

# The winemakers' winemakers

What greater accolade can there be than being judged best in the world by your peers? We asked leading winemakers around the world which three of their peers they most admired. The criteria were that they could be making wine in any part of the world but must have made at least 10 vintages and must still be making wine today. They could be working at a winery or as a consultant. When we number-crunched the 133 responses, these were the names that came out top

## The winemaker today



THERE CAN BE no doubt that winemakers, flying and not, have had an immense and largely positive impact on how wine tastes today.

Thanks to their training and experience, drinking flawed or unpleasant efforts is rare:

gone are the days of white wines oxidised soon after bottling or barely palatable, rustic reds.

Over the past 30 years, winemakers have become pivotal, thanks to skills ranging from a superior sense of taste and smell honed by years of experience and travels, to specific knowledge about one grape variety or terroir. For example, among the top 15 winemakers profiled here, Michel Rolland is famous for his skill at blending, Attilio Pagli is universally regarded as a Malbec expert, and perhaps nobody knows and understands Bordeaux's Left Bank terroirs better than Eric Boissenot.

In fact, the winemaker's role has evolved to encompass not only making the wines but everything from the growing of vines – many of today's most famous winemakers are also trained in viticulture – to their distribution, and acting as ambassadors for their estates.

Though the best have moved towards a 'less-is-more approach' in the cellar, they keep abreast of the latest advances in technology so as to work with the best possible grapes and make the best possible wines. Satellite imaging (to study characteristics of single parcels of vines), high-tech irrigation, integrated pest

control (to reduce the need for herbicides and pesticides), use of selected yeast or wild yeasts (so-called 'natural' ferments), reduction of total alcohol levels in wines (by use of reverse osmosis or spinning cones) and selecting specific coopers and oak varieties in which to age the wines are all part of a good modern-day winemaker's armoury.

### A fine balance

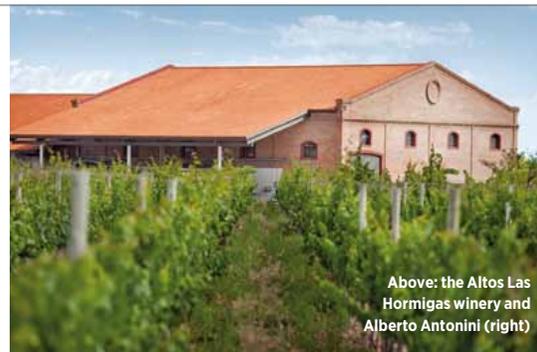
However, those very strengths can become a problem. Far too many wines nowadays taste more or less the same, no matter where they are made. Is that really desirable, even if the wines 'taste good'? I don't think so. Using cultured yeasts (naturally occurring ones are often characterised by less predictable behaviours) can also lead to standardised wines, all showcasing the same perceived desirable traits. For example, should all Fianos, Vermentinos or Albariños really taste of banana and the same tropical fruit?

Clearly estate owners should resist the temptation of delegating total control to the winemaker, and ask tough questions. But wine writers also need to do a better job, and become more knowledgeable about their subject.

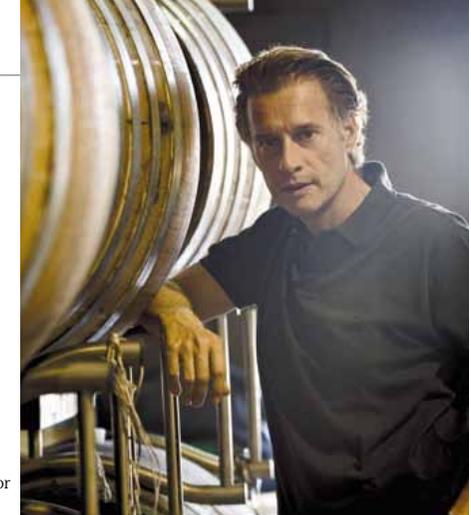
Ultimately, the greatest winemakers (including this top 15) don't just pay lip service to the philosophy that 'great wines start in the vineyard', but truly work to achieve that. Sometimes just playing the cards you have been dealt is the right thing to do.

*Ian D'Agata is an awarded wine journalist and author and a regular Decanter contributor*

*'The greatest winemakers don't just pay lip service to the philosophy that 'great wines start in the vineyard', but truly work to achieve that'*



Above: the Altos Las Hormigas winery and Alberto Antonini (right)



## The top five

(in alphabetical order)

### Alberto Antonini

As part of the consulting work Antonini does around the world, in 2010 he was offered a job in the region of Yeghegnadzor, Armenia. In their first conversation, the producer told him he wanted a 'modern' wine. Antonini, his voice calm, his manner zen-like, replied that if what he meant was a wine from local grapes and fermented in amphorae, like the wines made 6,000 years ago in Yeghegnadzor, then that was the 'modern' wine he needed. 'The wine of the future will be the wine of the past,' says Antonini. And that's the vision that, even after a 30-year career, sparks this Italian winemaker's excitement – the idea of returning to absolute simplicity in order to achieve the best possible interpretation of where wines are born.

