

HIS OWN MAN

RISK-TAKER CHRISTIAN MOREAU BUILDS ONE OF CHABLIS' BEST DOMAINES

BY BRUCE SANDERSON | PHOTOGRAPHS BY JON WYAND





On an unseasonably warm day late this winter, Christian Moreau surveys a parcel of vines in the *premier cru* Vaillons, one of the best-known vineyards in Chablis. “My father planted these vines in 1933,” he says, pointing out the gnarled trunks, which each harvest would bear fruit for the Chablis Vaillons Cuvée Guy Moreau.

Twenty-two years ago, on an overcast November day in 1994, on my first visit to Chablis, Moreau and I stood in the same spot, looking out over the same vines. As the winemaker for J. Moreau & Fils, he knew these vines well, along with the other parcels that had been in his family since 1904.

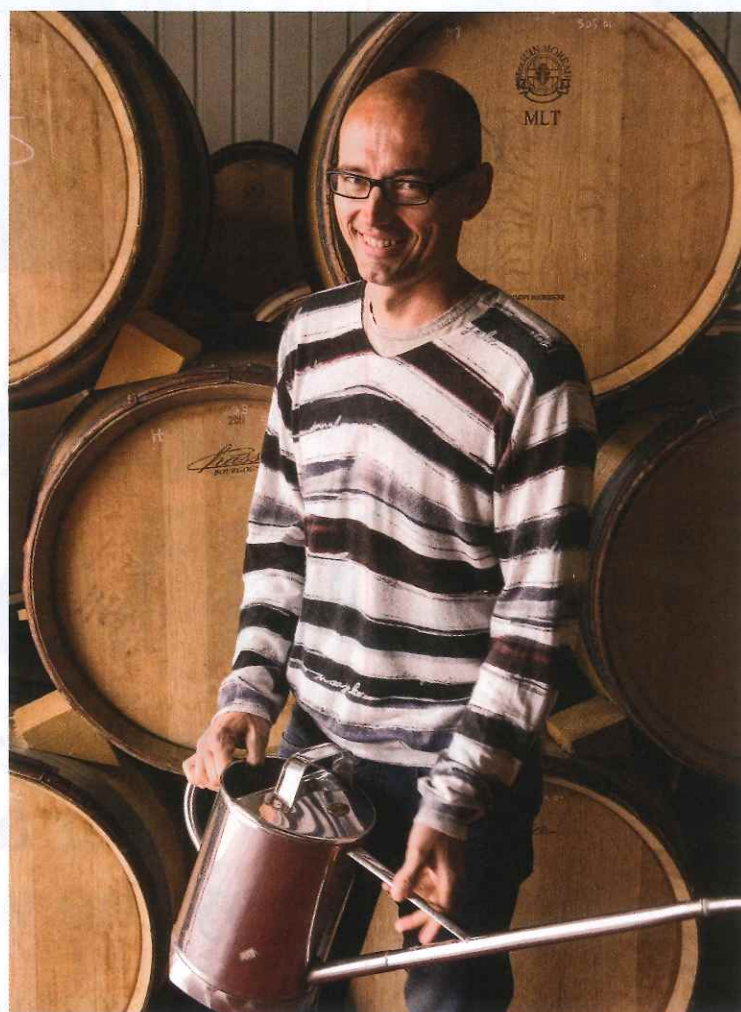
A lot has happened in the interim. Through a series of deals, Burgundy giant Boisset bought J. Moreau & Fils, the original family company, in 1997. But the Moreau family always retained ownership of its vineyards, and with the 2002 harvest, Christian and his son Fabien founded Domaine Christian Moreau Père & Fils; they then began vinifying, aging and bottling Chablis from nearly 29 acres, mostly in *premiers* and *grands crus* sites around the village.

Chablis, located about halfway between Paris and Beaune, is the northernmost part of the Burgundy region. It gives its name to a unique expression of Chardonnay, whose wines can be stony, complex and long-lived. Chablis owes its unique character to its distinctive geology; its bedrock contains fossilized chalk, marl and limestone formed more than 137 million years ago.

Great Chablis is recognizable first by a green-gold hue. Its scent is piercing, a combination of flowers, green orchard fruits such as Granny Smith apple and green plum, hints of iodine or seashore and, most importantly, flint. It is a medium- to full-bodied white, with refreshing acidity and an austere, steely character. With age, it assumes a nutty flavor, overtones of honey and a mellow richness.

Moreau and his son have built Domaine Christian Moreau Père & Fils into one of the best sources of Chablis in the region, alongside names such as Raveneau, Dauvissat, William Fèvre and Patrick Piuze. Moreau’s wines tend to have more flesh but retain the steely core and mineral, iodine elements. Most importantly, they reflect their individual vineyard origins.

