Wine Spectator

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In 2015, four NBA legends took a vacation together in the Bahamas. Anthony brought classic wines to share. "So much was sparked by that trip," he says. "I think [it] was really the start of wine culture in the NBA. Other guys saw [it was] cool to drink wine."

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Cover photograph by Meron Meghistab. Shot on location at Domaine Serene Tasting Lounge. Corduroy set by Todd Snyder.

BURGUNDY AND BEYOND

JEAN-NICOLAS MÉO BROUGHT HIS FAMILY ESTATE TO THE PINNACLE IN FRANCE, THEN TOOK HIS EXPERIENCE TO OREGON

BY ROBERT CAMUTO | PHOTOGRAPHS BY JIB PETER

Méo stands in Burgundy's famed Clos de Vougeot vineyard, adjacent to the medieval château. The Vosne-Romanée *grand cru* has been under his direction since 1989.

When Jean-Nicolas Méo was 20 years old, his father dropped a life-changing question on him.

It was the summer of 1984, in Paris, and Méo was getting ready to resume his university studies in business. But his father wanted to talk about wine.

The family's historic home was an estate in Vosne-Romanée, one of the most prestigious wine towns in Burgundy. At the time, sharecroppers farmed the vineyards and the wine was sold in bulk, though Méo's father, Jean, a businessman and government advisor, had started bottling some wine as a retirement project. New laws were pushing sharecropping toward its end, however, and the Méos had to decide whether to assume all duties at the estate or sell it off.

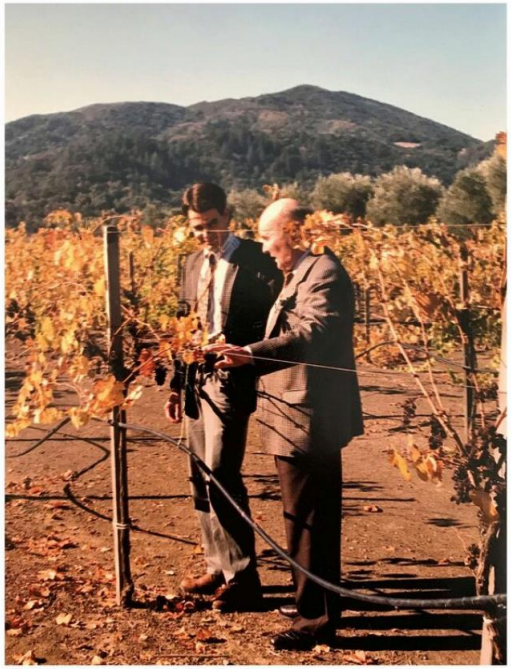
"My father said, 'I need you there,'" recalls Méo, 35 years later. "He told me, 'You don't have to say yes. But if you say no, the domaine will probably be sold.'"

Jean-Nicolas, the youngest of three children, was the only one who had not yet committed to a career: "It was me or no one."

He took a week to mull the offer.

"I accepted because I realized it would be impossible for me to let the domaine go, and to let go of Vosne-Romanée," says the lanky and graying Méo, now 57, standing outside the family winery in Vosne-Romanée on a clear summer morning.

At the time of his decision, neither Méo nor his father could know how much it would shape Burgundy's fine wine scene. Méo, after all, was a Parisian and knew nothing about farming or winemaking.



Raised in Paris, the young Jean-Nicolas had no knowledge of winegrowing when he took over the family estate in 1989, relying on the wisdom of Burgundy legend Henri Jayer (right) to guide him.

Méo waited five years to join the domaine full-time—finishing university in Paris while earning an enology degree in Dijon and then a master's in economics (his "insurance policy") from the University of Pennsylvania.

When he arrived in tiny Vosne-Romanée in January of 1989 (current pop. 350), the domaine needed to be reset from scratch. Because the Méos had long relied on sharecroppers with whom they split wine production, they had no winemaking or cultivating equipment. "We had no tanks. Not even a pair of pruning shears," Méo remembers.

Méo settled into his grandparents' house and made wine in the old cellar beneath it. His guide was one of the retiring sharecroppers—who happened to be winemaking legend Henri Jayer, who was then winding down a career that had begun in 1945. While Jayer continued working the vineyards he owned, he'd relinquished the Méos' plots and agreed to tutor the family neophyte.