But that wasn't always his goal. Antonini today advises wineries in places as diverse as Maldonado on the Uruguayan coast, or Caltanissetta on the island of Sicily. But it all started in Florence, where he graduated in oenology and viticulture in 1985. His first job was as an assistant winemaker at Frescobaldi, and then he became technical manager at remarkable Tuscan wineries like Col d'Orcia and Antinori. In 1997, however, he decided to work as a consultant, and it was then that his influence began to be felt.

Many of his clients are in Italy and he has his own winery, Poggiotondo, in Tuscany, where he lives when not travelling. But his influence is the strongest in South America, where he arrived in 1995. In Argentina, together with winemaker Attilio Pagli (see p37) and his friend Antonio Morescalchi, he founded Altos Las Hormigas, in 1996.

At that time Merlot and Cabernet were the stars. Bucking the trend, Antonini set his sights on Malbec, and the partners agreed that the project would revolve around it. The winery was successful, especially in the US,

and was an example for other Argentinian producers. The fashion

at the time, however, was for super-ripe and sweet wines, where it was very difficult to identify either any sense of place or tradition. While it would be unfair to say that the wines from Altos Las Hormigas were an example of this, they did exhibit some of these characteristics.

About seven years ago, Antonini says he realised that the path was not selling a grape, but a place. 'The idea was to forget the Bordeaux formula, responsible for the global colonisation of most wine regions of the world, with its strong standardisation of varieties and wine styles,' says Antonini. Through him, Altos Las Hormigas has been one of the leaders in the transformation of Malbec, reducing the excess of oak and overripeness, and focusing efforts on showing the site before the grape.

In Chile, his presence is also evident. He advises at Concha y Toro, Montgras, Viña Leyda and Luis Felipe Edwards among others. His style, not at all pompous, hides the influence he has here, but without doubt his expertise has helped to guide some of the most important Chilean winemakers, and his vision has helped to change the wine in this country as well as more widely in South America.

**Patricio Tapia**

*'Having worked with Alberto for almost 15 years at Concha y Toro, there's no question in my mind that he's a great and remarkable winemaker. His knowledge, understanding and expertise is extraordinary. However, what always impresses me most about him is his respect for authenticity and quality.'* **Marcelo Papa, Concha y Toro**

*'I've known Alberto for more than 15 years. I first met him at Gruppo Matura, Italy's top consulting team. Since then his international experience has made him one of the world's most admired and influential winemakers. For me, the secret of his success is that he is traditional with a modern approach.'* **Emiliano Falsini, consultant** >

## Top 30

(in alphabetical order)

- Alberto Antonini
- Lalou Bize-Leroy
- Eric Boissenot
- Jean-Louis Chave
- Stéphane Derenoncourt
- Aubert de Villaine
- Helmut Dönnhoff
- Paul Draper
- Alvaro Espinoza
- Richard Geoffroy
- Nadine Gublin
- Marcel Guigal
- Paul Hobbs
- Olivier Humbrecht
- Frédéric Lafarge
- Dominique Lafon
- Zelma Long
- François Millet
- Egon Müller
- Attilio Pagli
- Alvaro Palacios
- Mariano di Paola
- Paul Pontallier
- Ignacio Recabarren
- Marcelo Retamal
- Jorge Riccitelli
- Michel Rolland
- Christophe Roumier
- Eric Rousseau
- Alejandro Vigil



## Aubert de Villaine

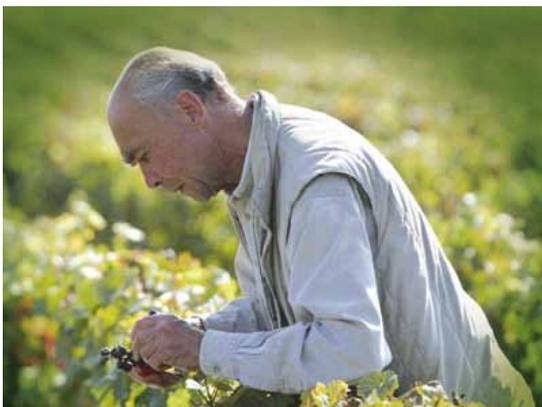
The co-owner and general manager of the Domaine de la Romanée-Conti is lauded worldwide for his modesty and self-effacing character. And it's true that he always insists he is a mere caretaker of this magnificent estate. He is also involved in other worthwhile projects, such as safeguarding the ruinous monastery of St-Vivant and preserving the world's finest massal selections of Pinot Noir.