Moreau is justifiably proud and is quick to give credit to Fabien for his work ethic and commitment to coaxing the best from the



Fabien Moreau, the *fils* (son) of Moreau & Fils, is a key man at the domaine, bringing degrees in enology and viticulture and experience in other wine regions to the project.

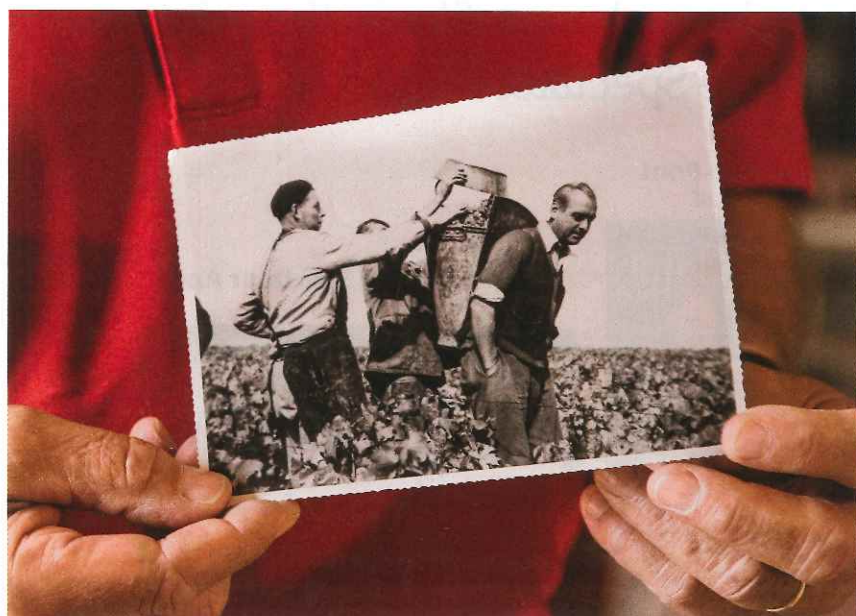
different *climats* on the property. “He’s the boss. Officially I don’t exist,” Christian says with a twinkle in his eye. However, if the elder Moreau isn’t traveling to promote the wines, or skiing in the French or Italian Alps, he’s either in the vineyards or in the winery office at the edge of town on Rue d’Oberwesel.

“My father really has a big role in the success of the domaine,” states Fabien. “OK, I have my hands more in the pumps or the must, but he’s here every morning before me. He put everything on the line at 60 [years old], and he really did it.”

Moreau, now 72, is a bear of a man with a big heart, quick with a smile or a joke and who loves a good glass of wine, preferably *grand cru* Chablis. But behind the physical presence and strong personality lies a shrewd businessman with respect for family, tradition and the reputation of his region. He left France as a teenager to work in the timber industry in the Canadian Rockies, survived two near-fatal skiing accidents and avoided a tragic tunnel fire in the Alps bordering Switzerland and Italy. This has imbued him with a love for life and a passion for the land of his ancestors.

