

DOMAINE DOS AND DON'TS

HOW TO BEHAVE LIKE A COUNT WHEN YOU'RE A NO-COUNT

BY AMY HUNTINGTON

"Don't drink enough to get stopped by the police on your way home," cackled the ancient Loire Valley *viticulteur* when I asked some of my Bourgueil-producing neighbors to enumerate the "dos and don'ts" of wine tastings and chateau visits. But besides the obvious, what else should one know when visiting one of France's tens of thousands of winemakers? The responses overwhelmingly evoked the Golden Rule of French winemakers: "Respect your French *viticulteur* as you would wish him to respect you."

Yes, there are the big-shots like Veuve Clicquot and Chateau d'Yquem, but most French wineries are small family-run businesses, often passed down between generations. A *domaine* usually employs just the winemaker, his spouse and perhaps their offspring, and tastings are often held just yards from where they live. Therefore, a certain measure of filial pride must be taken into account, as well as the run-of-the-mill good manners your mother taught you when visiting someone else's home.

Rule Number One: don't show up unannounced at mealtime. That means you are welcome between 10 a.m. and 6 p.m., excepting, of course, the national lunch hours of 12–2 p.m. And Rule Number Two is, don't show up unannounced at all if you want to get the best possible treatment. Drop-bys are not unwelcome, but if you phone ahead you could be treated to a comprehensive tour of the grounds instead of a summary visit of the warehouse.

Rule Number Three: don't exclude your host from conversation. Several winemakers told me they considered that the height of rudeness. If your host doesn't speak English, save extraneous talk for later.

In case you end up in a chilly underground cave, always wear a jacket or sweater and avoid high heels. Don't smoke. Don't wear heavy perfume or cologne. And schedule tastings either before lunch or long after so that your palate will be fresh.

Expect to keep the same glass throughout the visit, unless you change colors of wine. If in a "natural" setting (a cave with a dirt floor, for example) you may see your host spit or pour his wine on the ground. When in caves, do as the cavemen. Otherwise, look for the spittoon.

And finally, the answer to that question everyone wants to ask but doesn't dare: "How much should I buy?" There isn't one set-in-stone response. Ask the *viticulteurs* and answers will range from six bottles as the bare minimum to 12 as the "correct" amount. *Excusez-moi?* Seasoned wine tourists have a different view: If you get a full tour and much time is spent (time they are not spending working in the winery, remember) then, yes, six bottles is fair. But if there is no tour and just a token tasting, then one bottle is sufficient. Ultimately, if you won't have time to drink the wine while in France and have reached the in-luggage limit your airline allows, explain this to the *viticulteur* and then buy what you can.

French wine writer Jacques Dupont said, "The greatest risk you run when going to a winemaker's 'domaine' is becoming friends." That should be your key to cave etiquette: it should be treated as a social call. The winemaker will hope to make a sale, but almost as importantly will be achieving the goal of most transactions in France: both parties walk away with pride intact and a sense of time pleasurablely spent. **WB**