"Henri told my father, 'I will accept to teach him because he is a virgin—he knows nothing,'" Méo says with a laugh. "If I'd had my own ideas about wine already, Henri would have refused."

With Christian Faurois, the son of another sharecropper, managing the vineyards, Méo, as he puts it "was in good hands."

With great mentors, old vines in prime *terroirs* and a string of good vintages, Méo's wine career took off like a rocket. In his second vintage, 1990, a pair of neighboring *crus* in Vosne—Méo-Camuzet Richebourg and Méo-Camuzet Vosne-Romanée Au Cros Parantoux—hit near perfection, scoring 99 points in *Wine Spectator* blind tastings.

Méo embraced Jayer's vision and legacy and went on to produce wines which rivaled his mentor's in quality. But he also carried out his own vision—planting new vineyards on family lands and renting others, while sourcing grapes for a second label.

In the past decade he's expanded his horizons to Oregon, where he's partnered with his friend and former music entrepreneur Jay Boberg (ex-president of MCA Records) in Nicolas-Jay, an estate and winery that has itself become known for refined Pinot Noir.

"Jean-Nicolas is quite refined and cerebral, and you see this in his wine: thoughtful, complex, always interesting," says friend and generational peer Véronique Drouhin-Boss, winemaker at Burgundy's Joseph Drouhin and at Domaine Drouhin Oregon. "Jean-Nicolas doesn't do things in a rush. In Burgundy he quietly learned his vineyards and how to best express their *terroirs*. In Oregon I trust he will do the same."

Méo often remembers what Jayer said in their first vintage together: "See? It's easy to make great wine."

"He was right," Méo says of Jayer, who died in 2006 after passing his holdings on to his nephew Emmanuel Rouget. "Once you have good fruit and method it is quite simple. But creating the right conditions for the method is not simple."

COURTESY OF JEAN-NICOLAS MEO

"[MÉO] IS QUITE REFINED AND CEREBRAL. YOU SEE THIS IN HIS WINE: THOUGHTFUL, COMPLEX, INTERESTING." —VÉRONIQUE DROUHIN-BOSS

Just how the Méos inherited an estate that included about 27 acres of prime vineyards in and around Vosne, is itself an unlikely tale.

In the early 20th century, Étienne Camuzet, an elected national representative and the mayor of Vosne-Romanée, had little time for winegrowing and leased out the family vineyards to sharecroppers. But in 1920, when the nearby landmark Clos de Vougeot—with its château built from the early Middle Ages by winemaking Cistercian monks—went up for sale along with 37 of its 120 acres, Camuzet rallied local vignerons to buy the land.

He himself purchased the castle and 7.5 acres of surrounding vineyards. But deeming the château too ostentatious for a center-left politician's abode, he used it to house tenant farmers.

Before the outbreak of World War II, when Burgundy's appellation hierarchy was established, Clos de Vougeot was listed among the elite *grands crus*. After the war, the castle was in bad shape, having been used as a hospital, arsenal and prison by respective French, German and American armies. Camuzet kept his vineyards, but sold the château for a modest sum (fixed to the price of barrels of wine) to a group of families who ceded it to the nascent Burgundy-promoting bon vivant association, the Confrérie des Chevaliers du Tastevin.

In 1959, Étienne Camuzet's childless daughter bequeathed the domaine to her distant but serious-minded nephew Jean Méo, who was then a member of French President Charles de Gaulle's cabinet. The vineyards included a half-dozen plots in *grands crus*—Richebourg, Échezeaux, three in Corton, and the most famous of them, Clos de Vougeot.

Today, Jean-Nicolas Méo leads a visitor through his family vineyards adjacent to the Clos du Vougeot château at the top part of a barely perceptible slope that declines to the east. "Here in the upper Clos de Vougeot there is very little soil. One meter below the surface we have rock—limestone," he says, standing in a plot of gnarled, century-old vines.

"Clos de Vougeot has a reputation as a *cru* that is generous, rich and imposing. But this upper part is very different—the *terroir* gives a wine that is more elegant, straight, delicate.