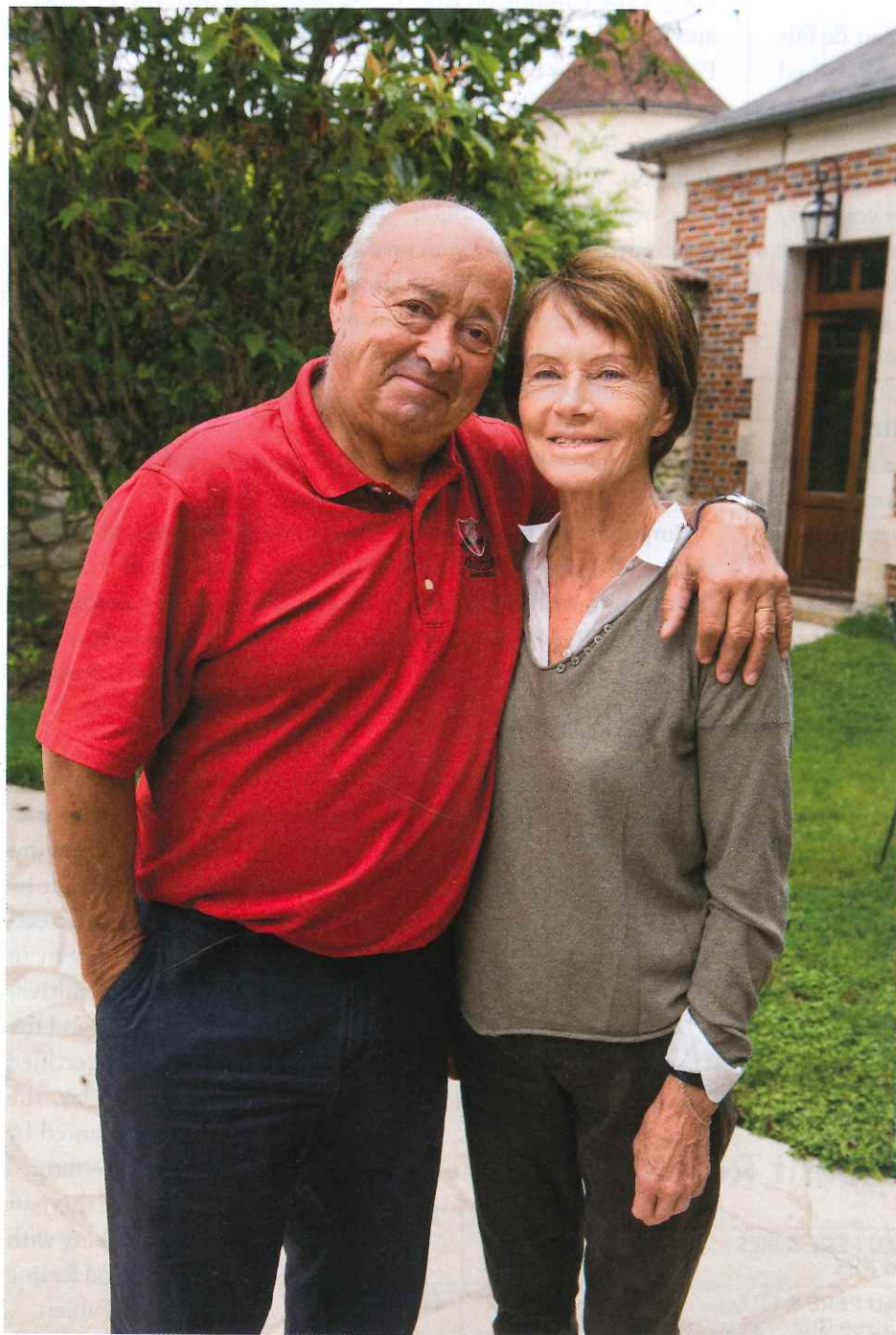
Christian Moreau was born Oct. 15, 1943, in the family home in Chablis. His ancestors were originally barrel makers who began buying vineyards and making wine, then in 1904 expanded their operations to include *négociant* activities. His father, Guy, and uncle Jacques began exporting the firm’s Chablis to the United States in 1936.

Guy Moreau was appointed food-and-beverage manager



Christian Moreau shares a photograph of his father, Guy Moreau (right), at harvest in 1952. In 1939, Guy built the relationship with U.S. importer Frederick Wildman & Sons that continues to this day.

for the French Pavilion at the New York World's Fair in 1939, further establishing the family company's network in the United States. He met Colonel Frederick S. Wildman, who had purchased Moreau's importer, Bellows and Co., and the same year began selling wine to Frederick Wildman & Sons, a relationship that exists to this day. "I have a letter from my father when he was in New York, writing to his father—it was in '39: 'Can you ship 700 cases of 1921?' So they still had some stock," says Moreau.



Christian and his wife, Christine, met and married in Canada during Christian's years working in the lumber business there. They have been married for 50 years and have three sons.

Surrounded by the family business, Moreau's earliest recollections of wine became deeply ingrained. "I was, let's say, in the perfume of the wine. In the cellar I can remember the way they were bottling, by hand, bottle by bottle, labeling, bottle by bottle, with the glue on the table, and I can remember for the U.S. everything was in wooden boxes, with each bottle put in straw," he recalls. "When you see the way we bottle and ship the wine now, there is a big improvement."

Moreau's parents separated when he was a baby and divorced in 1945. He went to school in Chablis and later moved to Paris, continuing his education. "I was not a bad boy, but I knew, when I was 16, I didn't want to go to school, I didn't want to work in the vineyard, I didn't want to work in the cellar. When my father said, 'What do you want to do?' I said, 'I don't know, not much.' He said to me, 'We have a big problem.'"

He had a cousin from Mâcon who worked as a logger in Canada, in a camp of about 80 lumberjacks in Hinton, Alberta. At 17 years old, the young Chablisien would try his fortunes there. His first job was feeding horses and cleaning stables. He soon began cutting logs, and during the winters drove the big Kenworth rigs, transporting timber. Eventually, Moreau bought his own Kenworth, making his living as a truck driver for the remainder of the 11 years he spent in the Canadian wilderness.

