

Bangkok Post  
the magazine

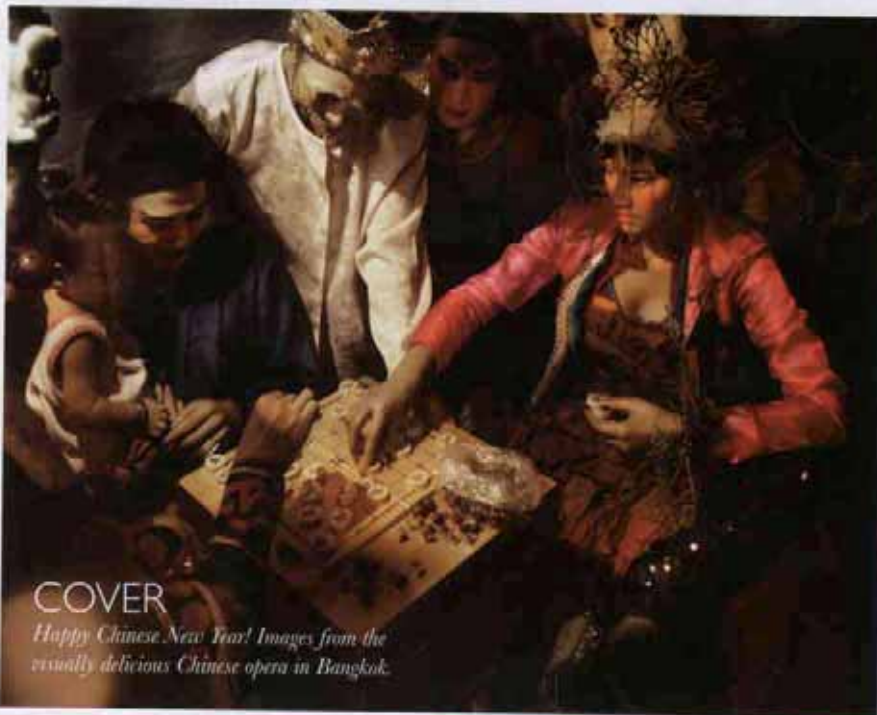
22 JANUARY 2009  
ISSUE 132



A Night at the Opera

Beijing Art Scene | Natural Remedies | Burgundy

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the **magazine**

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# THE BELLE OF BURGUNDY

*Story & Photography: Faith Maundy*



WITH ITS RICH HISTORY, MASTERPIECES OF ART AND, OF COURSE, SOME OF THE WORLD'S MOST CELEBRATED WINES, BEAUNE IN BURGUNDY IS ONE OF FRANCE'S BEST-SAVOURED DESTINATIONS.

## THE BELLE OF BURGUNDY

A picturesque old market town with a dazzling Medieval monument at its heart, a bourg of rich regional cuisine in which Boeuf Bourguignon is just the start, a labyrinth of cellars filled with the world's best wines, Beaune is a magnet for those with fine tastes.

If you fit that category, this historic town at the heart of Burgundy, once home to the Dukes and long the main marketplace for the superb Cote d'Or vineyards, is irresistibly a place for you.

Those who know their wines will of course need no pushing, for the very name of Burgundy will be enough to lighten their spirits, but in case this word has not done the trick, be informed that for a very large number of wine-lovers, this central French region is paradise on earth.

