



Not just any Burgundy...

At the prestigious charity auction that's an annual highlight of the wine trade, Peter Richards MW gets the inside track on how wines bought here are helping one UK retailer to tap into a growing premium sector

'EN VOULEZ-VOUS MONSIEUR?' The auctioneer conducts the room like an orchestra, his insistent refrain urging potential buyers on from the stage. Sitting a discreet distance from the front is a hunched bidder, ostensibly studying the brochure, in reality alert to every fleeting detail of the buzzy, fluid auction.

The bidding moves onto a Meursault premier cru. The bidder has had *sotto voce* instructions from the buyer sitting directly behind: get this wine. In the context, it looks to be a rare bargain. The buyer is excited – yet increasingly jittery at the bidder's inscrutable, unmoving demeanour. Had he heard the instructions? Barrel after barrel is sold. Soon it will be all gone. The buyer can't remonstrate – it risks undermining the bidder's strategy – and this powerlessness only adds to the tension. Memories of 2015's 'dramatic' and 'stressful' auction resurface, when the plan 'had to be torn up halfway through'.

Finally, the paddle is raised on one of the very last lots: the deal is done, the game expertly played, the wine secured at 40% less than the

price of last year's vintage. The tension diffuses; the auction proceeds. It's a good buy. A bonus to complement the Beaune and the Volnay already in the bag.

Such was one of the many scenes at the 2016 Hospices de Beaune auction in Burgundy.

It's a moment whose basic emotional and tactical plays will have reoccurred many times since 1859 at what is probably the world's most iconic wine auction.

What wasn't so usual was the identity of both bidder and buyer on this occasion. The bidder was Mounir Saouma of micro-négociant Lucien Le Moine, the buyer Emma Dawson MW from British retailer Marks & Spencer.

Trading up

British supermarkets have a reputation for driving a hard bargain rather than supporting charitable causes – so what was M&S doing there? Is it just good PR or part of a bigger plan? And how do the Hospices wines, pricey at the best of times (newer M&S vintages will be more than £100 per bottle), sit in the range?

The answers reveal much about



Above: bidding in full flow at the Hospices de Beaune auction

Left: Hospices de Beaune, Cuvée Goureaux Meursault, Burgundy, France 2014

the current state of British retailing. 'We want to see how far we can push the boundaries when it comes to fine wine,' explains Dawson. 'We have a traditional customer base who trust us. These wines offer them a chance to trade up – and we want to explore this area more.'

In a competitive marketplace, retailers are increasingly focusing on what sets them apart from their rivals. The broader M&S business, whose offering ranges from banking to home furnishings via dependable underwear, has performed indifferently of late. Yet its food and drink category has long held a reputation for quality – witness M&S's commendable performance at the Decanter Retailer Awards in recent years – albeit with a price premium to match. The company's accent on luxury itself took centre-stage in the company's memorable 2005/6 advertising campaign, which featured luxuriantly shot foodstuffs and a lascivious voice-over intoning words to the

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Mounir Saouma

effect: 'This is not just food. This is M&S food.'

In short, the received wisdom is that we Brits turn to M&S when we're treating ourselves or buying gifts. Noting positive reactions to fine wine parcels, M&S developed a new fine wine strategy to capitalise on this. It has evolved over time to incorporate the Hospices wines (first bought in 2011), as well as the launch earlier this year of 30 Bordeaux 2014 wines bought en primeur including the first growth Château Lafite (at a cool £420 per bottle). The fine wines go into key stores and online, the latter channel being particularly ➤

Photograph: Patrick Aventurier/Stringer/Getty Images



The Hospices de Beaune story

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important for fine wines, and the retailer’s periodic 25% discounts also boost sales.

Foothold in fine wine

So is M&S aiming to poach clients from fine wine merchants? Dawson chuckles. ‘We have a buying team with experience and excellent relationships – we can get hold of great wines. We want to use this to become a destination for people who know their wine.’ She also notes how the M&S wine category has ‘momentum’ within the business, with fine wine a small but growing part that has important value, ‘in the way it makes customers feel when they come into store’.