"It's always easier if a wine corresponds to the image of an appellation. But here it's not the case," he adds. "In the past, the monks created the *clos*, but they never left a recipe for the different parts of it."

During Méo's first decade at the domaine, most of the remaining sharecroppers retired, giving him more familial lands to cultivate. In those years, he and Faurois used organic agriculture in some parcels, while sparingly deploying sustainable fungicides on others most prone to mildew. He moved the winemaking to the centuries-old cellars below the historic home of the Camuzet branch in Vosne.

Most importantly, he learned the winemaking method pioneered by Jayer. The key was the cold soaking of grapes in their juices in open steel tanks for as many as five days before allowing the temperature to rise and spontaneous fermentation to begin. The method is known to extract color and flavors, but fewer hard tannins.

With the same goals, Jayer had also led the trend away from whole-cluster fermentations, to avoid extraction of tannins from the stems.

"I loved the way he made wine, because he was really a gourmand. His wines were very sensual—not an intellectual pleasure," Méo enthuses as he drives along a dirt road above Vosne. "Henri loathed stems because he didn't find the pleasure there."

Méo has preserved much of the Jayer method while also tweaking it over the years and adding new technology such as sorting machines and a modern bottling line. One of the biggest changes has been in the use of oak aging. While Jayer preferred all new oak barrels, Méo has reduced their use—adapting the mix of oak and toasting according to vintage and vineyard. And while Jayer eschewed filtering wines, Méo, beginning in 1991, also stopped fining them with clarifying agents.

Méo-Camuzet technical director Damien Hudelot (left) joined the domaine in 2018, replacing Jean-Nicolas' longtime righthand Christian Faurois upon his retirement. Like Faurois, Hudelot has deep roots in Burgundy *terroir*, hailing from nearby Chambolle.

Oregon project Nicolas-Jay, founded in 2014 by Méo and longtime friend Jay Boberg, also relies on the winemaking skills of Tracy Kendall.

Méo parks his SUV and walks across the Richebourg *cru* toward a rise in the hill above it, where lies the 1 hectare *premier cru* of Cros Parantoux. The steep and once-abandoned vineyard was made famous by Jayer, who dynamited it to remove stones and replanted it in the 1950s—bottling it as a *cru* from 1978. Jayer had bought up three-quarters of the vineyard and also cultivated and made wine from the rest, which belonged to the Méos. Today, Jayer's nephew Rouget and Méo remain Cros Parantoux's only vintners.

"It is a wine that is demonstrative and lively and ages very well," says Méo, though he doesn't believe Parantoux is at the same quality level as Richebourg, a *grand cru* which he calls "more consistent." Thus, he has been shocked in recent years as the resale prices of his Cros Parantoux have eclipsed those of Richebourg—even though he sold it for less until this year.

"Sometimes I feel like I am a winemaker who makes one wine," he says, shaking his head. "Because people just want to talk about Cros Parantoux."

By the turn of the millenium, Méo was frustrated by not having enough supply to meet demand. So he began a new segment of the domaine—a label of more affordable wines called Méo-Camuzet Frère & Soeurs. The négociant line has included excellent bottles such as three 2016s that earned outstanding to classic scores from *Wine Spectator*, and the just released Fixin Clos du Chapitre 2018 (90 points, $99).

"Making Burgundy red wines which don't end up in billionaires' cellars allows more people to taste our wines and our method, at home or in restaurants," says Méo, who today produces about 10,000 cases annually, most of that estate wines. "That is important."

Skyrocketing Burgundy prices have created other complications, with soaring vineyard values tempting family members to sell. A few years ago Meo's two sisters (neither of whom is involved in the business) sold part of their shares to an unnamed outside investor, with Méo retaining a controlling interest he hopes will stay in the family.

Méo and his wife, Nathalie, who runs the domaine's ancillary special projects, have three 20-something sons born and reared in Vosne. Middle son Tristan, 24, joined the domaine in 2020 after earning a degree in agricultural engineering.

Méo and his wife, Nathalie (center), have raised three sons in their Vosne-Romanée home. Middle son Tristan (left), now 24, has recently joined the domaine, bringing his degree in agricultural engineering to the fold.

