

From My Region to Wine Region

Georges Meekers reports from his homecoming wine tour.

PROPHET IN HIS OWN LAND

"If it's Tuesday, this must be Belgium".

How surreal – on a recent tour to Europe's northern vineyards, I made an unexpected stopover at the vineyards of - don't laugh - my native village of Borgloon, in Belgium; the land of chocolate and beer and where a handful of dedicated, hard working people now make very credible Chardonnay.

Don't believe me? Just ask confrere wine writer Jancis Robinson. She rated Peter Colemont's barrel matured 2001, Clos d'Opleeuw, A.O.C. Haspengouw very highly and compared it to a very sophisticated Puligny-Montrachet.

"Nicknamed 'le petit Belge', Peter Colemont is exemplary for a new age of cool winemakers in new, emerging wine regions. If you don't believe me, the prophet in his own land, just savour his Chard. "

Nicknamed 'le petit Belge', Peter Colemont is exemplary for a new age of cool winemakers in new, emerging wine regions. He has worked with several top domaines in the Côte d'Or, has learnt a great deal from Frenchmen Bernard Dugat-Py and Albert Grivault, and is now applying his knowledge to vines growing in my old backyard!

In Belgium, though, Peter's success is unmatched. This modest but talented winemaker is one of few

exceptions. The wine industry is still in its infancy; characterised by many but minute semi-professional operations run by well-intended, but inexperienced amateurs for whom there's little place. Belgian's viticulture and winemaking needs precise intervention because of the harsh, challenging climate, even with global warming.

I remember Peter not as a winemaker but as a young boy for wearing his summer shorts unlike any of us kids well into the ice-cold days of October. Clearly Peter is hardier than his vines in

his one hectare south-facing sloping block which is planted out with different clones of Chardonnay on meticulously matched rootstocks. It's a true 'clos', but even as protected as it is from the harsh cold northern winds by an ancient brick wall, this year's excellent vintage is expected to be even smaller than usual because of winter frost damage, a constant hazard in these parts.

But, like man, the vine has a strong survival instinct and tends to adapt itself to the conditions in which it finds itself. And, as it happens, a vinous Jules Verne like odyssey around vineyards nowadays takes you places never imagined before: even Belgium!

Belgium's young vineyards are amongst the most northerly in the world. It's the warmer temperatures, especially at the time of harvest, in the last ten years or so that have made for happier winemakers, here. In this part of Europe, the last decade has seen a series of excellent vintages.

German winemakers have shared the same sentiment with me. The whites and some reds of producers of the Rhine and Mosel valleys I've tasted on this trip are possibly some of the best - and most alcoholic - wines they have ever made.



'Clos' per se

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The same is true for some of France's cooler regions, especially Champagne which soon may be rivalled by Sussex Sparkling (if British winegrowers finally get well deserved support). Today, England and Wales - with late spring freezes banished, and long warm summers the rule - are home to more than 400 wineries. Even Sweden has patches of land under vine! The extent of viticulture has moved to the planet's frigid zones.

With average temperatures rising, vigneron like Peter Colemont are now much more certain of producing ripe grapes for quality wine every year than they were ten years ago here, in Belgium, and Holland and Luxembourg.

have also learned not to give in to common parochial or insular scepticism which too often stands in the way of the enjoyment of a good home-grown glass. Yes, I love his hand-crafted Belgian Chardonnay which is unusually fat and delicate, and not in the least because it renews all I once believed this place could ever offer.

However, I can't but help thinking that without the effects of climate change and global warming, all rather daunting and worrying phenomena really, the vines at Clos d'Opleeuw would not be here today. As I bid Peter farewell and pack up, I ponder what the future of wine can be: here in Belgium, in sunny Malta, or anywhere on this planet for that matter?

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Belgian Winemaker Peter Colemont

I left this region 20 years ago for sunny Malta. I still remember it for its fruit trees rising up against a horizon of greyness and pit heads towering over coal mine shafts. All that is at changing: the ugly mine region has been transformed to an agri-tourist's paradise complete with pockets of carefully tended parcels of vineyards.

Peter stayed put. As I taste his Chardonnay again, and again, I instinctively disregard his claims of supporting green, sustainable agriculture, his use of natural yeasts etc., True, villagers here have a tendency to mistrust each other. Meanwhile, though, I

I have no crystal ball and staring in it might not be the best way to predict the future of wine, anyway. But, one thing is clear: everywhere I go it's being shaped by passionate, visionary people making the most of whatever Mother Nature throws at them.

The world of wine is changing at speed, but maybe not as fast as some people fear.

Georges Meekers hails from Belgium but now resides In Malta. He is a member of the Circle of Wine Writers and can be contacted through his independent website www.winesofmalta.com