

Jean-Philippe Fichet

Great Meursault as a Window into the Earth

A noble *terroir* has at last reclaimed its birthright. Once esteemed above all other villages for its white wines, Meursault fell from grace in the late 19th century—despite having a greater diversity of superb Chardonnay soils than any other place in Burgundy, and possibly any other spot on earth.

Today, Meursault is back on top, and a new generation of winemakers is capitalizing on its diverse soils to make some of Burgundy's most exciting white wines. "Expression" is the order of the day, and wines of unprecedented individuality are emerging from such cellars as Comtes Lafon, Guy Roulot and Arnaud Ente. But if there is one winemaker who points the way to the future, it may be Jean-Philippe Fichet.

The Magic Within

More than any of his peers, Fichet is testing the limits of transparency, to find the very soul of Meursault's *terroirs*. It was Meursault's destiny to have its soils revealed in this way: their intense stoniness is magnified by an exceptionally low water table, forcing the vines' roots deep underground.

Fichet's work is a direct outgrowth of a breakthrough that happened three decades ago: René Lafon's decision to bottle his Meursault "Clos de la Barre" on its own. For a century before, such a thing had been unheard of, as only the most famous vineyards—the *premier crus*—were ever bottled individually; everything else was blended into Meursault *villages*.

Lafon's innovation not only proved that a *lieu-dit* (a non-classified vineyard) could say something profound, it drew attention to Meursault's incredible soils—paving the way for the later accomplishments of Jean-Françoise Coche, Jean-Marc Roulot and, of



"As I have said repeatedly, the Fichet wines are among the very best and purest in Burgundy."

A. Meadows, Burghound

"(This is) real Meursault, if so unlike the buttery cliché that I and my contemporaries were brought up to expect."

Jancis Robinson

course, René Lafon's son Dominique. But Fichet has carried Lafon's revolution to another level—studying every square inch of earth and stone in his domaine, to make Meursault's purest set of single-*climat* wines.

Purity & Passion

Even if uneconomical, Fichet would rather produce a very small amount of wine from his best sites than to lose their unique character in a blend. In 1998, his Meursault-Tesson

vines yielded little more than four barrels; anyone else would have blended so little wine into their village *cuvée*. But the Tesson was so magical that Fichet bottled it separately, exclusively in magnum.

Just as Jean-Marc Roulot did until recently, Fichet has flown largely under the world's radar. He began as a grower in 1981 but was forced to rebuild his domaine from scratch in the 1990s, having lost all his best fruit sources—including a piece of Meursault-Perrières—for lack of long-term contracts. But he learned from this experience. By 2000, he had used carefully negotiated long-term *fermage* and *métayage* agreements to create an extraordinary new domaine, brimming with exceptional sites.

No Short Cuts

Fichet's methods reflect his philosophy: he is famously meticulous and abhors taking short cuts. His low yields, the foremost key to quality, are achieved through severe winter pruning rather than by green harvesting. And he believes his wines' expressiveness is enhanced through a patient eighteen-month *élevage*, with little new oak and by avoiding aggressive lees stirring.

The wines that Jean-Philippe Fichet is making today have few rivals for their class in Burgundy, and ►

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► they could be unmatched in their transparency and expressiveness. His top wines include:

Bourgogne Blanc Vieilles Vignes — Forty-year-old vines in a parcel across the road from Meursault-Charmes, this wine has more Meursault character than the vast majority of Meursault *villages* wines.

Meursault — Based on three beautifully situated parcels on the southern slopes of the village: *les Cloux* (60-year-old vines); *les Chaumes de Narvaux*, just above Boucheres and Gouttes d'Or; *Limouzin*, directly below Genevrières, plus a little *Criots*.

"Meix sous le Château" — The vines in this *lieu-dit* were planted in 1953. This tiny, steep, west-facing site in the middle of the village is classically Meursault in character, with citrus and mineral notes, beautifully pure fruit in the mid-palate and fine length.

"Chevalières" — One of Meursault's finest *lieux-dits*: a superb plot of 30- to 77-year-old vines on the same slope as the *premier crus*—with soil like that of Perrières. With its intense minerality, great delineation and length, this is a *lieu-dit* of soaring quality.

"Tesson" — Very similar to Chevalières in its minerality and fruit character, in some vintages

Tesson has even more mid-palate weight and length. Focused like a laser beam, this is often the most complete of the *lieux-dits*.

"Gruyaches" — Gruyaches is a small plot of 77-year-old vines enclosed on two sides by Meursault-Charmes. This is the richest and fullest of the Fichet *lieux-dits*, yet it shares their focus, minerality and length.

Puligny-Montrachet *premier cru* "Referts" — Across the border and adjacent to Meursault-Charmes, Fichet's Referts is intense and racy—yet rounder than all but the Gruyaches—with soaring floral and white pit fruit aromatics. It is the most powerful of these wines.

The Best is Yet to Come

As good as Fichet's wines have been up to now, the best lies ahead. His winemaking gets better each year, and so do his holdings, with a coveted piece of the iconic Meursault-Genevrières *premier cru* acquired in time for the 2006 vintage.

Jean-Philippe Fichet is one of Burgundy's greatest talents—and his wines are every bit as extraordinary as he is. It is an honor to represent this brilliant winemaker for the United States. □

What Happened to Meursault in the 100 Years before Lafon?

Until the late 1800s, it was widely known that Meursault—and not Puligny and Chassagne—had Burgundy's most compelling Chardonnay *terroirs*. In his pioneering 1855 Burgundy classification, Lavalley placed Meursault's Perrières vineyard higher than both Chevalier-Montrachet and Batard-Montrachet. Earlier—when Julien ranked the *premier crus* in his historic 1816 *Topographie*—only Puligny's Combettes could hold its own against Meursault's Charmes, Genevrières and Goutte d'Or.

But over time, Meursault became lost in the giant shadow cast by Le Montrachet, the hallowed ground that straddles Puligny's and Chassagne's border. In the late 1800s, both villages added "Montrachet" to their names, transferring its cachet to countless lesser vineyards. And while Puligny's and Chassagne's stars both rose, Meursault's fell. By the 20th century, only Meursault's top *premier crus* were ever bottled on their own. As for the unclassified vineyards—the so-called "*lieux dits*"—they disappeared into anonymous village blends, until René Lafon and others allowed them again to express themselves.