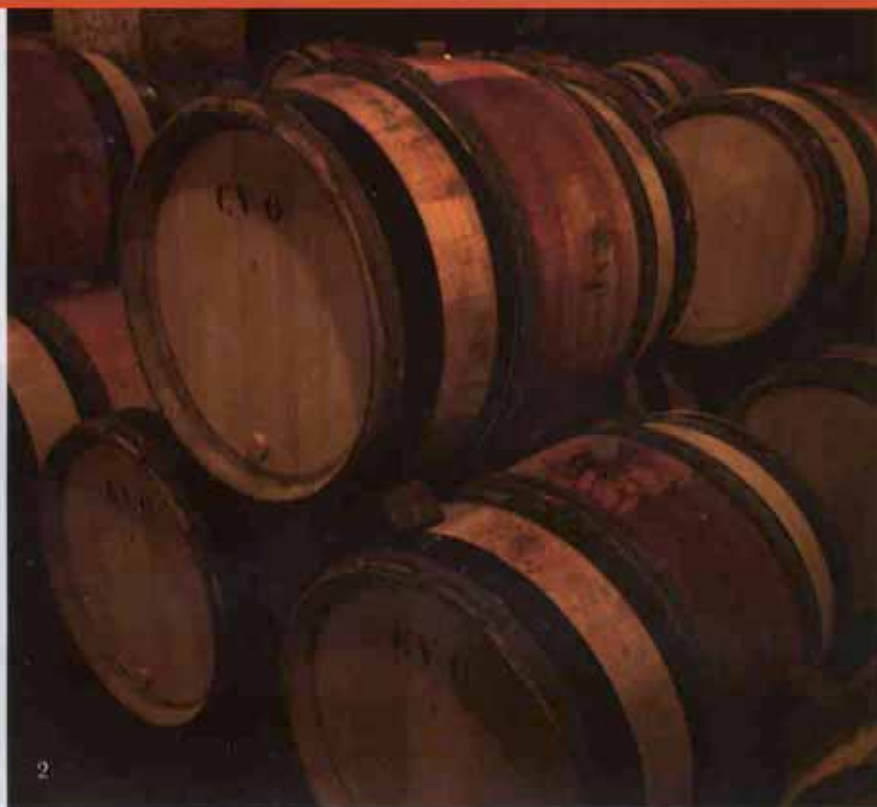
And within this paradise, there is a very heaven, a district of no great extent where vineyards and winemakers combine to produce the most-divine nectars: the Golden Slope, the Cote d'Or.

Running southwards from the outskirts of Dijon, Burgundy's principal city and historical capital, the Cote d'Or is a mere fifty kilometres long. Formed by an escarpment with a gentle southeast-facing slope and flat lands to its east, its precious soils are almost entirely planted with vines.

Here generations of viniculteurs have applied their expertise to this extraordinary terroir and made themselves veritable gods of wine.

Clos de Vougeot, Vosne-Romanee, Nuits-St-Georges, Alexe-Corton sing the names, followed by Volnay, Pommard and Montrachet to the south – just to mention the most renowned *appellations*. Every village is surrounded with vineyards exploiting every possible patch of the ochrish soil which prompts the name “Golden Slope.”

Centuries of increasing re-



finement have created a world-renowned “brand” divided into two areas, the Cote de Nuits in the north, which occupies about a third of the Golden Slope, and the Cote de Beaune in the south, accounting for about two-thirds. Basking in the prosperity of this vinicultural wonderland, the old town of Beaune stands at the mid-point of the Cote d'Or.

A town with Roman origins, it was once the favoured residence of the Dukes of Burgundy, which in the late middle ages was a powerful state independent of France. At the height of their power in the 1400s, the Dukes of Burgundy ruled not only sizeable portions of what are now eastern and far northern France but also the best part of the Low Countries, by dint of a clever marriage.

The court of the Grand Dukes of the West, as they were known, was famed throughout



YOU ENTER AN EXTRAORDINARY CHARITY HOSPITAL THAT WAS BUILT FOR THE POOR WITH LITTLE EXPENSE SPARED, A WORLD WHERE THE SICK AND OLD SUFFERED IN LAVISH SURROUNDINGS.



Europe for its opulence, a direct result of acquiring the riches of the Flemish and Dutch territories, in addition to possessing the agricultural wealth of Burgundy which is famed until this day. There existed a golden triangle formed by Bruges, Brussels and Beaune.

Half a millennium has passed since Burgundy fell from grace – the fault of the ruinously over-reaching ruler called Charles the Rash — and came under the heel of the French king in 1477, but you only have to go to the Hotel-Dieu to take yourself back to the splendour of that time.

The most splendid building of its kind in Europe, and probably the largest, the Hotel-Dieu de Beaune is world-famed for the dazzling multi-coloured tiling on its lengthy high-pitched roofs. Trans-fixed by the lofty geometric patterns extending for about a hundred metres around three sides of the institution's

courtyard, you doubt if anything inside can outdo this exuberant display.

