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Jancis Robinson Wine

Vin retrospect

My problem is that when I get drunk I say what I mean. And when I get very drunk I say what I don't mean." With that threat, a wicked grin and his habitual wheezy snicker, Belgian Jean-Marie Guffens kicked off a massive retrospective tasting of the exceptional white burgundies he's been making since 1980. His first swear word came nine minutes into the tasting. He clearly delights in being roguish and is well known for falling asleep in the company of wine luminaries.

Fine wine trader Farr Vintners has been importing his wines since the early 1990s and, to celebrate his 65th birthday, suggested the tasting to Guffens. When he decides to do something (and often he doesn't), he goes the whole hog. So, at the end of November, a group of us wine writers and traders were treated to a unique showing of no fewer than 54 of his wines at Farr's headquarters on the Thames in Wandsworth.

Guffens began his winemaking career in the Mâconnais, known for producing poor man's white burgundy, well to the south of the hallowed Côte d'Or. Later he ventured north to make wine on the "golden slope" and a considerable quantity of Chablis under his Verget negociant label, but you could say that his mission in life has been to prove that Mâconnais whites can be better than those from such famous white-wine villages as Meursault and Puligny-Montrachet. This tasting of his exceptionally nervy, long-lived wines confirmed his hypothesis to a large extent.

He told the story, with delight, of how the famous American wine critic Robert Parker wrote in 1983 about a crazy Belgian who made Mâcon wine as good as Puligny. Two weeks later, when Parker visited him, Guffens told him that this was an awful thing to say: "I just want to be me and make wine my way. Art is not to be compared."

The first vintage of Domaine Guffens-Heynen, 1980 - Heynen



As imagined by Leon Edler

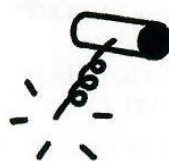
Stars of the Mâconnais

Domaine Guffens-Heynen
Please note that Guffens keeps making slight changes to the exact names of his cuvées.

- Mâcon Pierreclos, Chavigne 1997, 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2010, 2011
- Pouilly-Fuissé, Clos des Petits-Croux 1997, 2002, 2005
- Pouilly-Fuissé, La Roche

- 1997, 2004, 2008
- Pouilly-Fuissé, Premier Jus 1998, 2003
- Pouilly-Fuissé, Les Hauts des Vignes 2000, 2003

- Verget**
- St Véran, Terres Noires Atom Heart Mother 2002
 - Mâcon-La-Roche-Vineuse, Vieilles Vignes de Sommere 2002
 - Mâcon-Vergisson, La Roche 2006



Tasting notes on Purple Pages of JancisRobinson.com. See Wine-searcher for stockists of Guffens wines



being the surname of his stupendously indulgent wife Maine - was notoriously late to ripen. The second, 1981, was frozen by spring frosts. According to Guffens, their first "decent" vintage was 1982 but that wasn't perfect either. He described it as "too much". Nevertheless, the early wines made a significant impression not just on Parker but also the venerable Dutch wine importer Okhuysen, a representative of which was at our recent London tasting. But this modest domaine could make only 2,500 cases and Guffens needed a bigger canvas.

The negociant Verget was formed in 1990, long before buying-in grapes became respectable in

'Mâconnais whites can be better than those from such famous white-wine villages as Meursault'

Burgundy. Helped in the early years by fellow Belgian Jean Rijckaert, Guffens also started making remarkably fine Mâconnais wines, under the Verget label, that belied their lowly appellations, before adding a panoply of other wines from grapes bought in Chablis. In 2009, in particular - the last year he made any Côte d'Or wines - Guffens bought heavily in Chablis "because no one else wanted them".

"I love Mâcon-Pierreclos, Tri de Chavigne the most," Guffens told us, "because it was our very first vineyard and no one wanted it because it was too steep. We always take what others don't want." He smiled at his wife before adding, "I would be unable to make great wine somewhere well known like Meursault, for example, because I can't change it or make it my way."

His way is slow. He likes to pick as late as possible. "I hurry only when the vintage is really perfect, but for a bad one, take your ▶

◀ time. The only thing that interests me in wine is vibrancy. Wine has to mean something, has to tell you something. How many good-made but boring wines have you had in your life? You have to ask yourself: what's good in the vintage and what should I avoid? You have to accept the vintage and not work against it. Not make what people want you to."

Nor does he have any illusions about his customers. "To run a business like Verget, you need some stupid people. They always say there are more drinkers than knowers. You need to be able to sell your lesser wines easily."

He admitted, "I make a good living but I don't want to sell to very rich people. To make a lot of money you have to play the stock market and so on. Much more interesting are the people who are just really interested in wine - but not the very, very rich ones. I'd say to them: 'Wake up, guys.' There is so much expensive shit in Burgundy, it becomes a problem. I know I keep mentioning Meursaults but really I'm not sure about them because I don't drink or buy them any more."

It's hardly any wonder you don't see Guffens on the general wine circuit: he is not civilised in a conventional sense. Asked whose wines he does admire, he came up with a typically unexpected answer: Domaine Gallety of Côtes du Vivarais, a low-key producer in a particularly obscure appellation. He was also asked what effect he thought the long-awaited, forthcoming delimitation of Premiers Crus in the Mâconnais

would have. "It won't make any difference," he shrugged, adding, with reference to an appellation between the Mâconnais and the Côte d'Or, "who knows the Premiers Crus of Montagny, for instance?"

But some of his tastes in wine are perhaps more predictable. "I hate Sauvignon Blanc. I hate cat's piss. I was a very good friend of Didier Dagueneau [the late producer of the Loire's most expensive Sauvignons] but I told him: 'Your wines are so pale you can see through them.'"

In 2003, he was one of the earlier French producers to adopt screwcaps. He told us: "We use a lot of screwcaps. Winemakers don't like them because if a wine has a fault it means they have to admit they screwed up." (They can't blame a faulty natural cork.)

The fourth of our five flights of wines - three before lunch, two after - focused on the highest, best plots of the Pouilly-Fuissé appellation. "I never did this tasting in my life," Guffens observed happily. "The chalky La Roche we call the Montrachet of Vergisson." And the fifth flight included four Grand Cru white burgundies of the Côte d'Or, including a 1994 Montrachet and 1994 Chevalier-Montrachet, made when Verget still sullied its hands producing Côte d'Or wines. They were pretty stupendous but, as Guffens observed to his wife: "It's amazing. They're almost as good as our Mâconnais wines." **FT**

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