

DIARY OF A WINE-MAD-MAN

PROLOGUE

Little had I known that my wine making odyssey was to start with a self induced tour of the grand city of Basel. Unbeknownst to me and other motorists, the slipway onto the E25 highway towards Mulhouse had been closed on this gloriously sunny and warm September's evening, and somehow I ended up in central Basel aimlessly driving around trying to find my way to a highway – any highway! Though it cost me 40 minutes, at least I left with proof that Basel has more to it than the industrial terrain that surrounds the outskirts. And since I was on my own in the car, I could notch the volume of the car stereo to 'Number 11' in listening to my all-time favourite album, Ozzy's "Diary of a Madman".

Four hours earlier, I had received an email from Nicolas Potel, a talented Burgundian winemaker whose wines I had begun to follow and admire. We had finally connected after I had spoken to Jonathan Chamberlen at Goedhuis wine merchants in London who had kindly organised the connection via Graham Gardner. I had just that morning given up hope of joining the harvest after hacking my way through a phone conversation in French with 'Domaine Potel'. The lady on the phone announced the harvest was over. Completed, done, finito (Yes alright, she didn't say 'finito'). Had I kept up with Nicolas' movements I would have realised that I was now speaking to the wrong domaine, but more about that later. Anyway, a one-liner from Nicolas declared "we are still harvesting, can you come tomorrow? We start at 7am." As my friends and family already know, I have a wonderful and understanding wife, so when I asked permission to go at wafer-thin notice, Rachel said yes without blinking. "Take the car", she said, "so you don't have to bother with trains", probably referring to the notoriously unreliable Swiss train service (well, not really, but perhaps the French leg...). This was despite the fact that Lina had had to come home from school due to a high temperature earlier in the day – bless her, she was stuck with a fever for the remainder of the week.

Anyway, I packed my bags and took off after a quick supper with my family, Jessica, Lina and Rach all waving me off with best wishes. Even the bleedin' cats seemed happy to get me out of the house for a few days – I swear I could see both Amber and Jasmine wearing Cheshire cat grins.

After getting through the urban jungles of Zürich and, as mentioned, Basel, I was finally on track for Beaune, France.

When I got off the peage motorway at Beaune, the time was 11.29pm and it was raining and very September-dark. To finish my maiden harvest journey in grand touristic style, I managed to disobey my GPS (I so wish Jessica had convinced me to buy that Homer Simpson voiceover version – it would have uttered “Duh” about ten wrong turns) and did a mini-tour of the rather surprisingly industrial outskirts of Beaune – home of the Hôtel Dieu and the Hospices de Beaune and spiritual heart of the Burgundy wine industry. Just before midnight, I pulled into the forecourt of Le Hôme - my ‘home’ for the next five nights. Florens and Mathilde, my hosts, greeted me warmly, possibly with a hint of sleep in their eyes, and showed me to my room in the attic. The room turns out to be a perfect representation of the ‘flower’ period of sometime last century (or possibly the century before that) and is very charming. I am assured by Florens that “the burnt smell is pas de problem”, but merely that of a little dust on the electric heater. OK then. With the rain having cooled the midnight air and the heater safely turned off, I slip into my floral bed half dressed and drift off in wondrous anticipation.

DAY 1

I wake up with rather less than the required amount of sleep at 6am and eagerly traverse the retired floor tiles in the bathroom, slip into ‘suitable’ (I have no idea what is ‘suitable’ for grape pickers) clothing and tip-toe down the creaking stairs into the lobby, hoping for a swift coffee. Not a soul in sight, and short of time, I get in my car to go in search for Nicolas Potel’s winery. I drive the circular road that surrounds the old town and cannot for the life of me get my nearly-Homer Simpson-GPS to cooperate. I am sure Homer would have hooted ‘operator error’ because clearly I was not getting the instructions into my head. Funnily enough, I end up precisely where I started, and then realise I am standing nearly opposite the winery. Duh! At least that meant I was going to be spot on time, as planned.

