

By Julie Ihle

# Wine of gods and emperors

*Julie Ihle takes a visit to the city of Beaune in Burgundy – home of the god of wine. Here, she tastes wine fit for an emperor in a candlelit cave and discovers the beauties of Beaune above ground, too.*

**N**apoleon and I like the same wine: a Grand Cru Pinot Noir called “Chambertin”. Intense, fruity and perfumed, with a long finish, our favourite wine is available for tasting at the Marché Aux Vins in Beaune, Burgundy, in a series of candlelit underground tunnels and caves.

As I walk into the Marché Aux Vins, it occurs to me that only in France could you go on a self-guided wine tasting tour in semi-darkness, tasting anything from *vin ordinaire* to Premier Cru.

Beaune, a two-hour train trip south of Paris, is a city obsessed with wine. Even the name Beaune is thought to be a corruption of the ancient god of wine, Belenos.

The Marché Aux Vins is located in a former Franciscan church in the heart of the city. For €10 we are issued a tasting menu and a *tastevin* – a small silvery ladle with a tiny handle. As usual in France, tradition runs deep. The *tastevin* is a replica of the one the monks used to taste the mass wine.

Armed with our *tastevin* and wine menu, we walk gingerly down the shadowy spiral staircase deep into the caves. Lining the walls are dusty bottles of wine aging gracefully by candlelight. In the centre of the room are upended barrels with candles and wine bottles.

The layout for tasting is simple: 12 wines are spread throughout the vast cellar on upended barrels. At each barrel is a choice of Pinot Noir or Chardonnay of roughly the same quality.

In Burgundy, wines are graded into four different types or appellations: Regional Appellations, Village Appellations, Premier Cru and Grand Cru. The wine available for tasting at the Marché Aux Vins spans all these appellations, but for the most part it falls into a price range I would happily pay in Australia for a nice bottle to take to a restaurant – the equivalent of AU\$20-\$25.

We are the only customers here and it feels a little spooky in these candlelit caves. At first, it's like a cross between being in a horror film and being a kid left in charge of a lolly shop. Gradually, however, I recover my self-control and the refined French manner of tasting wine takes hold. I find myself savouring the taste.

**...only in France could you go on a self-guided wine tasting tour in semi-darkness...**

Every so often, Lucas, one of the sommeliers, does the rounds and we chat about wine. I'm pleased to find that he is very knowledgeable and complimentary about Australian wines.

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After a spot of wine tasting, wander around Beaune



Candlelit reception hall

Lining the walls are dusty bottles of wine aging gracefully by candlelight.





An old Franciscan church is the site of the winetasting



Cycle the Route des Grand Crus

At the end of our twelve tastings we come to an airy candlelit reception hall, with plenty of information (in English) about the wines.

The winemaking tradition is steeped in protocol. It was once controlled by the church; the Franciscan monks, known as Cordeliers (because of the rope-like cord they wore around their waists) used to be the font of winemaking knowledge because they cultivated vines for mass wine. After the French Revolution, the people seized the vineyards and today Burgundy's wine production is tightly controlled by a local wine body.

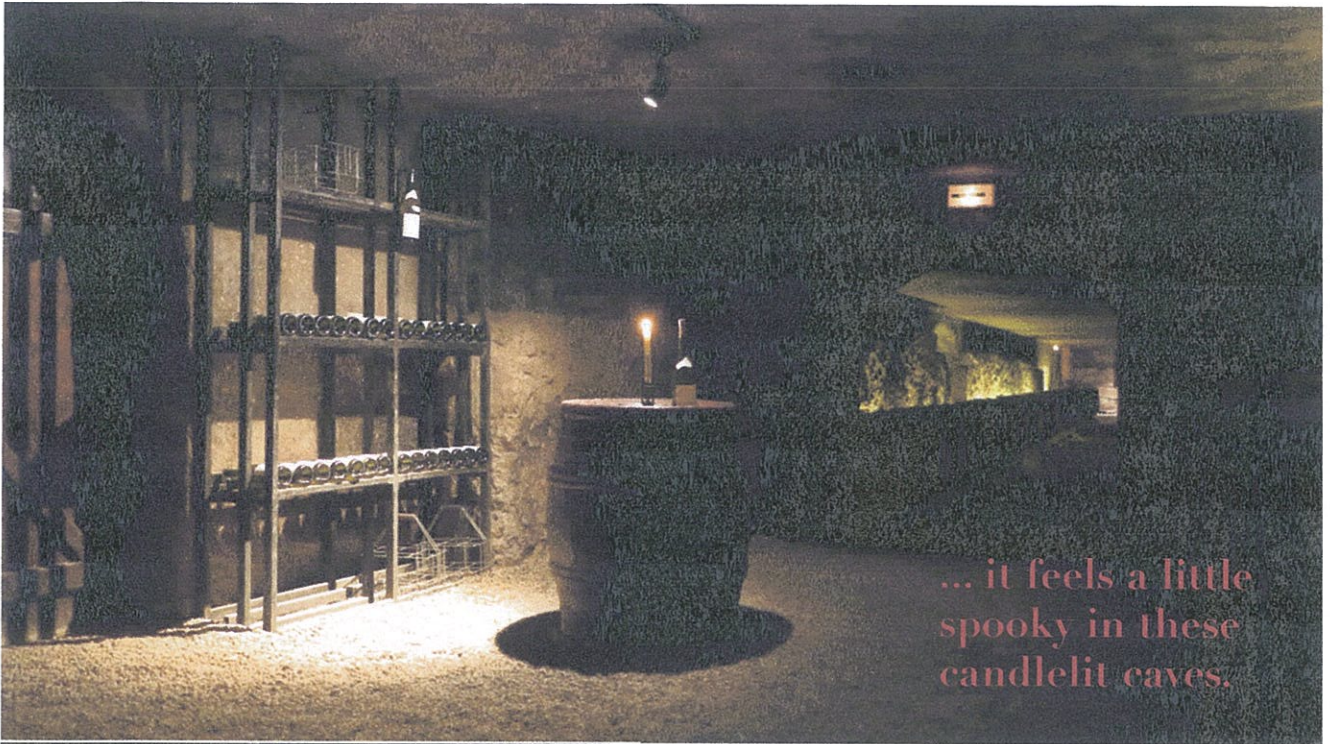
The local body controls the naming of wines and the blending rules (for the most part, blending is not permitted in Burgundy). The Premier Cru and Grand Cru labels are only granted if a wine has come from a particular field or *côte*. Burgundy has the distinction of having some of the most expensive fields in the world and prices have even been put on particular vine rows.