But within is a unique experience: you enter an extraordinary charity hospital that was built for the poor with little expense spared, a world where the sick and old suffered in lavish surroundings. The Hôtel-Dieu was founded in 1443 after years of war had made the majority of the people of Beaune destitute. Nicolas Rolin, Duke Charles the Good's chancellor, and his beloved wife decided to create a hospital and refuge for the poor. Expanding over the centuries into the Hospices de Beaune, the institution received many donations – farms, property, woods, works of art and, most famously, vineyards – from grateful families and generous benefactors, and continued to function as a hospital until 1971.

The Hôtel-Dieu is now a museum, and the main hall, or Poor Ward, shows the original layout with

end-to-end bed cubicles along each side, curtained and blanketed with heavy crimson cloth. They look comfortable until you learn that several people slept in each one. In the wide space in between, residents would have eaten at long tables. Heating must have been a problem: the hall rises to the pitched roof's peak, and has an open chapel at the end, gorgeously painted.

Chilblains and piety, agony and opulence, foul odours and incense – the Hotel-Dieu conjures extraordinary images. Many penniless people from rough cottages must have ended their lives in these strangely ornate spaces – keeping each other warm, tended by Catholic sisters.

The culmination comes in the darkened hall devoted to artistic treasures, where a magnificent multi-panelled altarpiece by Rogier van der Weyden covers the main wall. Here you see the supreme wealth of the

THE LOCAL TOURIST BOARD HAS DESIGNATED A ROUTE DES VINS – WINE ROAD – WHICH GOES ALL THE WAY FROM DIJON TO SANTENAY... FOR BEST RESULTS, TRY NOT TO BE THE DRIVER.



Burgundians and of Nicolas Rolin in particular, able to engage the great Flemish master, one of the finest painters of all time, to produce a six-metre-long masterpiece. Depicting The Last Judgement, this polyptych originally hung above the altar in the Room of the Poor chapel. Poor in art they were not, with this spectacular work to view, day in, day out.

The Hospices de Beaune, the institution born from the Hotel-Dieu, is unique in its historical, philanthropic and wine-producing heritage, and has become intimately linked with the economic and cultural life of Burgundy. Its extensive vineyards produce a quarter of a million bottles of wine each year and the proceeds still finance a hospital and a nursing home in Beaune.

Globally famous, the Hospices de Beaune hosts a great charity auction each November at Beaune's covered market where more than 500 barrels of wines are auctioned to buyers from all over the world. In an atmosphere of celebration, a weekend filled with tasting and partying, admirable business is done and the prices paid become benchmarks for the year's vintage in the Cote d'Or.

The Dukes of Burgundy revelled in being "lords of the best wines in Christendom" and so it's only fitting that their old palace in Beaune – the Hotel des Ducs de Bourgogne – now houses the Burgundy Wine Museum. Here you'll find the history of wine from the Romans to today; exhibits include terracotta amphora in which the Romans stored wine, medieval vineyard tools and crystal wine glasses. The *piece de resistance* is a dazzling minstrel-themed tapestry by the masterful 20<sup>th</sup> century *tapissier*, Jean Lurcat.

If you want to sample wine in Beaune, the town is full of traders who will offer you tastings of their wares. In-

deed, not only is Beaune home to great wholesalers like Louis Jadot, Bouchard Pere et Fils and Joseph Drouhin, much of the ground under the town is occupied by wine cellars. A fine way to visit the cellars and taste some wines is at the Marche Aux Vins (Wine Market).

If you're not too confident of your tasting skills, learn the basics at a little place called Sensation Vin. Here they'll give you a one-hour seminar in wine-tasting with an impartial choice of wines, from a wide stock which is also for sale.

Armed with this *savoir-faire*, you can set forth with some aplomb on a tasting tour of surrounding vineyards. The local tourist board has designated a Route des Vins – Wine Road – which goes all the way from Dijon to Santenay. You can also just drive around willy-nilly and be sure to see invitations to tastings.