While on the street outside the town seemed to be still waking up, once I step inside the courtyard of the winery, there is a small army of pickers and other folk waiting for the day to begin. They are served coffee with their Gitans (joking apart, I did see the odd Marlboro, too). I identify Nicolas and introduce myself. From London? Well, kind of, almost, but no,

living in Switzerland. Aha, speak French? Well, erm, not so much. But you are Swiss? No, Swedish. I am learning German, though. As I ponder why I bothered to add that last bit, Nicolas assigns me to Manuel. 'Manu' speaks some English and they explain I will start in the vineyard today, and Nicolas adds "tomorrow you help me here in the winery". Music to my ears, as this is precisely what I had hoped for, to see and do things first hand both in the vineyard and in the winery.

Manu is a super fellow from Dijon who also lived in Leeds (whatever lures a Frenchman to Leeds, I can only imagine). He trained as a chef but enjoys helping in the harvest season.

We drive off in a long line of vans and trucks, in the direction of Nuits-Saint-Georges north of Beaune. As soon as we pile out into the vineyard, orders come fast and furious in rapid-fire French. I must have looked like an idiot straight from the asylum, because of course I could not understand and I did not know the ropes. Manu pairs me with Werner, an elderly gentleman who turns out to be Swiss, even from the German speaking part. Unfortunately, he had left for the French speaking part early in his life (apparently leaving his German language behind, too) and so we end up trying to communicate in a mixture of French, German and English.

I am handed a pair of secateurs and ordered to watch Werner. Werner dumps all his picking wisdom on me in 30 seconds flat and away we go. Time is 7.30am.

How difficult could it be, clipping grape clusters off a vine bush? Well, not very difficult, is the answer. You need to get close to where the stem joins the cane. One challenge is spotting the bunches hiding under the leaves and branches. Much later, I learned the very obvious trick of simply and ruthlessly tearing off leaves to expose the grape bunches – the vines are pruned back to one or two canes and spurs later anyway. But the main problem is constantly leaning over which either does your back in, or crouching, which does your legs no good whatsoever. I paid the price for both postures at the end of the working day.

Anyway, we blast through another plot and suddenly the grape 'sergeants' blow the whistle to indicate a break – time, 9am. They pull out breakfast for us! This actually comes as a bit of a surprise to me as somehow I had thought only lunch would be provided. But it is a godsend, because I am ravenous! Everyone is already filthy dirty from battling the vines so it is just as well this is not a sit-down jobbie: Out of big sacks

come baguettes, chunks of cheese, pate and salami. And wine! I don't often get served wine with my brekkie. In a plastic cup. It seems to be taken for granted by all the (mostly French, say no more) pickers. We all take just a splash or two in our cups, except two or three fellows who seem to have BYOs and gingerly crack open their bottles.

Suddenly, there is a bit of commotion. People are looking across the wine fields to 'hostile territory' (someone else's vineyard plot) and there is something reflecting rather like those aluminium foil strips my old man used to put in our cherry trees to scare off the birds (never worked). But this 'scarecrow' is moving, and quite fast. It reflects in the sun again. Then we realise the size of it, almost like a bird of prey swooping for hapless pickers just above the grapevines. As it comes into clear sight, we realise it has four wheels, albeit rather small ones, since they belong to a Mini. The Mini carries on its roof a clubber-sized can of Red Bull (do I get paid for endorsements like this?). I mean, here I am in Burgundy, quietly trying to learn the ways of the wine maker and French life, and along comes a British styled car made by the Germans and driven by two blonde Hungarian femmes fatales carrying an Austrian product. Luckily, I had my Swiss (German-cum-French speaking part) friend to hold onto as all the young male pickers rushed to get their share of the Red Bull dosage. You've got to hand it to Mateschitz, it is ballsy to target the wine audience in the same way he targets extreme sports enthusiasts and clubbers.

