

# Hubert de Montille

## 1930-2014

THE CHARISMATIC BURGUNDIAN terroirist Hubert de Montille died on Saturday, 1 November 2014, at the dining table with family, close friends and a glass of Pommard Rugiens 1999 in hand. As Bertrand de Villaine told me several days later in the cellar of the Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, 'He had everything he needed in place for it to be the right moment.'

Quick to smile – and to argue – Hubert de Montille was a tour de force in Burgundy. As Dominique Lafon of Domaine des Comtes Lafon said, Hubert's capacity for a good argument, especially about wine, made him unforgettable.

Born into a family domaine that can trace its origins to the 1750s, pre-dating the French Revolution, he was thrust into winemaking in his late teens following his father's death. Hubert's uncle helped him with his first vintage, but was called to his wife's bedside while she was giving birth. Hubert was left to fend for himself in the notoriously hot, post-war vintage of 1947.

Stuck with grapes he worried were too warm to ferment without baking them, Hubert left them to cool in the courtyard overnight. What might have seemed like a hazard at the time proved to be a good gut instinct. Today, winemakers around the world harvest at night or cool their grapes before processing. Shortly after, Hubert's mother proposed that she sell the family home and vineyards to give him an education. Hubert refused.

### Rebuilding the domaine

What had been a grand domaine with holdings in the Côte de Nuits as well as the Côte de Beaune had been whittled down to just three hectares when he inherited it. Hubert de Montille became an attorney, as had many other de Montilles before him. Barrister in Dijon during the week and vigneron over the weekend, he more than saved the family domaine, growing it to its current 20ha and elevating its reputation.

De Montille's accomplishments were made with the support of his wife Christiane. His earnings as a barrister helped to fund the restoration of the domaine's holdings, but it was also made possible by the generosity of Christiane's family in the Jura. Bit by bit, the domaine's holdings were reconstructed.

Like most vigneron of the time, De Montille's attention was long centred on vineyards he could see from his front door, and he didn't gaze north to the treasures of the Côte de Nuits that the family had once owned. This exclusive focus on the Côte de Beaune, and on red wine, lasted until the early 1990s, when he bought a parcel of Puligny-Montrachet's Le Cailleret premier cru. Working with his son Etienne (also an attorney), De Montille also eventually acquired many prestigious parcels in the Côte de Nuits.

He had not, however, set out to become known for his wines. Preferring lower-alcohol wines, he made wines that suited his own tastes and bottled them at the domaine, rather than selling them to négociants. His inclination towards lower-alcohol wines resulted from a miscalculation in chaptalisation in the late 1950s. De Montille under-chaptalised. No matter. The wines became legendary and long-lived. He also favoured perfume over colour. While many domaines flirt with whole-cluster



*'He celebrated wine that showed its origins, whether it hailed from a prestigious or an unknown terroir'*

fermentation on their Pinot Noirs today, De Montille always used whole clusters – and a high proportion, too. Using grape cluster stems accentuates perfume but absorbs colour. Overall, his wines were infamously tough early on, yet they aged beautifully.

### Passionate about terroir

De Montille embraced his Burgundian homeland and its wine culture. He celebrated wine that showed its origins, whether it hailed from a prestigious or an unknown terroir. Wine was one of the best ways to share life, and De Montille was never shy in front of a glass. But wine was always a social event and never a trophy.

Other than those who drink his wines and know Burgundy intimately, De Montille is surely best known to many wine lovers through the lens of Jonathan Nossiter's controversial film *Mondovino*. Stalwart and punchy with characteristic vim and vigour, De Montille earnestly and convincingly argued his philosophy of terroir, purity and elegance.

Off-screen he never changed character. He clashed with a wine critic or two, including some high-profile Americans. He had a zero-tolerance policy for extracted, oaky wines that in his eyes diminished Burgundy's precious climats.

Hubert de Montille is survived by his children Isabelle, Etienne and Alix, three grandchildren – and many great bottles of his wines. At services held in Beaune following his death, Burgundy and Burgundy wine lovers mourned the loss of one of their most cherished personalities, then lifted glasses to celebrate his fight for the heritage of the region. **D**

Christy Canterbury MW

Photograph: Clay McLachlan/claypix.com