Vintage

We were students at Reims University & « *maîtres d’internat*” (we watched over the boarders in a high school except Antoine who was a student in 1ère & a “*maître au pair*” (he earned money as a *surveillant* but followed his studies in the same high school. He was Togolese & was so late in his studies that he was the same age as some “*surveillants*” (the equivalent of *prefects* in some English public schools).

We used to meet at night after the students were asleep & drink the night away as our flats were contiguous to the dormitories. We drove up to Reims as we were students &, after following the lectures, we had good times at a fashionable pub in Reims. We were so involved in the pub that we sometimes organized evenings there: we adverted at night in the various “*facultés*” (the equivalent of colleges) & attracted students who spent their money at “*Le Tigre*”.

*“Le Tigre*” was located in George Clémenceau Avenue & had drawn its name from that. Actually, “*Le Tigre*” was French “ *Président du Conseil”* George Clémenceau during WW1. He was so inflexible that he had deserved that nickname – a prototype of Winston Churchill during WW2.

Lots of students in the close-by high school were regular customers of “*Le Tigre*”. Still a few years ago, when I went to Reims for *the bac* (the French equivalent of A-levels), I used to return there & was happy to meet friends from long ago, sitting at the counter & talking to the landlord. This pub closed 4 or 5 years ago & its premises now shelter a driving school!...

It must have been during the mid-term holidays of 1975 that we decided - Jean-Marc, Antoine & me – to drive down the Rhône Valley to taste the Burgundy wines. Actually, we were a little fed up with studying & watching over the students; we needed a little outing. We started just after work from Vitry-le-François where we worked & went down to Dijon through Brienne-le-Château, Bar-sur-Aube, Langres. We drove along small *national roads* as we wanted to be in close contact with the heart of the country; we didn’t want to miss any wine-tasting opportunity.

We arrived at Dijon around 8:00 pm & had a wonderful “*tête de veau vinaigrette*” at the *Café de la* *Gare*. Nowadays, the capital of Burgundy has undergone lots of transformations as they have rebuilt – as in many French towns – the new tramway system to avoid pollution.

We slept soundly – we had just been on holiday – in a hotel near the railway station &, after a hearty breakfast, we headed down south. We needed the sun as we had spent the winter in cold & snow. The sun was there, but there was a brisk wind.

After Dijon, we took the “*Nationale 7”*, a mythical road for holiday-makers during the 50s & 60s – a French counterpart of “Route 66*”* in the US - & we drove through all the wine-growing villages : Nuits St George, Marsannay-la-Côte, Gevrey-Chambertin, the Beaujolais region, Morgon, Mâcon… where we had to stop & spend the night for we couldn’t drive any further as we were swigging *grands crus* from the bottle while driving!...

After a snoring night in a hotel in Mâcon, we started, very late & unshaven for our next destination: the *Côtes du Rhône* vintage. Jean-Marc’s eldest brother lived in Miramas &, after tasting the wines of that region, we arrived at his brother’s who was working in military aviation. He welcomed us & we had a wonderful meal. He advised us to go further south; to the “*Vins des Sables*” vine-growing region & we followed his advice.

After tasting the *Châteauneuf-du-Pape* wines, we headed to Avignon & Arles. We spent a night that I’ll never forget at *Pont du Gard* (the former Roman Aqueduct). It was so cold in the small bungalows we had rented on the camping site! The had opened just for us & we had to insist! In the morning, we had a cold shower because it wasn’t yet the holiday season & there was no hot water!

We stayed in Avignon. During the 15th century that city had become the residential city of Popes as the *Borgias* had been so loathed in Italy at that time! One of them, a woman called Lucrèce Borgia, resided within the Avignon fortifications. Apart from its signs of past grandeur, *the Popes’* *City* is, nowadays, the site of a worldwide famous theater festival in spring.

We climbed up “*the Pont du Gard*” over the Gard which is an affluent of the Rhône & the *Mistral* (the cold wind blowing northward along the Rhône valley was brisk!

As we were going south & leaving the Rhône Valley, the weather grew warmer & we found what we had been searching for: a place to rest in the sun, sleeping on beaches & forgetting the rat-race. We stayed in Arles – a Paradise on earth! Every year, the *Feria* used to take place there. People from all over the world used to come to attend corridas. There was a lot of drinking in pubs & the *bandas* (brass bands) used to play popular tunes. But some animal-protecting activists succeeded in having these demonstrations forbidden.

What Jean-Marc’s eldest brother had especially insisted on our visiting was the *Listel* cellars on the Mediterrenean coast at the Rhône confluent with the Mediterrenean Sea. There, the vines grow in excellent conditions. The ground is sandy along the sea & alluvions are brought from the north by the Rhône river which drags along lots of various sediments from the Alps as its springs are located in Switzerland.

The terrain on which the vine grows is very important & is at the origin of the taste of the wine. In Burgundy, the terrains are so differenciated that some productions are very limited & called “*clos*” (like “*Clos Vougeot*”). That may explain the price of some bottles … but not entirely!

The sort of vine is important (but it doesn’t mean that such a variety of grapes will produce white, red or rosé wine). In the Champagne region –actually a village called *Bouzy* - where I live, there is only a red wine production (as all the production is *Champagne*). The consequence is this wine is out-of-price!

We visited the *Listel* cellars & were enraptured by that “*sand wine*”. We bought lots of packs of various white, red & rosé wines.

But it was time to go back to work & we had to drive up north to our cold Champagne-producing regions for we only had a weekend to get (reluctantly) back there. On the Monday morning of the beginning of mid-term (but spring was coming & we were better in our heads after such an initiation) we went back to work with more strength in our minds.

Life is great if you can enable yourself to do some outings that will stay forever in your mind!