After that outer-space experience, we are ordered back to the rows of vines, all Guyot trained, off course, each row very neatly pruned and 1 metre high (much different to the training systems used back home in Zurich). I try to save the small of my back from the constant bending over by instead crouching and lunging and for this, my calves cursed me for several days afterwards. My fingers are VERY sticky from grape juice. My arachnophobia is numbed by all the eight-legged encounters. Other creepers too, for that matter, all having a field day.

Nearly three hours pass and it is time for lunch. For 35. They take us to a 'restaurant' that has the appearance of an old school canteen and we line up for a massive bowl of pasta salad. I will never finish this huge portion, I am thinking as I take my third bite. By then, the rest of the pickers are already lining up for the main course. And I thought the pasta *was* the main course! Mais non! Boeuf Bourignon is served up. So I have some. great peasant food. We get cheese and chocolate mousse to round off. And the odd glass of wine, of course.

We pick more grapes after lunch as there is nothing else for us to do. Same back breaking work. Same rules. Or at least, that is what I thought. 'André', an old French fellow who looked as if he had spent his life farming and wine harvesting, told me in French to stick to my 'piquet'. "Oui, oui, bon", I replied, not really understanding the meaning of what he said. André was half the size of Napoleon but displayed very imposing body language, just like I imagine the old emperor would have done. I am not sure how many times I got told off before I learnt his rule of 'rotate at every other pole along the row'. He was clearly quite frustrated with me, but smiled as though realising he was dealing with an idiot.

At five, I sensed we were rounding up for the day. But I was wrong. The sergeants squeezed another 45mins out of us. I think I knew then, what complete and utter incapacitation was like. I was ready to curl up in a ball. Then suddenly we were ferried off. Home? Not for me. I ended up back at the winery to put in another couple of hours of muscle tingling work tipping crates of grapes onto the 'sorting line' and cleaning equipment. Alas, all for a good cause.

I barely remember getting into bed – via the bathtub (yes I know, very girly) – but through tiny slits in my eyes could discern a Blackberry clock telling me it was 9.35pm. Out.

DAY 2

I had slept like a clubbed seal and my mind woke up refreshed. My body, however, woke up on the wrong side of the bed, in a complete strop. Curiously, my lower legs and feet were in worse shape than my back – squatting clearly was more tolling than bending over. Hm. I wonder if Rachel would agree with that theory? Given her experience with gardening, I mean. Not wanting to let the team down by being late, I roll out of bed, get ready and sneak quickly out of Le Hôme. Not even Baloo – the big black Retriever ostensibly described as the 'guard dog' (the French do have a sense of humour) – noticed me going past him in reception. This is odd, because as soon as I start walking down the road towards the winery, I hear a distinct 'clomping' sound accompanying my normally cat-like stride. My right foot is not getting much co-operation from my grumpy lower-leg muscles. Undeterred, I make the 400 metres down towards the town centre and pass a little bar which at first glance looked closed and almost boarded up, but on second inspection showed activity through the slightly-ajar metal door. I boldly step inside, immediately

greeted by three pairs of sleepy eyes and one pair of bright eyes, the latter belonging to the proprietor. Everyone says "Bonjour Monsieur" and go back to their morning ritual. One of those morning rituals turns out to be 'sipping a glass of white wine'. Why not? Time is 6.47am according to the French news channel blaring in the corner above the bar. I keep a close eye on my timing as I order my Cafe Crème (or do they say Cafe au Lait in this part of France?) and at 6.49am customer no. 5 enters. "Bonjour", and then he proceeds to shake everyone's hands, including mine.

Because of my temporary 'disability' I decide to give myself 50% extra time to get to the winery so leave with a "Merci, Bonjournée", at 6.57am. Hobble, hobble. I am greeted at the winery with numerous handshakes and Nicolas Potel appears and quickly reaffirms that "Matt, today we need you in the winery". Excellent news, exclaim my aching muscles in unison.

