



AMERICANS AT HOME IN BURGUNDY

Diverse terroirs host a variety of expatriates who are making their mark // BY JENNIFER FIEDLER // PHOTOGRAPHS BY JON WYAND



Vintner Alex Gambal and his wife, Diana, a tour guide, reside about 20 minutes from Beaune, in an old barn that they renovated.

“I arrived here at the perfect time,” says Alex Gambal, a Washington, D.C.–based businessman who came to Burgundy with his young family in tow in 1993 to work in wine.

The trans-Atlantic move was just supposed to be for a year if it didn't work out—a tale of adventure to tell their friends and family. But it did, and he stayed. Gambal, 54, who has the efficient stockiness of a wrestler's build, graying hair and the coltish grin of a teenager, recounts his early days in Burgundy working for American agent Becky Wasserman. Later, he became a négociant, trading barrels of wine with heavy-hitting names like Potel and Girardin for the first vintages of Maison Alex Gambal. “Dominique Lafon let me borrow his corking machine,” he says with a laugh, semi-incredulous at the generosity shown to him by top winemakers. “And that's how you get going.”

Competition for good grapes is fiercer now, reports Gambal, as growers have realized that they can earn more money by bottling their own wines than by selling off the grapes. The pressure has been heightened further as a host of new micronégociants has entered the game. For Gambal, that means shifting his strategy slightly from buying grapes to owning more vineyards. With the purchase of



two small parcels of Bâtard-Montrachet last year—he's the first foreigner to own part of the *grand cru* vineyard—Gambal has planted his flag firmly on pedigreed French soil, bringing his land holdings in the region to around 8.5 acres.

The sale was one of several high-profile real estate deals involving American investors in recent years. To name a few: American film producer Marc Tarlov's high-profile multicontinental Evening Land project, which makes wines in Oregon, California and Burgundy, invested in a winery near Beaune this spring; Mark O'Connell, a Kansas City-based collector, financed part of Maison Champy's takeover of Domaine Louis Boillot in Volnay in 2011; and New York sommelier Robert Bohr led a group of buyers that picked up Meursault's Domaine René Manuel in 2010 for \$16.5 million.

While American investment in Burgundy is not new—the Kopf family, who owns the wine importing company Kobrand, bought Maison Louis Jadot in 1985—the pace of this cross-pollination has accelerated in the past 20 years, especially during the recent financial crisis as longtime landowners or holders of grape contracts were forced to sell to raise capital. And in a twist, there's a scant handful of Americans (among other foreigners), including Gambal, heading micronégociant houses and actually making wine themselves—and good wine at that. It's a slow drip, to be sure, but as with water that slips into tiny fissures in the pavement and then freezes over the winter, upending roads and sidewalks, the full impact on this traditional and famously secretive region remains to be seen.