

Burgundy-Report

Profile: Domaine de Bellène (Beaune)

Nicolas Potel's old office was tucked away in Nuits St.Georges, close to the train station. Whilst that building stood proud on a corner, there were no external signs to the building's use – for a first-time visitor it wasn't easy to find. Look at a bottle from his new venture in Beaune and the label depicts a wonderful looking domaine – that should be easier to find – wrong!

There are two reasons for that; first the picture is an artist's representation of what the domaine will look like (probably in a year or two) when all the renovation is completed and second, because you also need to find the 'secret door' to enter it's courtyard!

Okay, sorry, it's a little easier than that – but I just like the sound of secret doors! Take the RN 74 North from the Beaune périphérique and after about 200 metres on the left you will see an archway into the domaine's courtyard.

I have long been an advocate of Nicolas's wines, my cellar holds many, but that ended early in 2009 and with the 2007 vintage when the team was split.

How it came to this...

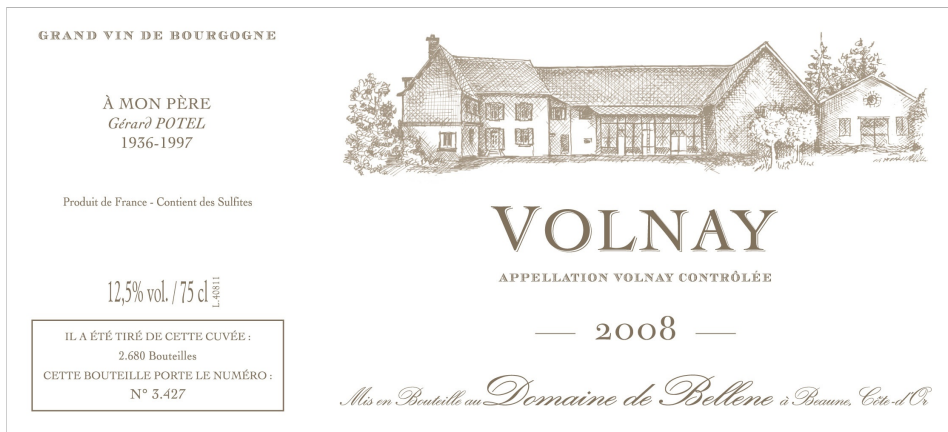
The gestation for **Domaine de Bellène** started in 2005, one of the growers contracted to Maison Nicolas Potel asked Nicolas if he would like to take his vineyard on an 'en fermage' basis with an option to buy the vineyard at the end of the contract. The Cottin brothers who owned the business since January 2004 weren't interested in vines so Nicolas decided to rent the land himself, thus starting DOMAINE Nicolas Potel with one worker. He already had 1.2 hectares which came from his mother, the produce of which he had sold to Maison Nicolas Potel since 1998. This arrangement carried on, Nicolas occasionally taking on more vines for the 'domaine'. In January 2009 it all changed. A management shake-up at Cottin Frères led to senior people losing their jobs and by March Nicolas was also asked to leave, basically using the reasoning that Fabrice Lesne – his number two – was making everything anyway. Fabrice chose to leave this year.



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To avoid issues Nicolas changed the name of his to domaine to Domaine de Bellène and that's where his focus is now. From the start his approach was organic The domaine is a total concept – centred on the theme of sustainability – he wants to have the first 'organic winery' in Burgundy – and that goes for his négoce wines too, which bear the modified name of Maison Roche de Bellène.



The wines of Domaine / Maison Bellène

For the domaine we have now 24 hectares, mainly very old vines with lots of massale selection. We have Santenay Blanc Les Charmes Dessus from young vines, St.Romain Blanc from 5 different vineyards of old

vines planted with a massale selection, Volnay from 20 year-old vines, a great cuvée of Bourgogne coming from my father's vineyard planted in 1928 and some vines from Comblanchien that are 50 years old. We have 6 Beaune 1er Crus, specially the Beaune 1er Cru Grèves has 104 year-old vines – we are starting to take massale selections from that vineyard. We have an old selection of Savigny-lès-Beaune villages, white and red plus two 1ers from Savigny. Then we have a great selection of old vines of Côtes de Nuits Villages red and whites. In 2009, a new line from Côtes de Nuits; 3 hectares of old vine Nuits St.Georges, Vosne Romanée close to Echezeaux, vines in Vosne-Romanée 1er les Suchots and one vineyard of Nuits St.Georges 1er Chaignots. 80% is coming from massale Selection.

