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Reflections On An Exceptional Terroir: Blagny

How to present a reflection on the terroir of Blagny?

There are undoubtedly many possible introductions. I will employ an excerpt from an article published in January 2007, Issue 36 by the journalist and famous gastronome of the Japanese review Winart. He wrote of Blagny: *“Blagny is a hidden treasure. As soon as you set foot in this hamlet, it’s as if time suddenly stopped in the middle ages. An impressive silence sweeps over you, only the birds and the blowing wind there to disturb you. From the village, you can see Meursault and Puligny-Montrachet, tiny in the distance. This landscape extends to the horizon. This is the first time I’ve contemplated such a spectacle in Burgundy.”* After having described the landscape and retraced the history of our family, he wrote of me: *“his talent is faultless; the wine he produces is intellectual and very orderly. His talent and the personality of the terroir of Blagny combine to give the 2004 vintage, for example, an accomplished flavor like a Greek marble sculpture. It is the fusion, in soft opulence, of a very delicate minerality and an effortless acidity that gives very solid wines of great density, wines that are remarkable and unexpected....”*

How can I speak of Blagny without being moved, without being plunged into an almost mystic, even esoteric ambiance? The strange atmosphere of this terroir evokes the millennium that separates us from the first monks who with their bare hands tore bushes and thorny plants from this uncultivated land; extracted mountains of rocks, some of which are still here, shaping our landscapes with numerous structures such as the walls and stone shelters in the vineyards that still mark the boundaries of our most noble crus today.

If, while strolling down one of our paths, you prick up your ears and let your eye wander, you will undoubtedly hear the melodious, enchanting song of these laborers of God....

After agricultural and viticultural studies and several years of teaching, my wife and I decided to come back “to our roots” to dedicate ourselves to working the family vineyards, acquired by our forbears starting in 1830. Blagny was once a dependence of the Cistercian abbey of Maizière. After ten years in these magnificent vineyards, I have managed to open only a crack the door that leads to the mystery of this remarkable terroir, to its revelation. Each day that passes is for me a new test. Each day that passes is a new challenge for me! Who is the great puppet master? What are all the combinations of this great blend? Would an effort to explain turn up more science than philosophy? I don’t have an answer to these questions but I do know that with every day that passes I come a little closer to the truth. Each day that passes strengthens a hypothesis that I will call “the perpetual voyage.” In effect, I believe that beyond the rational facts that are scientifically proven, such as the nature of soils, altitudes, or even certain cultural practices, there exist other parameters, clearly less tangible, such as “the positive energy of the substance” of which the quantity, the content, and the meaning are felt by the winemaker to be “arranged or recombined.” Nevertheless, this hypothesis remains difficult to prove with scientific reasoning.

Why is the terroir of Blagny so special?

First of all, the vineyards are at a high altitude. If we compare it to the entirety of the vineyard area of the Côte, 60-80 meters (197-262 feet) separate us from the villages of Meursault and Puligny. Aside from the incidence of this factor on seasonal temperatures, altitude also creates a lag in growing. The vegetative cycle of the plant is therefore longer because the conditions are less favorable for vegetal development. Furthermore, the slope of the vineyards systematically

causes an elimination of rainwater. Finally, these are very poor soils, either because they are composed primarily of layered rocks as in the vineyards of Puligny-Montrachet: “Hameau de Blagny,” “Chalumeaux,” or even “Garenne,” or made up of very pure clays and therefore practically infertile at this stage on the terroir of Meursault-Blagny. If we add to this very archaic cultural methods (no herbicides, fertilizers, insecticides, acaricides, or anti-mold treatment), a very old vineyard where each vine has an individualized pruning profile, *the vine does not adopt a behavior of growing and development but rather an attitude of survival*. It dedicates all its energy to the ripeness of its seeds, which assure the subsistence of the species. These seeds, to be dispersed in nature and therefore generate a new plant, must be consumed by animals. The more “appetizing” the grape is for the birds or mammals, the more enologically rich it is.... It is this formidable combat between the vine and its own environment that produces the best and the most fabulous potential for winemaking. Strengthened by this information, I am therefore convinced that the greatest works are always born in tears of pain. The exemplar: the closest to each of us is undoubtedly that of our birth...

What is the role of the winemaker?

His most important task is to understand the level of the difficulties encountered by the vine throughout a climatic year. In effect, each year brings its own amount of energy. From this energy, the biological and physiological mechanisms of the plant will be modified to give a different constitution of the wines: the molecular combination that characterizes a vintage is therefore directly correlated to the climatic variations of the year. *The wine is thus the memory of time*. The assimilation of this theory leads the winemaker to make decisions about the vinification and aging that are inspired by a sort of inexplicable premonition. Unfortunately, he is sometimes mistaken, an error “adding fuel to the fire” of chemist-enologists for whom the only truth is the exclusive realm of the exact sciences....

For my part, I am convinced that the “truth” is born in the purity of the wine, purity with a mineral origin and intensity, robustness and finesse that flow directly from the state of “survival of the plant.” It is around this minerality that all other components – such as, principally, the acidity, the sugars and the polyphenols – assemble.

What are the consequences for wines produced on the terroir of Blagny?

Their power is undoubtedly remarkable. The phenological and phenolic maturities are always deep, the harvest late. Aside from this great maturity, the acidities remain very high; it is at this point that the mineral will begin its mysterious work as “integrator.” The length of time necessary to the realization of this transformation is always correlated to the climatic system of the year. The more difficult the conditions the vine was in (its survival threatened), the more complex the job of blending seems, long and tedious but the greater the reward will be. At first look, “new” wines seem rather closed, even disappointing as if they wanted to hide their true faces. On the palate, their potential is strongly felt, dominated by a forthright acidity and a very important mineral tension. Six months to sometimes two or even three years are necessary before seeing the timid opening of the rosebud....

If chance exists, the magic of great wines does not. There is no hope for the technological, the chemical and the enological. The energy of the substance is the base, even the essence of the soul of the wine. To Flatter is one thing, to Love, Share and Understand is another. The perpetual voyage, my perpetual voyage, is to give back these minerals that constitute my organism to this incredibly beautiful Nature to be absorbed into it by a minuscule root of one of my vines. To take this trip into its bosom, then be seized by the frail hand of the harvester who will bring me to the belly of my cellars. To listen to the laughter and sometimes the shouts of my master who will not judge me to be up to his standards yet: the blender is at work....

Finally after long days of ripening, to hear them speak of you.

They are looking for you, listening to you, swirling you first one way and then another.
Do you hear them bringing you to their mouths, trying to penetrate your mystery?
Without a doubt, for a few instants, you bring them happiness, joy and good will.

Laurent Martelet

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