I am introduced to Julien, a young fellow from Bordeaux who speaks English. He will be my partner for the day. Great, my non-existent French skills won't be needed. We march off into the 'tank-room' and at 7.05am have started 're-montage', or 'pumping-over'. The tank room contains 20 steel vats ranging from 1,350-2,650 litres in size and all filled with red grapes. Each tank is marked with a different plot of land and date of harvest, the earliest from 9.9.09 – Rachel's birthday! Most tanks are equipped with a cooling sleeve around them, but not all. The tanks are elevated from the floor on legs for hygiene reasons and rise to a little over two metres. We plug in the 5cm diameter transparent tubes to the base of the tanks and use electric pumps to feed the juice from the bottom of the tank over the edge and onto the top of the 'cap' of 'must' created by the grape skins floating to the top. Potel's deputy wine maker – Sylvain – has given very strict instructions on the method to use today: relatively vigorous spraying from 40-50cm distance over the cap, and with fingers dispersing the juice into a 'spray'. This aerates the must and the extra oxygen helps the yeasts to start their 'feeding frenzy' of the sugars. It is also essential as a measure to 'disturb' the cap ('chapeau') which also contains a lot of acetic bacteria which, left with too much oxygen at the top of the tank, could turn the contents into vinegar very quickly. As such, we are instructed to pump over twice per day – morning and evening. Furthermore, as I will learn later, Potel is meticulous and artisan enough to manually carry out punching-down ('pigeage'). Simultaneous to the pumping over, Julien and I also measure and record average temperatures and densities of the must. Each tank shows different readings of course, and it is fascinating, however obvious, to see

the evolution of the different vats. We all know fermentation generates heat and eventually the must for red wine making will reach temperatures of between 20-32 degrees Celsius as the yeasts feast on the sugars. But for now, the average temperature recorded by "Master Matt" (read: cellarbum) hovers around 11-14 degrees. It is perhaps equally obvious that juice is denser than water. However, alcohol is LESS dense than water. So, when we measure density it allows the winemakers to track the gradual drop in the 'thickness' of the must.

Julien turns out to be a WSET alumnus, having completed the Diploma that I am currently undertaking. One difference between us is that Julien at least is in the wine business – as a merchant in Bordeaux – so I suppose that makes him slightly less of an anorak than me. We are, however, both staunch followers of Potel and his wines so share with equal passion our cellarbum duties in the winery. Before tipping back the juice from the test tubes we use for checking densities, we complete our instructions by each taking a sip of the juice to 'sanity-check' it against any off tastes and general progress. There were the more poetic moments (apart from the recurring line-ups of vintage wines that Nicholas Potel pulled from his private cellar) when Julien and I would go slightly dreamy-eyed and marvel at what this juice would at some point in future become. When the glaze wore off our eyes, we reluctantly acknowledged that it tasted like – well, grape juice. Or rather, 20 different grape juices because in actual fact, next to one another you could quite easily detect different nuances in flavour, stages of development, and fermentation and of course colour.

Let me tell you, we cleaned a lot! All equipment had to be rigorously and regularly cleaned and the floors hosed down, and then swiped. I can imagine that although the insistence on cleanliness is not unique, it is one of many defining quality features of the winemaker that is Nicolas Potel. More proof of attention to detail came from the fact that early and late in the day, we worked in semi-darkness as Nicolas sought to avoid temperature fluctuations (not good for the grape must) caused by artificial lighting.

Mid-morning, we were called from our posts to urgently help tip crates of white grapes (ask which variety, and I slap you!) into the press – Nicolas uses a pneumatic press. The key to keeping white wine fresh and not acquiring the taste of wet cardboard is to minimise exposure to oxygen throughout the entire winemaking process. Thus, we formed a human chain and furiously tipped grapes into the press in order to get the freshly

picked Chardonnay grapes to be pressed as soon as possible and then the juice pumped from the press straight into stainless steel tanks. Even then, Nicolas' winemakers had made sure to spray on a protective layer of sulphur dioxide (think 10,000 matches being put out simultaneously and you are close to the smell that blanketed the winery for a few moments) before the grapes went into the press. Of course, there is nothing necessarily unique to careful handling in a modern winery but I still got the impression that the human intervention that guided almost every aspect here *was* different and utterly quality oriented.