Nicolas says that it really took him 10 years to reach the standard he wanted while working in Nuits – on a technical level he thinks the 2007s were the best he produced despite it not being rated a great vintage. The domaine is now running for a little over 3 years so he expects he has another 3-5 year of improvement ahead. Although they started almost from nothing, the sales are quite good and are meeting the needs of the business. The domaine has 4 whites and 12 reds and the 'maison' 25 reds and 18 whites in 2008. Nicolas is also still working with Stéphane Aviron in Beaujolais, and still under the name Potel-Aviron.

The domaine's cellar is based in the Bellène courtyard, a similar size facility is located next to the offices of Albert Bichot for the négoce wines. Many of the contracts for the négoce wines are with the same growers as when Nicolas was in Nuits, though typically for fewer (he will say better!) barrels. The 'packaging' of the wines is excellent, a wax-top for the domaine and organic négoce wines which exposes half of the cork and the printing (info) on the cork, plus the bottles are numbered.

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*The 2008 vintage is a great expression for the terroir – particularly for the whites. The reds need some time, they gained in richness and fatness during the elevage, we wait, wait, wait for the bottling but the tannin structure was still there – I didn't want to fine, so they were bottled like that. I don't think they will close up... ...I love new oak, but it's about balance – for 2008 I used only 10% for villages, 20% for premiers, 30-50% for grand crus – maybe 10% more in 2009. For the whites I use a lot of 600 litre casks **Nicolas Potel***

The wines that follow were tasted in early May 2010 when most of them had been in bottle for about 1-2 months:

2008 Maison Roche de Bellene, Bourgogne

In bottle for about one month. High toned fruit in the mouth. Fresh, sweet and with good texture too for the appellation, likewise concentration.

2008 Domaine de Bellene, Bourgogne Maison Dieu

The vines come from Nicolas's father, the wine bottled in March. Deeper aromas of red fruit. The structure is a little more obvious here, slowly the fruit comes through to take over. Seems a stricter wine.

2008 Maison Roche de Bellene, Savigny-lès-Beaune 1er Les Vergelesses

From 80 year-old vines. Very good colour. Aromatically there's a good depth of red fruit. Riper than the bourgogne, the fresh fruit is backed by plenty of structure.

2008 Maison Roche de Bellene, Beaune 1er Cent Vignes

"Forty year old vines from the mid-slope, more tannic than higher up but very pure." Plenty of pretty, pure fruit on the nose. Lovely texture of velvet from the tannin dovetails fresh fruit. This is quite long. Good wine.

2008 Domaine de Bellene, Volnay

From a single lieu-dit, only worked for 2 years in manner Nicolas would like, but he was happy enough with this vintage to include some stems. The nose is a little shy, but clearly pretty and floral. The width of flavour is very nice, the tannin edges just ahead of the fruit today – but it's a good velvet texture.

2008 Domaine de Bellene, Beaune 1er Monte Rouge

They have worked these vines since 2005. Really lovely aromas here – a real sniffer's wine. The structure again delivers plenty of velvet and there is plenty of acidity, but the fruit flavour behind is really lovely.

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2008 Maison Roche de Bellene, Volnay 1er Taillepieds

The depth of aroma is super. Like the previous wines, the velvet tannin is just ahead of the fruit, but yet again lovely fruit it is.

2008 Maison Roche de Bellene, Volnay 1er Pitures

From the white marl close to Pommard 1er Chanlins. Perfumed, quite beautiful fruit. This is the first wine that shows a little fat to counter the structure. Gorgeous fruit – super.

2008 Maison Roche de Bellene, Volnay 1er Santenots

The aromas are narrower than the Pitures but the red fruit is still a very pretty thing. Again there is some fat here, the tannins being well-covered. Rounder than the Pitures though I preferred that expression of fruit.

2008 Maison Roche de Bellene, Volnay 1er Clos des Chênes

Beautiful fruit aromas again, and backed with violets this time. Super concentration, texture and balance – wow – I'm in!

2008 Maison Roche de Bellene, Nuits St.Georges 1er Murgers The aromas have a denser impression to the red fruit but there are still some pretty floral aromatics too. Good fruit and structure – there's a good balance here.

2008 Maison Roche de Bellene, Gevrey-Chambertin 1er Les Combottes

A wine that Nicolas says he has been waiting a long time to get hold of. Nice, elegant and fine fruit – not showing much depth today. Clearly there's an executive texture of silky tannin here. The flavours like the aromas are a little tight. The wine impresses on some levels, it's certainly quite elegant, but I'd have preferred to spend a little more time with it.

2008 Maison Roche de Bellene, Vosne-Romanée 1er Les Petits Monts

The aromas are understated but show a pretty complexity. Nicely fills the mouth – balanced and very understated.