ANDREA JOHNSON

In the past decade, Méo yearned to do something outside the Côte d'Or. At first, like other Burgundy winemakers, he considered expanding south in Beaujolais.

"I am convinced of the quality of Beaujolais, and I love the wines," says Méo over lunch at a local bistro. "But the image in France is terrible. I was concerned that with the conditions in Beaujolais you could work your ass off and sell your wine for $15."

Soon after, Méo joined a wave of Burgundy families that had set up Pinot Noir winemaking in Oregon. The Drouhins were first, establishing their Domaine Drouhin in the Willamette Valley in 1987. Recent Burgundian investors in Oregon have included négociant Louis Jadot with its Résonance Vineyard, as well as Domaines Henriot and Louis Michel Liger-Belair.

Méo's move started in 2012 with a phone call from his Burgundy-loving friend Boberg, whom he'd met through a classmate in Pennsylvania in the 1980s. The two developed their friendship over decades—visiting each other in Burgundy and California.

"We drank so much wine together," Boberg says. "Jean-Nicolas and I like the same kind of wines—with few exceptions."

When Boberg was trying to put investors together for a new winery in Oregon's Willamette Valley, both Véronique Drouhin-Boss and Drouhin Oregon's managing director, David Millman, advised him to call Méo—saying he would be an ideal consultant and addition to the Willamette Valley wine scene.

Though the deal fell through, Boberg and Méo went forward with their own plan to make wine together.

"The Willamette Valley is dedicated to Pinot Noir and is about the size of the Côte d'Or, so you have a critical mass of vineyards and expertise," Méo says. "I felt that I could work there and express myself and be rewarded."

The duo toured and tasted wines, and in 2014 came upon the 15-acre Bishop Creek Vineyard, which was for sale. They bought it in time for harvest for their first vintage: Pinot Noir Yamhill-Carlton District Bishop Creek 2014 (93 points on release).

The winery now also sources grapes from across the valley for about 3,000 cases of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, overseen day-to-day by winemaker Tracy Kendall, a Washington state native whose credits include serving four years as enologist on David Paige's team at Adelsheim before helping launch Nicolas-Jay.

Boberg says that although Méo makes the final decisions about wine, the Frenchman remains a curious and open-minded team member. "It's difficult to find people in his position and with his experience who are as collaborative," Boberg says. "He's confident in his own skin. But he wants to know what you think, and what is your thought process behind it. I think that's how he learns."

For his part, Méo says,"It's been really interesting to see and work in both worlds." He typically (outside of the pandemic) travels to Oregon four to five times a year, including immediately after Burgundy's September harvest days.

"Ripeness can be a problem in Burgundy and almost never a problem in Oregon," says Méo, enumerating the contrasts between the two winegrowing worlds. "Acidity can be a problem in Oregon and almost never a problem in Burgundy."

More fascinating to him are the cultural differences. "In Burgundy, people say 'I am an artist—I have my *terroirs*.'" Méo becomes animated as he acts out the part of an old school vigneron. Then he shifts gears, straightens his spine and caricatures a New World wine technician. In America people say, 'I have this clone and this equipment.' It's much more technical."

"I think in Oregon if you loosen up a bit you can make really great wines," he says with the same excitement as when he speaks of his early days in wine. "The AVAs there are distinctive and you can really taste the *terroirs*. It's nice to see you have these things outside of Burgundy—that it actually works somewhere else." □

SELECTED RECENT RELEASES FROM MÉO-CAMUZET*

SCORE	WINE	PRICE
97	Echézeaux Les Rouges du Bas 2018	$588
97	Richebourg 2017	$1,750
96	Clos de Vougeot Près Le Cellier 2017	$450
95	Corton Les Perrières 2017	$399
94	Clos de Vougeot 2018	$440
94	Vosne-Romanée Au Cros-Parantoux 2018	$1,710

SELECTED RECENT RELEASES FROM NICOLAS-JAY*

SCORE	WINE	PRICE
94	Pinot Noir Dundee Hills Nysa 2017	$90
93	Pinot Noir Willamette Valley 2017	$65
93	Pinot Noir Yamhill-Carlton Bishop Creek 2017	$100

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