But to portray Aubert de Villaine as a saintly character or a mere custodian is misleading, and one that would make him wince. He is a highly active head of the domaine, travelling frequently to host tastings and events that enhance the appreciation of DRC and its wines. He is far from complacent and works constantly to improve quality.

It has taken him many years of assessment and contemplation, but he has now converted the entire domaine to biodynamic farming. He paid close attention to tractor technology so as to equip it with machinery that would cause the least compaction to its infinitely precious soils. And he always gives the greatest possible credit for the wines' stellar quality to his long-term cellar master Bernard Noblet.

He began his career modestly, first working for importer Frederick Wildman in New York. When he returned to Vosne-Romanée in 1964 it was to work as an apprentice: pruning, driving tractors and sweeping the courtyard. He learned about the domaine and its wines from the ground up. In 1974 he became co-director of DRC with Lalou Bize-Leroy. Despite his modest manner, he must have had a strong will to have weathered the long dispute with her that led to her ousting in 1992.

He also has his own domaine in the modest village of Bouzeron in the Côte Chalonnaise, as it was all that he could afford when he and his American wife were looking for a property in the early 1970s. And there's a joint venture in California with Carneros grower (and brother-in-law) Larry Hyde: Hyde-De Villaine. Inevitably DRC remains his main focus, and few would deny that he has maintained the very highest standards, if only because of his



fundamental belief that the wines should be worthy of the domaine's incomparable vineyards. **Stephen Brook**

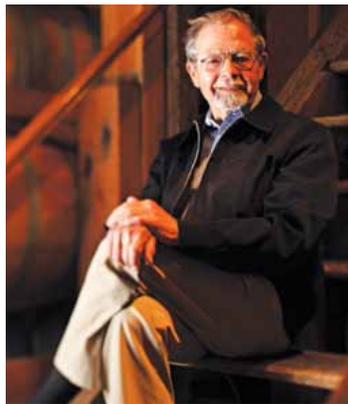
*'Why did I vote for Aubert de Villaine? Firstly, because he (and his forebears) seem to have got everything perfect. Secondly, having tried many of his wines, they are immaculately constructed, typically Burgundian and layered with another whole level of soil and geology expression.'*

**Chester Osborn, D'Arenberg**

*'What I most admire about Aubert de Villaine is his humility, knowledge, dedication and respect for the source of his wines – the vineyard! It is his thoughtful and careful approach with all aspects of growing grapes and making wine which has made me question what our wines really need to be: that is, an authentic and clear expression of where they come from.'* **Tom Carson, Yabby Lake**

*'Aubert has run DRC for many years and continues to represent absolute the benchmark of quality, clearly showing each appellation or climat through the sheer elegance of his wines. Despite being at such a level of excellence, he also remains a very humble, simple person who is always open to his colleagues. So it is always a lesson to spend time with him.'* **Dominique Lafon, Comtes Lafon**

**Above: Aubert de Villaine and (top) the entrance gates to Domaine de la Romanée-Conti**



Photograph: Clay McLachlan/claypix.com

## Paul Draper

On a spring day in California, the faithful packed an old barn at Ridge Vineyards' winery, 760m up in the Santa Cruz Mountains south of San Francisco. They had come to taste the latest vintage of Ridge's Cabernet-driven Monte Bello – the 'primeur' tasting, as CEO Paul Draper, ever the Bordeaux loyalist, calls it.

This was more than a tasting. It was a signal of the intense loyalty that Draper has built over 45 vintages working on this mountain. And not just among his customers. Both his wines and his willingness to be outspoken have made Draper a beloved figure among fellow winemakers – including many who prefer a far more bombastic style of wine.

Perhaps that's because Draper, an Illinois native who came to California via work in Chile, never took an obvious path in his career. He taught himself winemaking by reading 19th-century texts, which ultimately led to him devising a minimalist approach in the Ridge cellars: native yeasts, moderate extractions, an insistence on American rather than French oak. That approach yielded a half-century's worth of iconic American wines: not just Monte Bello but also the Zinfandel-based twins Geyserville and Lytton Springs.

All along, Draper's work has been beyond reproach, even when Monte Bello was the antithesis of Californian style: about 13% alcohol as many Cabernets soared toward 16%.

Draper might be even more popular among his Old World counterparts. He recalls a winemaker from a Bordeaux second growth tagging along with one of his lieutenants to a cork supplier. The visitor was astounded when they hydrated, then sniffed, several thousand corks to check for taint.

At the same time, he has remained at a distance from the industry, living on the same mountaintop – just a quick walk from the Monte Bello crushpad – for nearly 50 years. Yet Draper is anything but isolated. In recent



**Left: Paul Draper and (above) the Monte Bello vineyard**

years he has become more outspoken about the need for what he calls a 'pre-industrial' approach in the cellar, eschewing additives.