2008 Maison Roche de Bellene, Vosne-Romanée 1er Les Malconsorts

The same understatement as the Petits Monts. There's a little extra fat but essentially the same post-bottling tightness as the last wines.

2008 Maison Roche de Bellene, Clos de la Roche

Aromatically tight. In the mouth this has a really impressive flavour – it's hard to spit – overall an 'exciting' wine.

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2008 Maison Roche de Bellene, Clos St.Denis

The nose is more understated than I would like – mainly because the little it offers is gorgeous. In the mouth this doesn't have the impact of the Clos de la Roche but like the nose the fruit flavours are to die for. Just a hint of minerality to the finish.

2008 Maison Roche de Bellene, Clos de Vougeot

Very different aromas versus the last wines – a much darker impression of fruit. Not austere but there is a higher level of 'managed' structure. The flavours have a floral dimension. I find it imposing yet, at the same time, slightly aloof. A nice challenge!

2008 Maison Roche de Bellene, Charmes-Chambertin

My nose is greeted by a width of warm fruit, plenty of freshness and occasional bright flashes of more defined fruit. Very well balanced showing lovely flavour. Very fine length.

2008 Maison Roche de Bellene, Clos de Bèze

Wide, fresh and complex aromas – again with flashes of different, finer fruit. Hmmm; such width, complexity and texture – I am sold on this.

2008 Maison Roche de Bellene, Chambertin

The nose here is tighter. The palate, however, shows a superb depth of flavour that insinuates itself into your palate – very, very long. As a package, today I prefer the Bèze. Tomorrow, if the aromas bloom I might differ...

1997 Maison Nicolas Potel, Echézeaux

I'd brought a bottle of this for us to enjoy as a mark of Nicolas's first production vintage under his own name (the few 1996s were bottlings of finished wine). Sadly it had some cork-related taint. I didn't spot while tasting those wines above that Nicolas had arranged to get a replacement from his own stock. "What a baby!" was his reaction when he sniffed it. I found good freshness to the aromas; some earth, herbs and a dark fruit component. Lots of width and a good texture. A wine to savour, and yes, still a baby!

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The whites had all been bottled in March, which is the longest that Nicolas has made white elevage – and he's very happy with the result, no battonage was used. Discussing potential oxidation: "I don't expect problems with these 2008s. We press quite long, clearly if you don't have enough colloidal material in the press wine, the wine will break! Don't forget that in the 90s nobody wanted to use sulfur, too much crop, not pressing enough, very quick debourbage with batonage, batonage, batonage, bad cork, bottling on the wrong day – it's not one problem it's too many technical things."

Due to pressures of time I didn't have time to make a ton of notes, so I'll deliver what I have in a different style:

The Whites The 2008 Maison Roche de Bellene, Bourgogne Blanc seemed precocious with width, nice flavours and plenty of interest. 2008 Maison Roche de Bellene, Rully 1er Les Clous showed finer aromas with hints of wood, with plenty of fresh mineral aspects. I wrote only that the St.Aubin 1er Le Chetanière was very good, the 2008 Chassagne-Montrachet Vieilles Vignes was very wide and that the 2008 Meursault Vieilles Vignes offered very good intensity of flavour.

Then came a trio of 2008 Meursault premiers; the Genevrières had a fantastic, ever-growing width of flavour with a late-arriving creaminess, the Charmes-Dessous had more dry extract and was very long whereas the Perrières had lovely texture and intensity plus super mid-palate flavour and dimension.

With a short pause for breath we are into the 2008 Puligny-Montrachet 1er 'Hameau de Blagny', the first wine with a hint of toast on the nose. There's extra minerality and acidity but no fireworks, that said, the intensity is excellent. The Folatières that follows is deep and concentrated – the flavours are not as precise as the 'Hameau' but here be fireworks – very impressive wine this!

The 2008 Corton-Charlemagne is intense right from the start, starting with a punch and then keeps pushing you into the wall – fabulous energy. We initially finish with a (the!) 2008 Montrachet that decides to start all soft and subtle (versus the Charlemagne anyway!) with warm fruit aromas. Initially the flavours are mineral but they grow and grow in your mouth until you can hardly contain them – there's just a fabulous width here. The night before I'd drunk Nicolas's 2008 Bienvenues Bâtard-Montrachet and it was so good that I forsook all other wines on the table, I mentioned it to Nicolas and all of a sudden there was a bottle in his hand! Good (sorry, outstanding!) as it was the night before it was no surprise to me that it fell a little short, flat perhaps only because it followed the Montrachet...

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