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Wild About Burgundy

A most passionate collector makes a connection to the legendary DRC



Photo by: Robert Camuto

Collector Edmond Asseily (right) with Domaine de la Romanée-Conti codirector Aubert de Villaine in the barrel cellar

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Edmond Asseily doesn't make halfway decisions. He goes all in.

As a young high-flying currency and metals trader in Europe in the 1990s, Asseily dove into Bordeaux's top growths—amassing thousands of bottles in his Paris cellar, studying châteaux and drinking every vintage he could find.

"Within seven years, I drank everything you could drink in Bordeaux back to the 19th century," he says. "I was on a learning binge."

But Asseily, now 48, wanted more. Tall and lean, the French-Lebanese hedge-fund manager has an intense personality, fluency in seven languages and a hyperactive curiosity.

In 1996, at a lavish dinner in Paris with classic French vintages, he drank 1978 Domaine de la Romanée-Conti Romanée-Conti, which he says changed his life: "The Romanée-Conti haunted me with its sheer aromatics and delicacy I had never encountered before."

Asseily sold his Bordeaux collection in 1999 and plunged into Burgundy, fascinated by the range of wines all centered on Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.

"I wanted to understand Burgundy the way I understood Bordeaux," he says. "At the time, Burgundy was off the radar; it was still reeling from decades of poor winemaking practices. The revival had started in the '90s, led by a small number of growers."

Since that time, Asseily has become a regular fixture in Burgundy, leading his life in unexpected directions.

I first met Asseily six years ago on a visit to DRC, and I was floored by the accuracy of his palate in picking out cuvées and vintages in a blind tasting. In January, I caught up with him again in Burgundy.

Over several bottles in Beaune, he described how he learned Burgundy from the ground up, starting by walking its mythic vineyards.

In 1999, while walking the *premier cru* Cros Parantoux vineyard, adjacent to Richebourg, he met Christian Faurois, vineyard manager of Méo-Camuzet, who became his mentor and friend.

Two years later, the men crossed paths with DRC co-owner and codirector Aubert de Villaine.

Eager to gain de Villaine's confidence, Asseily offered to share two classic wines he had purchased from DRC's Paris distributor: DRC La Tache 1937 and a magnum of Romanée-Conti 1945.

"I was very impetuous," Asseily says with a laugh. "I wanted to learn too much too fast."

The reserved de Villaine was wary of the exuberant wine enthusiast, but accepted the offer and invited him to lunch, eventually warming to Asseily as a connoisseur and confidant.

Calling him an "enlightened *amateur*," de Villaine, 78, says, "Edmond has a great capacity to speak about our wines that he has tasted, with a perception that is very close to my own."

De Villaine also appreciates that Asseily doesn't just collect wines; he drinks them. "I can call Edmond a friend," he adds.

Tasting through the stellar 2015 vintage in DRC's cavernous barrel cellars, de Villaine and the effusive Asseily act as foils, seeming to feed off each other.

Pondering a glass of DRC's Grands Echézeaux, de Villaine says, "I am not good at making analogies, but for me the 2015 vintage is like the 2005 vintage plus the 2003 vintage."

Asseily elaborates: "The tannins aren't as firm as 2005; it's rounder. And you have the over-ripeness but not the dried currant flavors of 2003."

Asseily's passion for Burgundy has evolved into small sideline businesses. When he was a child, his parents left Lebanon during its civil war. Believing in his native Beirut's revival as an oasis of peace in the Middle East, he moved his family to the city and, in 2003, began importing Burgundy wines there. Asseily, who now helps run his family's investment fund, then became DRC's exclusive agent in Lebanon in 2004.

In 2010, Asseily opened a Beirut wine bar named Burgundy, partnering with a French-Lebanese doctor, Ziad Mouawad, who runs it. De Villaine honored Asseily by attending the restaurant opening and calls the Burgundy-dominated wine list "one of the most beautiful in the world."

In 2014, Asseily took over a Swiss wine importer and distributor, Maison Mathieu, from its retiring owner, and he says his focus has changed from Burgundy's stratosphere to lesser-known, young and upcoming producers. "Back in the late 1990s, I was buying La Tâche for the equivalent of 180 euros [about \$200] a bottle," he says. "Now it's thousands. It's crazy!"

After a two-decade love affair, drinking Burgundies that most of us can only dream about, Asseily has concluded that *terroir* is important, but that the wine producer's hand has even more impact. "A great producer who farms lesser appellations will always be worthier than a less-thorough producer with the best appellations," he says of the shift in his purchases.

"Originally I was trophy hunting, but it was affordable," he says. "Now it's evolved into a treasure hunt."

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