Labour in the winery is a wet and sticky business. If you are not covered in grape juice, you are sure to be trapped when cleaning equipment, or when cleaning crates. Empty crates are fed through an 'automatic car-wash' so they can be sent straight back out into the field. Manning the 'car-wash' was indeed wet work, and not necessarily amusing. There was definitely higher amusement value in balancing ten stacked empty crates in your hands to get them from press to car-wash. Most people made most runs (yes, runs) across the winery forecourt without 'leaning tower' incidents but it became a challenge that people watched with one peering eye.

Working indoors in semi-darkness and getting gradually more wet, it was a welcome change to be instructed to step outside to the cooperage area. It required decent old heavy lifting. Moving empty 225-litre oak barrels (called 'tonneau' here in this part of the world – 'barrique' is SO Bordeaux) is hard labour. Moving bigger barrels was harder labour. But sanding them down to make their appearance more 'aesthetic' – this was really hard work that also required skill with the entirely lethal sanding machine. Alex, another young aficionado, had already been doing this for a while and looked like he was made from bread, so covered was he in wood dust. What quicker way to becoming a 'breadman' than joining in the fun whilst wearing damp clothing – it caked me up no time! And I had thought picking grapes was hard work!

We stopped for a grand lunch served in the forecourt – a pork, sausage, and cabbage stew that reminded me a little of choucroute, except that it wasn't. And a fine display of wine. I sat down next to Sylvain, the chief winemaker under Nicolas. Conversation was underway in French. I offered by way of breaking the ice, the remark that Sylvain looked a bit like my hero David Coverdale, the lead singer from Whitesnake, but could not be sure whether Sylvain had taken offence as all subsequent conversation in French went over my head.

After lunch we were left very little time to think about how much we'd eaten and drunk, as grapes started coming in from the field again – not by their own accord of course, they were chauffeur-driven by the field team leaders. There were white and red grapes coming in so obviously we repeated the superfast handling of the whites and then I was posted to the sorting table for the reds. My job was to tip the crates of grapes onto the gridded 'shaker' table where most (not all, mind you!) MOG got shaken off. MOG means 'matter other than grapes' and includes spiders, beetles and other utterly surprised little creatures from the vineyard. The second part of the sorting table consists of a conveyor belt next to which 4-6 persons armed with secateurs sort the good grapes from the bad. Bad grapes include mould and mildew affected ones, and also rotting grapes. The ratio of good to bad was probably 20:1. Though this was my first harvest, I did get the impression the grapes were on the whole extraordinarily healthy. Once they pass this scrutiny, the next conveyor belt lifts the bunches into the de-stemmer, a clever contraption that fiercely spits out the grape stems in one direction and gently delivers grapes in the other.

Then there is a lull in activity at the sorting table as no more grapes come in for a while, so I move back onto the dirty work of sanding barrels. It is where I feel the least confident despite slowly learning the technique. It just seems so blatantly dangerous with those crazy electric sanders easily being able to cut deep gashes in skin and flesh. But I persevere.

Then, out of my dust-caked overalls and over to the sorting tables again. I do a couple hundred more crates then take a place further down the sorting table, secateurs in hand. This is NOT a place for squeamish people afraid of creepy-crawlies! In other words, not a place for me! Well, what difference does a few spiders and bugs in your fist make? In the interest of making 'beetleful' wine, I simply could not let it bug me.

It was then back to the semi-darkness to do some more pumping over, temp-reading and density checks. Before we knew it, it was a quarter to nine and we'd completed our task and could round up for the evening. As soon as we had cleaned the floor and equipment again, of course! Wine-making is no walk in the park.

Afterwards, my cleaning rituals, I made a short trip into Beaune old town for a late snack, which of course turned into the obligatory three-course meal. Sadly, I must have been ensnared in a tourist trap at the tail end of the serving window because the whole meal – including the wine and the service – was the antithesis of my romantic vision of dining in the heart of

wine country. Bland food, sour wine and arrogant staff. Grumpy and mildly foul-mouthed, I marched out of the restaurant leaving no tip, at 11.37pm. A few minutes before the witching hour, my floral-pattern-encased bed hit me hard in the head. And I was out.