Sommelier Lucas rejoins us in the reception hall. He explains that Burgundy is a small producer but punches above its weight. Bordeaux and Rhône are much bigger, but they lack the personalised hands-on service that Burgundy offers. "We want you to come and visit us and taste our wines at the source to help you find out what you like," he says.

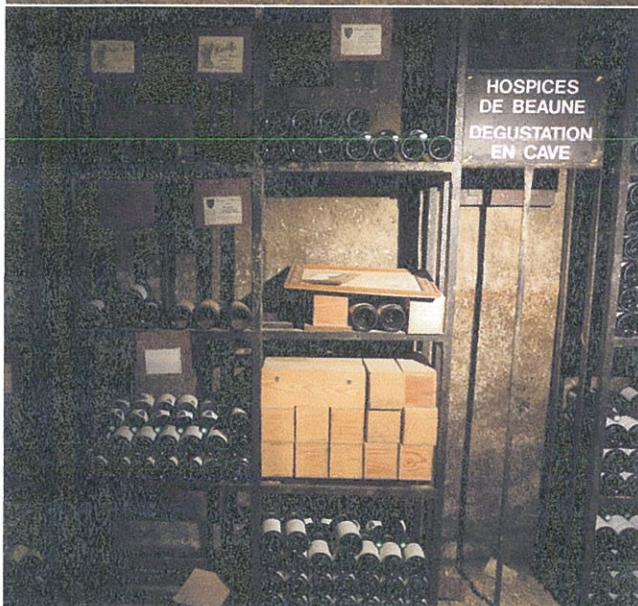
Photographs by Julie Ihle

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... it feels a little spooky in these candlelit caves.



And I'm so glad I did. Not only have I tasted wine fit for an emperor, I've also had the chance to visit Beaune, which is one of the loveliest towns in France.

Opposite the Marché Aux Vins is the Hospices de Beaune dating from 1443. This Gothic masterpiece is famous for being one of the few medieval hospitals built specifically for the poor, but on a grand budget. The founder, Nicolas Rolin, chancellor to Phillip the Good, didn't think the poor should receive a lower standard of care or be deprived of gardens for recuperation. Today, the Hospices are a museum – one of Beaune's most popular tourist attractions, with a grand Gothic hall and roof in the Burgundian tradition of coloured tiles. The medieval pharmacy, with its collection of pewter and earthenware, is a fascinating glimpse into a different age.

Thankfully, Beaune was spared in the nick of time during WWII so its beautiful churches and mansions remain intact. Always a wealthy city, due to wine and textiles, its merchant homes have been turned into cellars, where more tasting can be had for a nominal charge.

If your legs are wobbly after a round of wine tasting, there is a tourist "train" which takes in the town's main sites. There are also walking tours, but one of the best ways to explore the place is to gad about by bike. Local authorities have invested heavily in bike infrastructure and many bike trails lead from Beaune to other parts of Burgundy. The best one is the Green Trail, a 30km jaunt into the heart of Côté de Beaune.

Beaune and the surrounding countryside ooze the good life. I don't know what Napoleon would have made of the lack of revolutionary zeal here, though – the revolution had virtually no affect in Beaune. After a few days, I can see why. Beautiful countryside, wine and food ... some things should never change. **FP**

The Marché Aux Vins is open every day from 9.00am to 11.30am and from 2.00pm to 5.30pm. During July and August it is open continuously.

Unguided visits and tasting of a large range of Burgundy wines including a complimentary souvenir "tastevin" is 10.00€ per person. No booking required.

For further information, visit:  
[www.marcheauxvins.com](http://www.marcheauxvins.com)

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