Hinton was near the resort town of Jasper, Alberta. It was there that Moreau met his wife of 50 years, Christine, a student from Rimouski, Québec, working for the summer. Their two oldest boys, Philippe, 47, and Patrick, 43, were born in Canada. Fabien, 41, was born in France, but has Canadian citizenship. "I'm the only Frenchman in the family," says Christian with a chuckle.

Guy Moreau came to his son's wedding in 1966 in Rimouski and told Christine that when he was ready to return to France, he would pay for his plane ticket. He later sent the ticket, but Moreau paid his own way home. Yet after a month back in France, Christine had had enough. "I didn't feel like coming back—the mentality, the way they work, you know I was in Canada. I still had my paycheck when I was working with certain people, 360 to 380 hours a month, so it was not 35 hours [a week] like in France," he says.

But in 1972, Moreau decided to return to France for good and join the family business. His first job was in the vineyards. For four years, he worked with the foreman and learned how to prune, how to operate a tractor among the rows of vines. Then it was the cellar for four years. "I followed instructions from the cellar master and learned how to make wine, from the harvest right to the end," he states. By 1984, it was Christian giving the orders on how to make the wine. "That's when I learned *le métier*, the business," he adds.

Moreau compares his path to that taken by Fabien, who has a degree in enology from the University of Dijon and a master's in vineyard and winery management from ENITA in Bordeaux. He worked for five different estates in France and New Zealand, including Domaine de Chevalier in Bordeaux and Olivier Leflaive Frères in Burgundy's Côte d'Or before returning to the family business.

"He went the other way," Christian says. "Myself, I started from the bottom in the vineyard and the cellar. He is more technical

“What’s most important is that we recovered all our vineyards to manage, vinify and sell from the domaine.”—CHRISTIAN MOREAU

than I am, but we get along very well. Sometimes I can bring him a few ideas, but we complement ourselves.”

When Christian came home in 1972, J. Moreau & Fils was still a family company. By the early 1990s, it had grown to 650,000 cases and moved to a big, new facility at the edge of Chablis.

Moreau’s father and cousin Jean-Jacques had decided to embark on a fifty-fifty joint venture with the Canadian spirits company Hiram Walker in 1974, on the négociant side of the business. “Not the vineyards. The vineyards remained in the hands of the family domaine, always,” explains Moreau. “The protection was there; the family was not crazy. You can make a joint venture, but you need to have an exit door.”

The agreement with Hiram Walker stipulated that after a minimum of 10 years of supplying grapes to the joint venture, and then with five years’ advance notice, the Moreau family could once again control grapes. Little did Moreau know at the time how important that stipulation would become.

Guy died in 1989. Between 1995 and 1997, through a series of consolidations, J. Moreau & Fils became part of Allied Domecq’s holdings. They were sold, first to Calvet and then almost immediately to the Boisset Group.

By 1997, Christian was the only family member remaining at J. Moreau. He was the winemaker, buying grapes and looking after the day-to-day operations. Though his cousin Jean-Jacques had already retired when the Boisset Group bought J. Moreau & Fils, Christian and he decided to end the contract. Jean-Jacques’ son Louis was coming back to his family domaine (Domaine Louis Moreau) and Christian’s son Fabien was planning to return in 2001. They would regain control in 2002.

“The decision to enter into the joint venture in 1974 [with Hiram Walker] wasn’t mine—I was just coming back from Canada,” says Moreau. “Whether it was a good decision or not, it’s in the past. The main thing, what’s most important, is that we recovered all our vineyards to manage, vinify and sell from the domaine.”

When Fabien Moreau returned

to France from New Zealand in 2001, he had just spent a year at the Ngatarawa winery in Hawkes Bay. He and his father soon bought the building on Rue d’Oberwesel, and with the 11.6 hectares (29 acres) of family vineyards, Domaine Christian Moreau Père & Fils was born.

In addition to the domaine fruit, since 2002 the duo has bought grapes from a 15-acre parcel. “We are quite lucky to have a nice domaine. When you have over 12 acres of *grands crus*, almost the same of *premiers crus*, Chablis and Petit Chablis, that’s perfect; you can control it and make your own reputation, voilà,” beams Moreau. “You can always get bigger. I know what big is.”

Moreau is referring to the peak production years when J. Moreau & Fils was bottling wines from Muscadet, Loire, Chablis, Côte d’Or, Beaujolais and even Bordeaux, and exporting to many countries. Today, he and Fabien produce 11,000 to 11,500 cases. They employ four people full-time in the vineyards, and a salesperson, with Fabien and Christian in the cellar.