DAY 3

Since I had soaked in the bath already for a few minutes the night before, I thought I had plenty of time to wake up slowly. But once I got out of bed, I started dilly-dallying around the floral compartment looking for something clean and dry to wear, and quickly found myself running out of time. When I slithered downstairs, Baloo greeted me with a sniff of my once-were-trainers (Baloo, remember, is the dog not the owner). I clomped along down the road to the winery, claspng somewhat rigidly (maybe desperately?) in my hand a little ibuprofen pill that I could pop with my coffee to scare away some of the head- and body ache. "Bonjour, bonjour, bonjour" to everyone, but I went into denial about the handshake thing. I disregarded the brief thought that maybe tomorrow I would no longer be welcome. Half-pint sized fellow grape picker André marched through the door to the bar and proceeded to order a beer. Why not? It is nearly 7am after all. But we were almost late already, so when we step outside together, André quickly marches off ahead of me on his stocky legs, as my clomping seems to be agitating him. See you back at the farm!

I am one minute late, but do not get punished for it. Rather, I am again awarded higher social status by being asked to stay at the winery rather than going into the vineyard. Yes! I find the winery work more interesting, though the field work of course has its charms. In any case, it feels like there is rain in the air, so I am quite pleased to have cover over my head. Maybe I got lucky because another 'anorak' joined the group this morning and Nicolas wanted to send him into the vineyard as a first step. Sebastien, the new fellow, therefore gets sent to the 'frontline'. He is a buddy of Julien who lives in Lyon and who works as an engineer but whose heart beats for wine. He's about three metres tall and I wonder how he is going to be able to reach down to the grapes.

We start the morning in the same vein as the day before. Julien and I pump over, measure, test and clean. When breakfast comes at nine I am ready for it – perhaps as a consequence of my failed supper the night before. The big chunky brown "prison bread" (so called by one of the

workers because it is big enough to hide several prison-escape tools inside!) is super fresh and matches perfectly with the paté and cheeses. And wine.

We carry on with our work and I then get sent to do some tests on white wine already in barrel. Times goes very quickly and it is close to lunchtime when I get ordered to climb into a vat to walk on the grape cap. "Take off your trousers", says Whitesnake-Sylvain, but I dither and soon a young woman has instead whipped off her jeans and climbed into the vat. Maybe it's because they say it's really good for your skin that she was so quick to get her legs dirty? So I miss my chance at punching-down (pigeage) with my feet and legs steeped in juices. But I do get to be a willing observer of the spectacle. Though of course, it is not for show, but forms an important part of the process in a serious winery. And by the way, feet are at least nominally washed in a basket of water beforehand. I was not witness to what happened to the feet *after* the pigeage. Also, for the record, we are obviously not at the wine stage here. The juice, after undergoing fermentation and other wine making processes such as clarification and stabilisation, turns into wine void of (most) bacteria because of the presence of alcohols and acids.

Lunch in the sunshine is a superb three-course farm meal consisting of delicious fish as the centre piece. Nicolas pulls out all the stops regarding wine served, and the line-up includes a 1978 Volnay made by Nicolas' father. This was one of the very best vintages in Burgundy over the past five decades the wine is beautifully elegant and poised.

It's astonishing how many aspects of everyday French life I have missed during my numerous visits to France. The hand-shaking. The breakfast wine. And the plate-wiping. As we get onto cheese, I am vaguely aware of people watching me 'struggle' to find a non-saucy part of my plate for my cuts of cheese and Valerie next to me makes a remark in French. Eventually, Mme Potel translates to English: "In France we use the bread to wipe our plates for the cheese", she explains. Well, my chunk of bread disappeared in a nano-second at the beginning of lunch. Next time, eh.