To stand firm behind this approach, he became perhaps the industry's most vocal proponent of ingredient labelling. Each Ridge label lists not just the bottle contents (grapes and a bit of sulphur dioxide) but also little-discussed winemaking processes, such as the use of calcium carbonate to lower acidity. This is seemingly less full disclosure – Ridge wines always had detailed winemaking notes on the label – than it is Draper quietly shaming more technically minded winemakers.

That iconoclasm has brought him even more respect, specifically because his views are so unshinting. He sees something transformative in great wines; they're meditations on a place and time, and should be treated with the utmost respect. It's a view most winemakers espouse, but few live up to. **Jon Bonnè**

*'Draper taught himself winemaking by reading 19th-century texts, which ultimately led to him devising a minimalist approach in the Ridge cellars'*

*'Everything I aspire to in my own winemaking seems to have been practised forever by Paul Draper at Ridge. For instance, he has a respect for individual sites with an intimate knowledge of the land. Moreover, Paul has never pandered to fashion. But happily, the classic, more reserved style of Ridge is once again fashionable. And as a result, more and more producers are making wines of elegance and of the land, not of the winery.'* **Gordon Russell, Esk Valley Estate**

*'Paul is foremost brilliantly steadfast in his vision and pursuit of excellence. Secondly, he is not conservative, dogmatically traditional or even Francophile. Instead, he was always inquisitive in the extreme, experimental at the risk of embarrassment and inspired by great European classics. To me, Paul's work with Monte Bello is one of California's finest examples of success and continuity.'* **Tony Soter, Soter Vineyards**

*'Paul has been a beacon for the importance of single-vineyard sites, sustainable grape growing, selective 'natural' winemaking practice and the diversity of wine styles. He is also a great human being.'* **Peter Gago, Penfolds** ➤

## Michel Rolland

There are few winemakers or consultants whose name is as familiar to non-experts as Michel Rolland.

Countless winemakers and château owners have attested to his instinctive feeling for what makes a wine come alive, to his great skill in blending and his faultless memory for the different vats and barrels and how to bring the best out of them.

Born in Pomerol in 1947, Rolland grew up at Château Le Bon Pasteur, also in Pomerol, and studied at the Bordeaux Oenology Institute under winemaking greats such as Pascal Ribéreau Gayon and Emile Pénaud. After graduation, he went on to set up a laboratory with his wife Dany Rolland in 1972 (they met while studying at the institute).

With their fledgling business just getting on its feet, they soon found that Rolland's real gift was in translating the sometimes complicated oenological ideas to their clients out in the vineyards and châteaux, and he became the face of the partnership.

Today Rolland owns six estates, and has joint-venture partnerships in Spain, Argentina and South Africa, while continuing to consult for countless properties around the world for clients as diverse as Château Ausone in St-Emilion, Harlan Estate in Napa and Tenuta dell'Ornellaia in Tuscany. This alone should demonstrate that there is not simply 'one style' of Rolland wine, as is sometimes suggested.

Even so, he clearly has not lost his touch (or possibly appetite) for controversy. When asked about the reaction to his appointment to the ultra-traditional Château Figeac in St-Emilion, he said: 'People will always talk and always



**Above: Michel Rolland and (below) Château Le Bon Pasteur**

have their own opinion. We will concentrate on making wine.' **Jane Anson**

*'Michel Rolland's influence and impact is huge in Bordeaux and around the world. But what a lot of people probably don't know is that Rolland isn't just a brilliant winemaker he's also a master of viticulture.'* **Stephen Carrier, Château de Fieuzal**

*'Having worked with him for five years in Chile, Michel Rolland gave me a renewed vision of winemaking. Michel has the technical ability to do things that others can't. However, if I had to pick his greatest single talent, it is his skill at blending.'* **Aurelio Montes, Montes Wines** >



Photographs: Philippe Roy

*'From Bourgogne rouge to the estate's grand crus, Roumier is known for a style marked by finesse and purity'*

**Christophe Roumier**

Visitors to Domaine Georges Roumier covet a taste of Musigny Grand Cru, but only a minuscule quantity is made. So, it is arguably Christophe Roumier's Chambolle-Musigny premier cru, Les Amoureuses, that achieves the highest profile at his demure domaine in a back corner of this appellation.

Whatever the wine, from Bourgogne rouge to the estate's grand crus such as Bonnes Mares and Ruchottes-Chambertin, Roumier is known for a style marked by finesse and purity. The wines are sometimes firm early on, but they deliver the ageability that Burgundy lovers crave.

One reason for this is that Roumier knows his vines – mostly very old – very well. He has made wine only at his family's domaine. Yet his potential influence on the wine world was initially unclear. His father was not interested in working with him, and Roumier was drawn to science.

Eventually, this led him to the study of vinification. Previously, he knew nothing of the scientific side of the cellar. Roumier became fascinated with the process of fermentation, the composition of wine and the process of wine's evolution.

Though not an easy relationship, Roumier joined his father in 1981. He produced his first 'real' vintage – where he called the shots – in 1984, though his father remained on board until 1990.

