two months after I left, his juggling act came crashing down. The new owners of Maison Nicolas Potel fired Nicolas Potel. (The wines still bear his name today, but he has no role in them.) When I checked in with him before my story appeared, he was putting the pieces back together, launching a new *négociant* and looking for vineyards to start a small *domaine*. His energy was still there. But I wondered if it was all too much.

Today, Potel remains full of energy, ambition and ideas. But he also seems more at peace. I returned to Burgundy this past week, and I called on him at his headquarters, a centuries-old property just outside Beaune's city walls. When I last visited the place, it was an empty shell with crumbling ceilings. Today it's an active winery, though it's still a construction site—Potel is building himself an apartment upstairs. When I walked into the tasting room, he was standing there smiling, still with reddish brown hair, a boyish face and sparkling eyes that flit back and forth between innocent excitement and playful mischievousness.

"Things are so good today," Potel told me, and looking at the table, it was easy to see why. Four dozen bottles of wines stood there as a few importers tasted and took notes. With the help of some friends, Potel did launch his twin projects—Domaine de Bellene (an estate of vineyards in several appellations) and Maison Roche de Bellene (a *négociant*). He is making high-quality wines with consistency, receiving outstanding and classic scores from my colleague Bruce Sanderson. My overall impression of the 23 wines from 2012 that I tasted was that Potel and his winemaker, Sylvain Debord, have found a nice balance between vibrance and power, with a healthy dose of *terroir*.

After the tasting, Potel, his Japanese export manager Seji Kitazawa and I grabbed dinner at local institution Ma Cuisine and discussed how he had started over. He believes it helps that it's not the first time he's had to pick himself up.



Darryl Estrine

Mixed Case

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Potel grew up at the Volnay domaine Pousse d'Or, where his father, Gérard, had worked since 1964. Gérard was a true Burgundy great. Christophe Roumier told me last week that while he and other winemakers from his generation are known for revitalizing Burgundy, raising quality in the 1990s, a few iconoclasts like Gérard Potel and Jacques Seysses of Domaine Dujac were the heroes. At a time when Burgundy was producing large volumes of mediocre wine, Gérard Potel was experimenting with new techniques to improve ripeness and concentration. Those experiments gave Roumier, Dominique Lafon and others a foundation.

Nicolas trained abroad and returned home in 1996, hoping to build a négociant business with his father, since the Potels did not own Pousse d'Or. But in 1997, Gérard died at age 61 of a heart attack, and Nicolas and his mother had to leave Pousse d'Or. That was the start of Maison Nicolas Potel, a micro-négociant. Men his father had taught—Roumier, Lafon and Jean-Marc Boillot—sold him grapes to give him a start. Potel began sourcing grapes from good parcels, often working with the growers to improve quality. By 2002, he was making 120 wines from 50 different appellations.

But Potel's ambition overextended him. The post-9/11 recession and a family illness left him cash-strapped. So he sold ownership to the Cottin brothers, owners of large négociant Labouré-Roi. They kept him on for the first few years. But by the time I came to town, there were obvious tensions. When the Cottins fired Potel, they claimed his side projects were competing with Maison Potel. Nicolas says it was obvious from the start they did not share his idea of small quantities of many wines. The reality is, it was a bad marriage.

On my trips to Burgundy, I have been struck by the camaraderie of its winemakers. Sometimes they gossip a bit, but for the most part they stick together. Relationships matter. Potel's success is proof of it. First his father's acolytes helped him. Then, when he lost all he had built, he picked himself up by reaching out to fellow winemakers and growers. Those growers sell him fruit today because they know he will make good wine with it. But they also know that he is a good man, a persistent man.

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Jeremy Matouk — Port of Spain, Trinidad — February 9, 2014 8:09pm ET

Well written, Mitch. You have painted the picture quite truthfully of this irrepressible winemaker. When I first met Nicolas it was on an exploratory trip to source wines from France back in 2008. His wines were in such demand back then that the first thing they told me when I arrived at the winery on the Rue de Blees in Nuits was that there was no wine for sale. "No problem", I said, "I am just here to learn". After a cellar tour I had a chance encounter with Nicolas during a tasting, in which I asked all sorts of newbie questions and the next thing I knew was that I could buy whatever I wanted. I have represented his wines down here in Trinidad ever since. It was very distressing to read about the problems he then faced, particularly the allegation from his former financiers that he had little or no role in the production of the wines that bore his name (which they kept). Enough to break a man.

Our next encounter was at the new winery outside of Beaune in October 2012 where he showed me around the winery and the apartments he is renovating upstairs, before a 3 hour lunch and tasting through over 20 wines from recent vintages. If that were not enough, he then fetched three older vintages of Chambolle-Musigny (1996, 1999 and 2001) for us to savour. As a parting gift he gave us a bottle of his father Gerard's final vintage of 1996 Volnay 1er Cru Les Caillerets, which we had with dinner that night in Meursault. This is a man of great generosity and determination who I admire very much. You ought to have mentioned that his new labels at the Bellene winery carry perhaps the most information about the wine in the bottle than any labels I have ever seen.

Yes, a man of great talent and relentless determination and energy. It is good that he should get the publicity he so richly deserves.

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