Back to work, I am stationed by the tray-washing. It is wet and muddy work, so I am relieved when Nicolas sends me to take over the unloading of grape crates onto the sorting table. This is work more suited to a man – some honest heavy lifting! I spend at least two hours here, loading nearly ten palettes of grapes! Each palette takes 48 crates of grapes weighing about 10kg each. So I lifted about four and a half tonnes of grapes in the two hours!

Various items of equipment in the winery need cleaning (again) so I move onto that. This is turning out to be a very wet day so the sound of my clomping around the concrete floor is supported by a somewhat less rhythmic squidgy sound from my soaked and dust-caked trainers. Julien in the meantime moves around in stealthy silence. My endless clomp-and-squidge might not have been a surprise topic had Julien been seeing a psychiatrist.

Whitesnake-Sylvain asks me to prepare samples from each of the tanks. Lining up 20 test tubes next to each other, you realise how different each grape must is in appearance and flavour. Suddenly, it's late again and we are all cleaning equipment and floors in the darkness. As we finish and time approaches 8.30pm, Nicolas rewards everyone with some more good wine. I quickly knock back the Kronenbourg I had grabbed in all haste and get handed a glass of Premier Cru Chablis. "Super-fresh", is all I can muster in attempting among my wine friends to describe the lemon-and-minerals Chablis. Nicolas nodded gently, in agreement or as a sign of compassion, I could not be sure. Also on the table is a bottle of Dr Loosen Auslese Riesling from the late 20th century (um, 1990s). I never did get my grubby hands on a glass of that nectar, but learned at least that Ernie Loosen and Nicolas are old buddies.

After a quick soak in the bath, I dash (well, hobble) outside in pursuit of one of the restaurants that Florens the guesthouse proprietor had recommended. The one 200 metres down the road seems only a short clomp away, so I settle for that. I enter at about 21.25 (I told you it was a quick bath!) and the owner greets me in a friendly, maybe slightly hesitant manner. As I am shown to a long table laid for what seems like a party of 20 I realise I have again slotted my feeding time at the tail end of the serving window (what is this, Switzerland!) and that perhaps he is eager to serve and then get rid of me. But I was mistaken: the owner makes his best recommendations and lets me enjoy the delicious food at my own pace. Crevettes in a little 'Asian pancake' parcel, then hunch of beef in a red wine sauce with Dauphinois potatoes and then finally a superb cheese tray. A glass of house wine with each course I am completely zonked. Despite the enjoyable pace, I am tucked in bed by 23.15.

DAY 4

6.15am wake-up. At 6.45 I was waiting outside my 'coffee bar' but where was the big fellow behind the bar? The place was closed! Obviously takes Saturday mornings off. There is rain in the air. At 6.55am the rain is not in the air but on my head. I take refuge in Nicolas' kitchen, shuffling about with the other weary pickers and wine makers. I hear my name mentioned and get slightly nervous – I get a sense they are talking about sending me to the front line – the 'picking fields'. I slip out to go and scrub some floors in order to look 'really busy' but Whitesnake-Sylvain nails me. "Matt", he calls, "we need all hands on deck in the vineyard today" (sure, it makes sense – you don't want the grapes to endure too much rain at this point in their maturation as it can dilute their concentration and also potentially contaminate the grapes). But I had hoped for more exciting work in the winery and maybe a small part of me was hoping for cover from the rain. I jump into the van and they put Sebastien (the other 'anorak') in front of the driving wheel. With mild consequences, as we immediately lose sight of the vans in front when they slip away in the tipping rain, and Sebastien turns the wrong way. We eventually have to return to base to get Sylvain to drive in front of us. We head to Savigny Les Beaune. Once we get there, our van – loaded with empty crates – needs to get up a dirt road at the top of the slope so Sebastien confidently revs up and charges up along the hill in the slippery mud bath. Rocks lie across the path like giant chocolate covered hazelnuts, but we persevere. We join the others at the top but realise on climbing out into the showering rain that the van door has flung open and we have left a trail of crates like giant chocolate wafers strewn along the steep, muddy and wet dirt road. Most pickers are watching us and seem to enjoy the early morning entertainment.