**Left: Christophe Roumier and (below) bottles of his Les Amoureuses 1er Cru, Chambolle-Musigny**

Roumier drew inspiration from his father and grandfather. His grandfather Georges' wines are particularly eye-opening – showing purity and incredible freshness even 60 years on. He looked to other great winemakers, too, seeking inspiration not only from their techniques but also from their philosophies on crafting great, ageworthy Burgundies. Roumier met Henri Jayer in 1980, before he was well-known, and met Jacques d'Angerville at around the same time. Jacques Seysses of Domaine Dujac, with his belief in the use of whole-cluster berries, also influenced him.

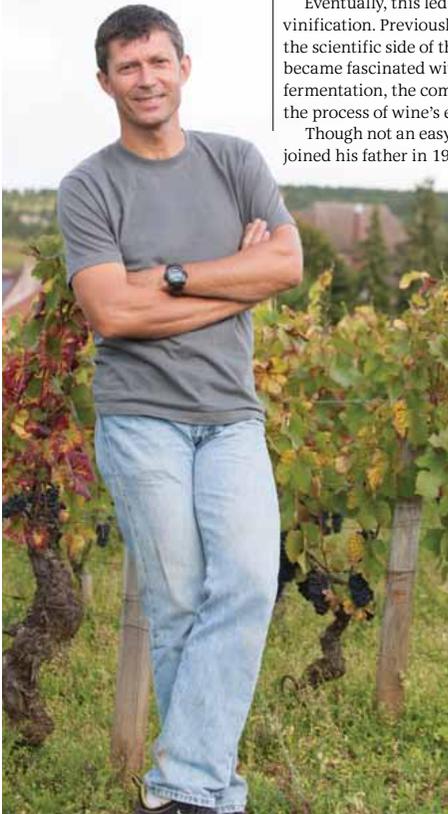
Nonetheless, Roumier's initial work at the domaine focused on changes in the vineyard: monitoring vine vigour, limiting production, improving grape health, abandoning chemicals and harvesting later. The resulting fruit led to adaptations in the winery. The refinement of many small details at every stage led to a new level of greatness in every bottle.

The story seems deceptively simple. However, it is painstakingly accumulated inspiration, intuition and introspection – along with the blessing of brilliant family vineyards – that has led Roumier to inspire so many of the world's best winemakers today.

**Christy Canterbury MW**

*'In a region with so many extraordinary sites, Christophe Roumier defines, for me, the extent to which an individual can elevate an already famous terroir. His quiet thoughtfulness and relentless drive for quality have always impressed me. He is the epitome of dedication.'* **Anthony Hamilton Russell, Hamilton-Russell Vineyards**

*'Never over-extracted or lean, Christophe's wines are pure pleasure; balanced, elegant and true to their origins. He is an extraordinary talent who makes wine with great feeling and real common sense.'* **Véronique Drouhin, Maison Joseph Drouhin >**



Photograph: Michel Joly

## The next 10 (in alphabetical order)

Photograph: Jean-Bernard Nadeau



### Eric Boissenot

Referred to as the least-known most influential man in wine, Boissenot consults at two-thirds of the Médoc's 1855 classed growths, with rare ventures out to Pessac-Léognan, the Right Bank and even Greece. But he is most at home in the Médoc, where he was born and, as a child, helped his father Jacques at their own small château.

After school, he followed in his father's footsteps to the Bordeaux Institute of Oenology before joining him in their laboratory in 1990 – now only his after Jacques' death in 2014. Among Boissenot's clients are four of the five first growths, but he works with hundreds of Médoc properties,

including small châteaux and modest crus bourgeois. His clients say he can read Cabernet Sauvignon and the contours of the Médoc like no one else (he says 'the exceptional parts of the Médoc are not as numerous as they once were, and those that remain are genuine treasures').

Boissenot puts the emphasis on letting terroir, grape and vintage speak. His trademarks include early blending, to give the wine time over ageing to become 'whole', an obsessive approach to press wine, which he believes is essential to backbone and ageing ability, and techniques to minimise potential bacterial issues. **JA**

*'Eric is among the most technical and talented winemakers I know. He respects the spirit of an estate while always improving quality.'*

**Sandrine Garbay, Château d'Yquem**

*'Eric is modest and understated. At the same time, he is incredibly knowledgeable and has the rare ability to make complicated things simple to grasp.'* **Jean-Charles Cazes, Château Lynch-Bages**

### Stéphane Derenoncourt

The self-taught Derenoncourt is well respected for his work in the vineyards and his grass-roots approach to winemaking. At his own estate of Domaine de l'A in Castillon-Côtes de Bordeaux, and with most of his clients, he is a big proponent of organic and biodynamic viticulture because 'no other method is so able to meet the demands of a terroir in order to express its essence'.

