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THE GRACE OF AUSTERITY: DOMAINE PONSOT'S MOREY-ST-DENIS BLANC MONTS LUISANTS 1959-2003
by Frank Kämmer MS

Balance and character are widely accepted as the two hallmark qualities of fine wine. In spite of this fact, there are a few highly individual wines whose distinct character actually results from a certain lack of equilibrium. Although indisputably great wines, who would call Sercial Madeira, Manzanilla, Sherry, Santorini's Assyrtiko or Laurent-Perrier Ultra Brut truly balanced wines? These are the exceptions that prove the rule. In such cases the purity of character, often of sheer minerally austerity, is the unique quality in the wine, one that does not have to be balanced by another component such as fruit, body or sweetness. This is the lesson I relearned when tasting 31 vintages of Laurent Ponsot's white Morey-St-Denis 1er Cru Mont Luisants, discovering the grace of austerity in one of Burgundy's most controversial and probably least understood wines.

Although Domaine Ponsot is recognised as one of Burgundy's finest red-wine producers, there is a piece of vineyard land in Morey-St-Denis where the Ponsots have been producing white wine for generations. Adjacent to, but high above, the famous grand cru Clos de la Roche, is the 1er Cru Monts Luisants. Laurent Ponsot possesses the very core of this vineyard, which is known as the Clos de Monts Luisants. Due to the high altitude and limestone-dominated soil, this had been a white-wine island in a sea of Pinot Noir for many years. Ponsot's plot was planted in 1911 with only a small amount of Chardonnay; most of the vines, especially the oldest ones, are Aligoté, while others are an obscure white mutation of Pinot Noir. What appears to be at odds with today's Chardonnay-based Burgundy makes perfect sense in the eyes of Laurent Ponsot: 'Aligoté is the only grape to unveil the terroir in the wine up here,' he says. And, accordingly, he is planning to uproot the Chardonnay in favour of Aligoté in the future.

The winemaking is surprisingly simple: no new oak, no malolactic fermentation, no *bâtonnage*, no fining or filtering, but very low yields down to 28.8 hectolitres per hectare. The limestone soil

of the vineyard and Ponsot's no-frills winemaking result in a unique wine of great personality. Although certainly of high quality, this wine is not eager to please. Its pure and undisguised minerally austerity immediately divides those who approach it for the first time – it's love it or leave it.

The following notes were taken at a tasting of unprecedented scope, held in Cologne in February 2005 on behalf of Laurent Ponsot and his German importer Albert Kierdorf.

The tasting

2003 White blossom on the nose, a bit creamy, hints of nuts and banana, as well as a certain dustiness. On the palate, much more fruit, yellow apples and pears; racy, with a crisp finish and a touch of smoke and melon. Rather exotic for the terroir. **16**

2002 Smoke, sandalwood, nougat and beeswax on the nose. Good body, but a very prominent minerally backbone comes through strongly, with lots of steely structure and raciness. The fruit gives way to roast nuts on the finish. Still very *nerveux* but with immense potential. **17.5**

2001 Very closed on the nose, just a little bit of smoky fruit and wet chalk. More complex on the palate, but driven by minerality rather than fruit. Moderate length, with crisp aftertaste of bread crust. Straight, unadorned, even naked, terroir style. Will another ten years in bottle help it to develop an additional charm? **15.5**

2000 Rich nose of beeswax and honey. Good body with additional aromas of sandalwood and pear compote. A good acidity for the vintage, but dominant and strident on the aftertaste. Rather loose-knit, lacking depth and minerality. The complete counterpart to the 2001. **15.5**

1999 Very intense nose, but very

elegant as well. Scents of the vines at flowering are combined with multidimensional minerality, notes of iodine, even sea salt, and the peculiar flinty smell of the terroir. Subtle and very lively on the palate; medium body but great depth and complexity. The aromatic intensity is reminiscent of a great Riesling, but the silky elegance is truly Burgundian. Although there is just a little fruit, this wine seems to lack nothing. **18**

1998 Fine nose of lime and roasted almonds. Medium body but lacking a bit of the characteristic complexity and inner tension. Dustiness is dominating the medium finish. Quite good, but neither charming nor with the fascinating austere minerality of other vintages. **14.5**

1997 Surprisingly floral and charming on the nose, with just a hint of smoke and flint. There is good backbone (remarkable for this vintage) to balance the quite juicy body. Intense but broad aftertaste, with lots of burned nuts and rich nougat. Mature and round. **16**

1996 A minerally nose of great finesse, strangely suggestive of white Alba truffles. But then surprisingly lean on the palate. There is a certain weight, but the whole wine still seems unwrapped. So youthful and promising but at the moment torn between an inviting smell and an undeveloped taste. This will never become a blockbuster, but there is definitely an elegant beauty sleeping in this bottle. **17**

1995 Unusual, very individual nose of dried apricot, gunpowder and saffron. Dense body, but nice aromatic transparency. The fruit is rather restrained at first, but it opens up later on. Still very fresh. Defined and strong aftertaste, with exotic fruit compote and hints of iodine. Unusual and hard to understand, probably needing more time to reveal its true personality. **16.5**



1994 Quite similar scents to the 1996 but much more restrained. A touch of geranium on the nose. Rather lean body, but tight-knit and elegant. Brioche and apricot flavours on the palate, and a fine finish. A rather discreet wine, for those seeking softer music. **16**

1992 Very elegant bouquet of bread crust, roast almonds and pine seeds. Restrained fruit and lean body but multidimensional on the mineral side. Great elegance and finesse. Without being truly balanced, there is a certain inner harmony and a fascinating, self-confident presence. Classic. **17.5**