This picking session is a grey, grim and wet affair. We're picking Chardonnay, which doesn't help in terms of being able to detect the grape clusters hiding between the green leaves. I am in a shower of rain, bending over into soaking bushes and my glasses keep sliding off my face and twice they drop in the mud. Then suddenly, the rain stops. Within minutes we have rays of sun. Bliss! It will take the rest of the day to dry off, though.

While we pick our way up and down the slopes, the couriers gather our filled crates and take them to the vans. These fellows would take six at a time on their crate rack holders sitting over their shoulders. One filled crate weighs about 10kg, so with 60kg on their backs, they then

negotiate up and down the steep and narrow rows in the vineyard. Very tiring work indeed, which also needs to be fast since every few moments, one of us pickers shouts "caisse" to get our replacement crate.

At nine we get our breakfast of bread, cheese, paté and wine. Everybody wolfs down. The break is very short – only 15mins. We have a lot of grapes to pick in order to complete the harvest today. So we soldier on until lunchtime. I speak to Jeremy who is the sales director. He has also thrown in his pair of hands in the picking. He speaks of Nicolas' departure from Domaine Potel, his new brands "Bellene" and "Roche de Bellene" and we exchange exciting ideas about establishing new markets for Potel's wines.

Lunch. We gather at the usual 'deserted school house canteen' restaurant and are fed salad, then a potato and bacon hash followed by, curiously, apple doughnuts.

After lunch we drive south through Beaune and towards St Romain for some red grape picking. By now, the weather has turned positively summery. The Wellies that I had fortuitously chosen to wear this morning were beginning to feel clammy and the soles were gathering 5cm plateaus of drying mud under them. We move from one plot to the next in beautiful undulating landscape and at quarter to five we're at what seems to be a very (sorry, very) young set of vines. The blueberry-sized (European size, not Texas-size) Pinot Noir grapes are forming small and youthful clusters, almost as if to allow us to visualise that the grapes are running out. It feels like we are nearing the end of our harvest. Everyone is elated and enjoying the warm weather which is nicely drying off the last segments of damp clothing.

Thunder. I hear mutterings in French and I figure out almost as quickly their general meaning as the heavy rain chucked down on us. As I dart off towards the van to fetch my waterproof jacket, I hear the other pickers calling after me, "there goes the Englishman" (of course, I've been speaking mostly English to people here so fair enough). A kind pregnant picker (pregnant! And picking grapes!) corrects them and shouts something like "Il c'est Suedois".

As quickly as the rain arrived, it goes away again and out comes the sun. Just then, we finish. Yes, we finished!. Everyone gathers for some tobacco inhalation and then we set off in a long column of vans and trucks – now decorated with field flowers – down towards the winery in Beaune. The whole distance, all of our drivers make generous use of their car horns,

and as we enter the town, make a cacophonous 'victory' lap around a roundabout. It is noisy, raucous and brilliantly French! People in the street and in cars stop and wave and shout in support as we drive through the town centre. The car wash man sprays the whole convoy with his water gun and tourists take photographs. On a detour to the winery, we all stop again at the 'deserted school house canteen' for celebratory drinks. Nicolas Potel has brought out another string of pearls from his private cellar and generously pours the social stimulant in round after round, to 40-odd pickers. One bottle after another of stunning wine appears: Aloxe-Corton 1999 (Potel); Gevrey-Chambertin '99 (Potel), Volnay '99 (Potel), Gevrey '01, Marsannay...I taste a drop (or two) of each and every one. Nicolas and I then return to the winery, refresh our palates with a beer (!) and talk some business. Nicolas has grand plans for his new brands and mentions an exciting Chilean collaboration.

EPILOGUE

We help to wrap things up in the winery, scrubbing floors and equipment, so that Nicolas can bring out the oysters and Chablis. We finish working around nine and I say my farewells to all my wine buddies and get the group picture, including the 1980s style 'moonie'. Before I set off for Le Home, I ask Sylvain whether he has heard of Whitesnake. "No", he says, "but I will Google it". I wonder if I will get more endorsement money for mentioning that.