For best results, try not to be the driver. One destination is thoroughly



1. Amid the vineyards stands Chateau du Clos de Vougeot, an ancient winery that is a national monument.
2. Oak wine barrels in the cellars of Chateau de la Tour, the largest vineyard of the Côte de Vougeot district.
3. Patients at the Hotel-Dieu sleep in crimson-curtained cubicles.
4. The chapel altar in the main hall of the Hotel-Dieu.
5. Mary of Burgundy ruled 1477-82.
6. Philip the Bold, ruled 1363-1404.
7. A dazzling ensemble of geometric tiling and domes surrounds Beaune's Hotel-Dieu.



DOMINATING THE FIELDS LIKE A GREAT SHIP FLOATING ON A VINE-GREEN SEA, THE CHATEAU DU CLOS DE VOUGEOT IS A KEY MONUMENT OF BURGUNDY WINE TRADITION.

#### TRAVEL FILE

Air France flies daily to Paris, with connections to Dijon, just 35 km north of Beaune. Visit [www.airfrance.com](http://www.airfrance.com) for full details or call 001 800 441 0771 (toll-free) or 02 635 1191.

Direct TGV trains run from Paris Charles de Gaulle Airport to Dijon in the evening, or from Paris Gare de Lyon station throughout the day, with connections to Beaune. Visit Rail Europe website at [www.raileurope.com](http://www.raileurope.com) or call the local Rail Europe agent, Diethelm Travel, on 02 660 7000.

Hotel Le Cep: details at [www.hotel-cep-beaune.com](http://www.hotel-cep-beaune.com)

Loiseau des Vignes: details at [www.bernard-loiseau.com/FR/BOURGOGNE/vignes](http://www.bernard-loiseau.com/FR/BOURGOGNE/vignes)

Sensation Vin: details at [www.sensation-vin.com/en](http://www.sensation-vin.com/en)

Marche Aux Vins: details at [www.marcheauxvins.com](http://www.marcheauxvins.com)

Hospices de Beaune: details at [www.hospices-de-beaune.com/gb/hospices/index.php](http://www.hospices-de-beaune.com/gb/hospices/index.php)

Festival information: [www.burgundytoday.com/gourmet-traveller/wine-festivals.htm](http://www.burgundytoday.com/gourmet-traveller/wine-festivals.htm)

Official tourism information:  
Beaune: [www.beaune-burgundy.com](http://www.beaune-burgundy.com)  
Cote d'Or: [www.cotedor-tourisme.com](http://www.cotedor-tourisme.com)  
Burgundy: [www.burgundy-tourism.com](http://www.burgundy-tourism.com)  
France:  
<http://sg.franceguide.com> (website of French tourism's South-east Asia office).



iconic: the great vineyards of Clos de Vougeot in the Cotes de Nuits, about 20 km north of Beaune. Dominating the fields like a great ship floating on a vine-green sea, the Chateau du Clos de Vougeot is a key monument of Burgundy wine tradition, with 12th century monastic origins. Reeking of centuries of toil in a noble cause, a great medieval wood-beamed barn has four enormous old wine presses in heavy wood. The Chateau de la Tour vineyard is Vougeot's biggest and has a fine tasting room up in the stone tower of its name.

For bedding in Beaune, you can't beat the Hotel Le Cep in the heart of the old town for style and atmosphere. Host to the French celebrity firmament — Catherine Deneuve and Gerard Depardieu, French cinema's reigning monarchs; Francois Mitterand and Jacques Chirac whilst each was president of France — the

Le Cep occupies adjoined houses with 14th to 18th century origins, its renaissance courtyards combining with classically elegant interiors.

For dining, step no further than next door to a restaurant in the spirit of the legendary chef-restaurateur, Bernard Loiseau. The Loiseau des Vignes enquires into your personal preferences and dislikes, before coming up with a tailor-made menu — you are an instant gourmet, your tastes magically translated into a superb meal.

To accompany it, wine choice is greatly aided by 70 fine wines on tap via a state-of-the-art conservation system, the bottles fixed in a sealed glass case running along one side of the restaurant. You can take a wine tour by the glass, assured that each choice is in fine fettle.

France is famed for the arts of living, and here — as so often in this gilded domain, the Cote d'Or — you know why. **1**