His approach is more Burgundian than Bordelais – you're more likely to find special cuvées from single plots in Derenoncourt estates than you would find typically in Bordeaux, where blending across a large vineyard is the norm. You are also more likely to see late blending after ageing in barrels.

Derenoncourt learned winemaking on the job – he was a vineyard hand at 19 years old, before becoming cellarmaster at Château Pavie-Macquin. When he left to create his consultancy in 1999, Pavie-Macquin became his first client. Today Derenoncourt has 90 clients across France, Europe, the US, Lebanon and India, but is still renowned for starting all jobs by mapping the plots of vines, ranking them and working out what each one can bring to the wine. **JA**

*'I worked with Stéphane in St-Emilion, and got to appreciate his respect for terroir and his intuitive approach. He taught me that you need to stay close to the wine and always keep your hands dirty.'* **Andrea Leon, Casa Lapostolle**



### Helmut Dönnhoff

No German winemaker would be surprised to learn that Dönnhoff had been elected among the best of the bunch. This is impressive not least because he is a quiet man, with a humble manner. The wines are like him: restrained, nothing flashy; he is the ultimate safe pair of hands.

Dubbed the 'Dalai Lama of the Nahe' by *Gault Millau*, Germany's top wine guide, Dönnhoff comes from a long line of viticulturists. The family has made wine in the Nahe for over 250 years. In recent years the region has performed better than any other, and Dönnhoff is blessed with some of its most interesting soils. Like most great winemakers, he insists



that the soil should speak through the wine. He is only the interpreter.

Dönnhoff is admired by his peers for pursuing not power but elegance. Each one of his wines is given leave to find its own perfect balance and optimum level of ripeness. His wines

are mostly dry, but he does not eschew traditional sweet wines.

All his wines are great, and despite the relatively large size (by German standards) of his estate – some 25 hectares, across nine sites – everything he bottles is considered and allowed to strive for different goals. Dönnhoff has never been tempted to extract too much from his raw material. The grapes and vineyards make their demands on him, not vice versa. **Giles MacDonogh**

*'There are few winemakers with Helmut's creativity, knowledge and wisdom. He also disregards fashion and fads. Plus he makes great wine!'* **Jeffrey Grosset, Grosset Wines**

## Paul Hobbs



The charismatic Hobbs comes from a farming background in upstate New York. His first serious job was for Robert Mondavi, and he later worked at Opus One and Simi in Sonoma's Alexander Valley.

Hobbs established his own winery in 1991, focusing on classic varieties: Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Syrah from Sonoma, and Napa Cabernet.

One of the first international winemakers to take a serious interest in Mendoza, he founded Viña Cobos in 1999, quickly realising the potential of Mendoza's sub-regions.

In both Argentina and California Hobbs initially favoured a full-blown style, at least for top wines: heavily oaked, often super-ripe and high in alcohol. But the style has been reined in over recent years. He admits that US critic Robert Parker played a large part in his choice, since that rich style was what consumers wanted, at least in the US. Today he seeks to make wines with greater finesse.

Somehow he finds time to pursue new projects, such as establishing a winery in Armenia, and planting a vineyard in New York State's Finger Lakes. It's hard to see Hobbs as a Riesling fan, but that is precisely what he wants to produce, in a joint venture with Johannes Selbach of the Selbach-Oster estate in the Mosel. **SB**

*'Before meeting Paul I was convinced it didn't matter what kind of fruit I had. I thought that with technical winemaking I could drive the wine wherever I wanted. He consulted for us for 10 years and taught me simplicity. It's about the fruit and the right picking moment – that's it. From there the only thing you can do as winemaker is try not to screw up.'*

**Santiago Margozzini, MontGras**

## Dominique Lafon

Lafon often seems to be frowning, and I used to think it was grumpiness or a shortage of cigarettes. But it's actually perfectionism, and frustration when one of his wines doesn't meet his high expectations. Lafon is one of the world's finest producers of dry white wine – some would say the unrivalled best – and that reputation carries responsibilities.

As a young man he had strained relations with his father René, and it wasn't until 1987 that he took over at the domaine, which owns land in most of Meursault's top terroirs. In 1998 Lafon converted the domaine to biodynamism, though at first hesitated to admit this in case people thought he was jumping on to a bandwagon just because it was fashionable.

Being a top winemaker in Burgundy has its drawbacks. Not even Lafon can afford more vineyards, and over the decades the domaine has only grown by four hectares. Instead he has acquired a domaine in Mâcon, Les Héritiers du Comte Lafon, where he makes wonderfully crystalline, elegant whites. He also consults for Evening Land Vineyards in Oregon.

