

IDEALWINE UPDATE: PIONEERING SPIRIT

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Henry-Frédéric Roch, of Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, had been making organic wines at his own estate since 1988. His death last November marked a sharp upturn in interest for his wines at auction



ON 18 November 2018, the wine world woke to the news that Henry-Frédéric Roch had died at the age of 56 of a particularly virulent cancer. For almost 30 years, Roch had worked alongside Aubert de Villaine as co-director of the famed Domaine de la Romanée-Conti. Nephew of Lalou-Bize Leroy, Henry-Frédéric Roch hails from what could be called Burgundian royalty. When Leroy left DRC in 1992, her nephew – Henry-Frédéric Roch's brother – Charles Roch stepped up to the role. Henry-Frédéric became co-director in 1992, following the death of Charles in a car accident.

He was the family's representative at the legendary Burgundy estate for almost three decades, producing some of the world's most celebrated and sought-after wines. Yet Roch's talent as a winegrower wasn't restricted to his time at DRC. He had founded Domaine Prieuré Roch in 1988, having fallen in love with Clos Goillotte Premier Cru, a plot of which constitutes his very first vineyard purchase. Right in the centre of Vosne-Romanée, at merely 50 metres from DRC's La Tâche, it was, according to de Villaine, Henry-Frédéric Roch's most cherished parcel. The domaine expanded over the years, and today it spans 14 hectares along the Côte de Nuits, with plots in over a dozen of the region's most prestigious climats, as well as parcels in Vosne-Romanée.

These include vines in the prestigious Gevrey Chambertin Chambertin Clos de Bèze Grand cru (1.01 ha), Clos Vougeot Grand Cru (0.68 ha), Nuits Saint Georges Premier Cru Le Clos des Corvées, (a monopole of 5.21 ha), Nuits Saint-Georges Clos des Argillières, Premier cru (0.69 ha), Vosne-Romanée Premier Cru Les Suchots (1.02 ha), Vosne-Romanée Les Clous (0.72 ha), Vosne-Romanée Hautes-Maizières (0.63 ha), and 2,16ha in Ladoix.

NATURAL

EXPRESSION

A long-standing precursor to Burgundian natural wines, and biodynamics more generally, Henry-Frédéric Roch is considered something of a visionary. Respecting the natural expression of terroir was at the core of everything he did; this respect for nature and low intervention vinifications shines through in the domaine's wines.

His propensity to employ rigorous organic methods and his decision to abandon all inputs in both the vineyard and during vinifications (at a time when in Burgundy, this was not common practice) established Roch as avant-garde among his peers. No sulphites were added to wines from the domaine from the late 1990s onwards. Always striving to find harmonious balance in his wines, from 2016, the domaine began experimenting with long barrel-ageing, sometimes for up to three or four years. In recent years, he had also bought a farm – from which he planned to sell produce – and managed a négociant business selling natural wines.

Roch had strong opinions about the state of viticulture and agriculture, affirming that “so-called modern agriculture in the last 60 years has thrown to the wind the ‘terroirs’ and the soils, which have served for thousands of years. Perhaps now man must re-evaluate this.” Yannick Champ, who began working at the domaine in 2002 as an intern, and was nominated co-director in 2010, is now ensuring the future of the domaine.

Lauded at once as an anti-conformist and defender of tradition, Henry-Frédéric Roch will be remembered for his charisma and pioneering spirit. Wine enthusiasts seek rarity above all else. When a talented winemaker dies, their wines become collectable items, as each bottle may be the last chance for the enthusiast to taste the late producer's wines. It's perhaps not surprising, therefore, that Domaine Prieuré Roch has been arousing interest at auction. As a leader in the development of natural wines, a trend that has been gathering speed at auction, the Prieuré Roch name is eagerly sought out by enthusiasts in Europe, Asia and the US.

In recent months, Prieuré Roch wines have exploded onto the market, with its emblematic label – inspired by Egyptian hieroglyphics – increasingly featuring online, everywhere from Instagram to iDealwine auctions. Of the 63 bottles sold on the iDealwine platform in 2018, 48 were sold after Roch's death, in the space of just one month. Since the start of 2019, 93 bottles have sold at auction, representing a turnover of €45,870 (£40,440). On 21 November 2018, only 3 days after his death, a bottle of Nuits-Saint-Georges VV 2010 sold for €304, almost doubling its initial estimate of €160. In January 2019, a bottle of the iconic Clos Goillotte went under the hammer for €1,330.

Since then, growth has been exponential. The domaine's Chambertin Clos de Bèze is the perfect example. Before April 2019, none of these bottles had reached the €1,000 mark, iDealwine's May auctions saw all 10 wines from this climat cross that threshold. A bottle of the 1998 vintage even sold for €1,740. A combination of Henry-Frédéric Roch's talent as a winegrower and the increasing scarcity of his wines, coupled with consumers' ever-intensifying love affair with Burgundy and natural wines, suggest that auction prices will continue the same trajectory in the coming months.