The feel-good factor is on Saouma’s mind too. His Lucien Le Moine wines, much like the man himself, are renowned for their intensity, marrying an expansive character with an almost forensic comprehension of nuance ➤

- The Hospices de Beaune is perhaps the most famous of all charity wine auctions. Its story starts in 1443, when the iconic polychromatic-tiled Hôtel-Dieu (pictured above) in central Beaune was built to tend the sick. Over the years, the charitable cause was given vineyards among other donations. The annual auction ritual as we know it today began in 1859 and forms the centrepiece of boisterous celebrations in Burgundy over the third weekend of November. The proceeds benefit the hospital (now a modern facility on the outskirts of Beaune) and other good causes. There is a famous saying that ‘Beaune is the best place in the world to be ill’.

- The Hospices is an important marker in the evolution of the new vintage. The auction features multiple barrels of 45 cuvées, blended from sites spanning 60ha, principally in the Côte de Beaune,

the majority premier and grand cru. Anyone can buy – today’s market is truly global – and the wines are matured by local merchants, who help with their knowledge of the vintage.

- In 2016, the 156th auction raised €8.4m overall, including 596 barrels of wine, which achieved an average of €13,833 per 228-litre barrel. Though still the second highest total ever, this was 25% down on the ‘exceptional’ 2015 sale – an anomaly, as the Paris attacks happened the day before, spurring charity-minded buyers to spend at unprecedented levels. Nevertheless, there were suggestions that this softening of prices at the November 2016 sale also reflected ‘caution’ over the 2016 vintage and the uncertain political climate.

Conducted by Christie’s, the 157th Hospices de Beaune wine sale will take place on 19 November 2017



Above left: Mounir Saouma of Lucien Le Moine. Above right: pre-auction tasting from the barrel in the Hôtel-Dieu cellars

and detail. He and his wife Rotem buy wines from producers (the Hospices being one example) and age them, often for far longer than the norm, with extended lees contact in barrel a signature technique. Though neither is originally from Burgundy, both feel a strong loyalty and kinship to the region.

‘Our children were all born in Beaune; it’s important to us,’ enthuses Rotem. ‘We are proud to continue this chain of history and support the Hospices – even if it’s not our core business.’ To which Mounir adds: ‘It’s great that the Hospices is more about the wine, charity and people than just business and prices. It’s the best weekend of the year!’

Vintage preview

It’s not only charity and tourism that benefit from the Hospices. The weekend also helps set the tone for the new vintage, from quality to pricing. Christie’s wine consultant and Burgundy expert Jasper Morris MW describes the first half of the 2016 vintage as ‘the most difficult in living memory’, and the latter half ‘as close to perfect as anybody could hope for’. First hail, then a terrible frost and mildew devastated many vineyards – others were unscathed. Thereafter, fine and balanced weather saw ‘pure and refined’ wines being made, more restrained than the opulent 2015s, but which many are touting as fine quality in a classical style.

Hospices winemaker Ludvine Griveau told me that 2016 was a ‘ripe’ vintage, describing the reds as ‘softer, rounder than 2015 but still powerful’ and the whites as ‘balanced’ and ‘supple’. The auction itself delivered a softening of prices for those wines in decent

supply, but an upshift for those that are scarce.

While Mounir expresses ‘admiration’ for M&S’s support of the auction, I quiz Dawson as to how many people buying the Hospices wines really appreciate the charitable aspect and story behind the wines. ‘You do wonder,’ she muses, before adding: ‘Ultimately, we hope people are buying these wines for their quality. But if we can raise awareness of the charity, that’s great.’

As ever, Dawson is counting on her good buys translating into good buys for M&S and its customers. Not to mention for the remarkable charity that is the Hospices de Beaune. **D**

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Two to try: M&S wines from the Hospices de Beaune auction

Both wines matured and bottled by Lucien Le Moine for Marks & Spencer

Hospices de Beaune, Cuvée Goureau Meursault, Burgundy, France 2014 94

£65 M&S

Complex and profound, an intensely savoury Meursault from a top-notch white vintage. Full of roasted nut and zingy red apple flavours. The palate is tense, textured and resonant with bass tones. Still young and steely – will benefit from decanting and time in bottle once opened. **Drink** 2018-2024 **Alc** 13.5%



Hospices de Beaune, Cuvée Jehan de Massol Volnay-Santenots 1er Cru, Burgundy, France 2014 93

£65 M&S

Perfumed and engaging, but still young. This is fairly forceful in character, with dark fruit, gamey and earthy aromas leading into a spicy, layered, savoury-sweet palate profile. Fine-textured, poised style that opens up nicely. **Drink** 2018-2028 **Alc** 13.5%