Lafon is in his prime, confident of his expertise and intuitive brilliance, although he never seems complacent. **SB**

*'What I most admire about Dominique is his ability to express where his wines come from. They are always elegant and pure, with great terroir influence. That combination of elegance and depth is something extra special.'*

**Philipp Wittmann, Weingut Wittmann**



## Attilio Pagli

One of Italy's most admired winemakers, Pagli is the force behind some of the country's best-known wines, such as Caprai's Sagrantino di Montefalco 25 Anni and Salvioni's Brunello di

Montalcino. However, Pagli is extremely famous in Argentina too, where he is credited with a major role in turning what was a local wine into the worldwide success story it is today.

In 1992, Pagli was hired by Nicolas Catena to consult on a Sangiovese project in Mendoza, but once there, he realised the vines weren't Sangiovese. Studying the vineyards led him to many old Malbec vines. 'I was fascinated by its potential,' he recalls 'but back then nobody had much faith in Malbec.'

Pagli's skill in reviving forgotten local varieties is clear in Italy too. He is the country's biggest expert on Cilieggiolo, a red grape that makes beautiful, midweight, spicy red wines that are increasingly sought after. But it took Pagli to come along and realise its potential.



'The Rascioni & Ceconello estate owned enough Cilieggiolo vines to make a varietal wine. I thought the big berries and bunches merited a chance and I urged them to give it a try. I

was lucky too: the first vintage was 1988, a great year in Tuscany. Cilieggiolo has since proven itself and is here to stay.'

Pagli is also well known for his Matura group, a consultancy created in 1997 with Alberto Antonini (see p27). Winemakers and viticulturists follow their own estates but meet regularly to exchange ideas. The group has helped some of Italy's brightest young talent to progress. Today Pagli and the Matura group make some of Italy's greatest wines from other native grapes such as Vespolina, Ansonica and Aleatico, all with a very bright future. **IDA**

*'Attilio is an inspiration because his standards never drop. His understanding of terroir is his finest attribute.'* **Vittorio Fiore, Podere Poggio Scalette**

**Paul Pontallier**

Pontallier is neither a consultant nor a château owner, and has spent his entire career in the service of just one estate, save for an 18-month stint teaching oenology at the Catholic University of Santiago during his military service. Of course, that estate just happens to be Château Margaux, one of Bordeaux's first growths.

Pontallier arrived at Margaux in 1983, hired by owner Corinne Mentzelopoulos when he was just 27. He had proved little more at the time than his intellectual prowess, having studied at an agronomic institute in Paris, then wine growing and oenology in Montpellier then undertaking further studies in Bordeaux, where he received his PhD in oenology in 1981. He did consult for a few other estates in his early years, but it was at Margaux that he really found his home, applying his



intelligent, balanced and instinctive approach to the vineyards and cellar and helping the wine reach its current astonishing level of success after difficult years in the 1970s.

Pontallier became managing director in 1990, and is still 'passionately in love with my job' as he describes it, creating a research and development department in

1990 that is currently carrying out projects in areas such as biodynamic viticulture and viticultural changes to combat global warming. He is also unafraid of making changes when he feels it necessary, most notably taking the white wine Pavillon Blanc back to more reasonable alcohol levels after years of watching it climb to 14% alcohol or higher.

It is this considered approach, delivered modestly but with unarguable results, that attracts such admiration. **JA**

*'Paul got my vote for his talent, consistency and commitment. He has been working at Château Margaux for 32 years and has maintained and improved its distinctive style of finesse and elegance. Additionally he has been an outstanding ambassador for Margaux due to his enormous qualities as a person.'* **Francisco Baettig, Viña Errazuriz**

Photograph: Bloomberg/Getty Images

**Marcelo Retamal**



In 2011, Marcelo Retamal and his team at the De Martino winery made a very special announcement.

From that point on they would use no new oak in their wines. They would also advance significantly the date of harvest in order to obtain more freshness in their wines, and would produce them as naturally as possible. 'We want to avoid all contributory factors towards the standardisation of wine,' Retamal explained.

Such an announcement today would not be a novelty. Most wineries in Chile (and beyond) make similar statements. But in 2011 this news caused much turmoil and controversy. Today his philosophy is applauded

and Retamal has risen to the rank of pioneer in the new stage of Chile's wine evolution.

Retamal has never changed employer, working at De Martino since he graduated in oenology in 1996. The learning curve that he has travelled along is discernible in the wines he has produced there: initially they were super-concentrated, over-oaked and technological wines, but along the way he developed a desire to rewrite the rule book and make wines that, as he says simply 'will go better with food'.

Retamal and his team were also responsible for rescuing Chile's forgotten Itata Valley and putting it at the forefront of viticultural innovation. From there, they revived the production in Argentina of grapes like Cinsault and Muscat, vinifying them in the ancestral way (amphorae

included), and shaking up Argentina's wine scene with these new flavours.