1991 Restrained and slightly herbaceous, with a hint of green mango on the nose. Quite fresh on the palate but somewhat dilute and

lacking the usual depth, through to a less-than-spectacular finish. A nice, fresh wine, but nothing more. **14**

1990 Still a bit restrained, but one can almost feel the immense potential and richness sleeping here. Notes of dried quince and roast hazelnut. The fruit opens up much more on the palate, perfectly balanced by a remarkable mineral backbone. This wine combines the purity of Manzanilla, the silkiness of a fine Burgundy and the elegance of a Dom Pérignon. Perfect and delicious, without losing its distinct personality. Great future. **19**

1989 Rich and intense nose, but not quite the complexity and finesse of the 1990 - more on the smoky side. Despite this, there is great freshness and vitality, a still-vibrant acidity

cutting through the tight-knit body. Great personality - not yet totally harmonious, but already with a long, rich finish. Great potential, but definitely still needs time. **18**

1988 A fine nose of discreet intensity, roast nuts and a nice melon fruit. Lean body, somewhat reserved, but there is sublime finesse. A hidden, unpretentious beauty, currently hiding under a veil. A 'contemplative' wine for those able to see through to it. **17**

1987 Ripe, nearly 'creamy', on the nose, with unexpected fruit aromas like apricot jam. Very pleasing and rounded on the palate. Nice fruit and good body, but not with the usual minerality. Delicious and immediately enjoyable, but somewhat lacking in typicity and that extra terroir dimension. **16.5**

THE GRACE OF AUSTERITY: DOMAINE PONSOT'S
 MOREY-ST-DENIS BLANC MONTS LUISANTS 1989-2003
 by Frank Kammer MS



1986 Restrained, but very mineral. Great finesse, but great presence, too, without being at all pushy. Crisp and austere on the palate, very lively and vibrant, with hardly any flesh to cover the backbone. Wet limestone on the finish. Reminiscent of the fragile grace of a Giacometti sculpture. **16**

1985 Nose of the finest nougat, with some mineral hints coming through, too. Very inviting. A rich first impression when it hits the tongue, but probably missing a bit of freshness to carry the mature aromas. Very harmonious and rounded - perfect to drink now. Great length. **17**

1984 Very mature nose, like an old white Rioja, but a bit herbaceous as well. The same combination of ripeness and unripeness appears again on the palate. An interesting, somewhat obscure personality, but despite the remarkable structure, this is not a great wine. **13**

1983 Surprisingly restrained, but a very fat, even sweetish, nose. Much better on the palate, with a nice freshness and good body. Medium-intense finish. The fresh and enjoyable taste is in surprising contrast to the reserved smell. **14.5**

1979 A strange smell of fresh mushrooms and oyster shells; all in all, somewhat musty. The mature, obscure flavour sits oddly amid the still-quiet-pleasant structure. Past its best. **12.5**

1978 A great bouquet of immense complexity and finesse, revealing layer upon layer of roast almonds, black and white truffles, and even a touch of asparagus. Although possessing great body, this is not a monster like many others from the vintage, but rather a fascinating diva at the height of her powers. A great, mature personality, but still with many years to go.

Delicious, balanced and long on the finish. **18**

1977 Surprisingly attractive bouquet of ripe yellow fruits, nuts and wet pebbles. Quite lean, with an unpretentious finish, but still a somewhat nutty fruit, proper minerality and a certain raciness to add freshness. A nice autumnal luncheon wine - not big, but drinking surprisingly well for its age and vintage. **15.5**

1975 Sweet, mature smell of quince jelly and apricot jam on burnt toast. Despite the poor vintage, this wine is astonishingly lively and charming. Lacking a little depth and length, but perfectly drinkable now. A pleasant, jolly, elderly gentlemen. What a surprise! **16**

1973 Smoky nose of mushrooms and marzipan. Mature, nearly overripe character, pungent acidity, austere body and bone-dry finish. Like a mature dry Riesling from a poor vintage. **12.5**

1966 Invitingly fine nose with scents of apricot, lime and flowers, with an underlying minerality, too. Quite powerful and juicy body, well-balanced and integrated acidity, and a silky texture. A rich and perfectly mature wine, now at its peak, still with a long but unpretentious finish. **17**

1964 Delicious bouquet of red apricots, fully ripened Williams pears and finest Cavaillon melons. Given that this

vintage is made from 100% Aligoté, there is an unbelievable complexity and intensity of aromas. So silky and rich on the palate, but what a freshness on the finish! There is a nutty, smoky fruit coming through the almost creamy (but not coating) texture. Fascinating intensity and length on the aftertaste, which finishes like a Beethoven symphony. Stunning wine! **19**

1962 Mature but multidimensional nose of asparagus broth and white currant. On the palate, very lively, even vibrant. Good body, but not as refined and harmonious as the 1964. Great freshness, even a bit racy on the finish. Unique personality; clearly defined backbone. **18**

1961 Broad and intense nose of mushrooms and truffles, enriched by limestone scents like wet chalk. Surprisingly racy and medium-bodied. Minerally personality and steely backbone, with the mouthwatering structure of a Sercial Madeira. Pure, minerally aftertaste, crisp and elegant. **17.5**

1960 Very fine, intricate nose of white nougat - not very intense, but so fresh and elegant! The lean and mature body cannot cover the wine's impressive raciness, so a bit unbalanced on the cleansing finish. Will probably live for many more years but will never mellow to find its true inner harmony. **16**

1959 Mature but very minerally nose, slightly floral as well, with a certain flinty character developing over time. Rather like a rare Manzanilla Pasada. Somewhat austere body, but with shimmering complexity and a self-assured personality. Lively and straightforward, with limestone fireworks on the stimulating finish. An intellectual wine, not immediately approachable: one has to appreciate the grace of austerity to savour it properly. **18** ■