All these things have been followed closely by the community of wineries in South America. And although today everyone talks about Itata, of Cinsault, and of fresher and less alcoholic wines, Retamal was among the first to put these issues on the table. **PT**

*'In my opinion Marcelo is Chile's best soil and vineyard "explorer". He is a true pioneer in the study of Chilean terroir and a great winemaker.'* **Rodrigo Espinosa, Marques del Atrio**

*'Marcelo must take a lot of the credit for the broad diversity Chilean wine has today. He had the freedom to lead the way but also the guts to do it. You have to admire his vision, his self-questioning mind, technical skills and his love for wine.'* **Francisco Baettig, Viña Errazuriz** >

**Climate change and critics: our top winemakers speak their minds**

When contacting the world's top winemaking talent for this article, we took the opportunity to poll them about issues of the day. Have they felt the effect of climate change on their wines? To what extent do they take wine critics and judges into account

when making their wine? And which other region would they make wine in if they could?

To see the response to these and other questions, visit [www.decanter.com/winemakersurvey](http://www.decanter.com/winemakersurvey)



## Eric Rousseau

Charles Rousseau of Domaine Armand Rousseau is a hard act to follow. Although he handed over the estate to his son Eric long ago, the nonagenarian is still a presence. Eric returned to the domaine after completing his studies in 1982, so has a most

intimate knowledge of the vines and wines.

Not that Eric has made dramatic changes. Why would he, given the domaine's exalted reputation? One of the first Burgundy domaines to bottle its wines in the 1930s, it was run by his grandfather until his death in 1959, which forced Charles to take control. Charles and now Eric have always wanted the wines, and terroirs, to speak for themselves. Eric employs green-harvesting to control the yields, and picks the grapes relatively early, to avoid masking the individuality of each terroir with overripe flavours.

Rousseau has also continued a modified version of his father's policy of ageing some top sites – Chambertin, Clos de Bèze, and Clos-St-Jacques – in new oak (which have the structure and concentration to support it, he says), while other wines, even grands crus such as Ruchottes and Charmes-Chambertin, are aged in second-fill barrels to allow the fruit to sing. He is also wary of excessive extraction, and in general the wines spend less time in oak than they used to.

Rousseau has also moved the domaine towards organic farming. In difficult years he may resort to a dusting of fungicides, but in good vintages no chemical treatments of any kind are used. He also has instituted minor modifications in the winery, such as allowing the malolactic fermentation to take its course without heating, even if this means a fermentation of many months.

Charles Rousseau was always committed to producing wines of finesse and ageability rather than explosive power. That is what Burgundy is all about, and his son sees no reason to change that goal. **SB**

*'Rousseau wines always impress. There is a recognisable house style that is consistent and transcends the vintage character. It is the epitome of great Burgundy. This constancy is inspirational and has more to do with a well-practised in-depth understanding of what not to do – stepping back from the winemaking – rather than a range of specific techniques.'* **Blair Walter, Felton Road**

Photograph: Tim Atkin/Cephas

## Alejandro Vigil

Vigil is one of the most important figures on the South American wine scene today. Since 2003, as part of the winemaking team at Bodega Catena Zapata, and since 2007, as its chief winemaker, Vigil has focused his energy on making the wider public realise that there is much more to Argentinian Malbec than current wines suggest.

His first efforts came immediately after his arrival at Catena: creating its single-vineyard collection of Malbecs. Even with the first vintage in 2004, this group of wines illustrated how chameleon-like Malbec can be, depending on where it was planted. The single-vineyard Angelica in Lunlunta, at 920m above sea level, and Adrianna in Gualtallary, at 1,450m, are two of the best examples.

But Vigil is tireless. And though he remains committed to deepening our understanding of Malbec terroir, he also has many other interests. One is Cabernet Franc, a grape that is sparsely planted in Argentina, but has given excellent results in a very short time. Vigil is on a quest to discover all he can about the variety, especially those plantings in the highest vineyards of the Uco Valley.

Cabernet Franc is also a central point in Bodegas Aleanna, the winery that he has owned jointly with Adrianna Catena, daughter of Nicolas Catena since 2009. The wines are a snapshot of Gualtallary as a zone and Cabernet Franc as its focal point. Take, for example, its 2011 El Enemigo Cabernet Franc, a delicious, energetic wine coming from some of Mendoza's highest vineyards, at 1,450m in the Gualtallary sub-region.

Cabernet Franc also features – among many other things – in Vigil's family project. The Republic of Chachingo, in his homeland of Maipú, consists of a growing number of wines made from Malbec and Cabernet Franc, but also from Grenache, Monastrell and even Pinot Noir from Patagonia in the very south of Argentina. All the wines are deliciously fresh and electric – a style rarely seen in Argentina, yet further proof of Vigil's tireless work in teaching the world about the diversity of wines from his country. **PT**

*'Alejandro is not only the "complete" winemaker, he also understands and interprets our diverse Argentinian terroir with consummate skill.'* **Juan Pablo Michelini, Zorzal Wines** 