Burgundy is a region where passing the reins from one generation to the next can be difficult. Moreau himself had a difficult relationship with his father, yet he and Fabien work together very well. “It’s challenging. My father has a strong personality,” says

Fabien. “But he really gave me the key to the cellar. He said, ‘Do what you want.’”

The first thing Fabien wanted was fewer chemicals in the vineyards. The use of herbicides was halved in 2003, and in 2005 he stopped using the synthetic treatment for botrytis. He began to experiment with organic cultivation in Vaillons in 2007, and the entire estate has been certified Ecocert since 2010. Today, the old vines in Vaillons planted by Fabien’s grandfather are farmed organically. “I really like this part of Vaillons. It’s like working with old trees, so I have a good feeling in this vineyard,” says Fabien.

The harvesting machine broke on the last day of picking in 2001 and since then, all the parcels, from Petit Chablis to the *grands crus*, are harvested by hand.

He has also made changes in the cellar. Since 2008, the fermentations are conducted using indigenous yeast and no bacteria for the malolactic. “Wild yeast brings depth and complexity to

Holdings of Domaine Christian Moreau Père & Fils

Petit Chablis	1.73 acres
Chablis (Les Pargues)	2.96 acres
Chablis (Fontenay; purchased grapes)	14.82 acres
Chablis (Premier Cru) Vaillons	11.61 acres
Chablis (Grand Cru) Blanchot	0.25 acres
Chablis (Grand Cru) Vaudésir	1.24 acres
Chablis (Grand Cru) Valmur	2.47 acres
Chablis (Grand Cru) Les Clos	7.16 acres
Chablis (Grand Cru) Les Clos Clos des Hospices	1.25 acres

Recent Releases

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
CHRISTIAN MOREAU PÈRE & FILS Chablis Blanchot 2013	93	\$97
CHRISTIAN MOREAU PÈRE & FILS Chablis Vaillon Cuvée Guy Moreau 2013	92	\$65
CHRISTIAN MOREAU PÈRE & FILS Chablis Valmur 2013	92	\$97
CHRISTIAN MOREAU PÈRE & FILS Chablis Les Clos 2013	91	\$106
CHRISTIAN MOREAU PÈRE & FILS Chablis Les Clos Clos des Hospices 2013	91	\$142
CHRISTIAN MOREAU PÈRE & FILS Chablis Vaillon 2014	91	\$45
CHRISTIAN MOREAU PÈRE & FILS Chablis Vaudésir 2013	91	\$97
CHRISTIAN MOREAU PÈRE & FILS Chablis 2014	90	\$30



Christian and Fabien Moreau amid the stainless-steel tanks Christian prefers for Chablis production. Fabien, however, has introduced the use of oak for several of their wines.

the wines,” explains Fabien. “There are about four or five yeasts that do the alcoholic fermentation—one starts, another finishes and there are some working in the middle.”

The other major change in the cellar is the adoption of wood. During his tenure as winemaker at J. Moreau & Fils, Christian Moreau was proud of the clean, mineral style of Chablis, fermented and aged in stainless-steel tanks. “I’m not in the lumber business,” he would joke, referring to the use of oak for fermenting and aging Chablis. “I used to be in the lumber business.” He always believed new oak and small barrels in particular were not compatible with Chablis.

Moreau’s position against the use of oak has softened, but he and Fabien use it judiciously. Burgundy barrels (128-liter *pièces*) are used for up to 40 percent of the fermentation of the *premiers crus* Vaillons and the old-vines Vaillons Cuvée Guy Moreau, which see maximum 3 percent new oak. The *grands crus* Blanchots and Vaudésir are entirely barrel-fermented in older oak, 2 to 5 years old, and the Valmur and Les Clos, including the Clos des Hospices, a 1.25-acre parcel, see a mix of stainless steel and barrel for fermentation. In 2015, all the stainless-steel tanks were replaced.

The Moreau wines have become more precise, and though bottlings from the late 1980s and early 1990s reflected the different vineyards, today there is even greater individual identity and character. Indigenous yeast and judicious use of oak give the wines more texture in addition to complexity.

“There’s one thing we cannot forget,” cautions Moreau. “Chablis

is a Chardonnay, but you have Chardonnay everywhere in the world and some good ones. So, to fight against all the Chardonnay from the U.S., from Australia, Argentina, even from the east countries, you have to strive to be above and think about one thing: quality, quality. Quality always survives.”

With the domaine hitting its stride now after 14 harvests, Moreau needed to ensure its future. It will stay in the family, first under Fabien’s control, and then at least for the next generation, under the direction of Fabien’s daughter or son. “The transmission [for the future] is done,” says Moreau. “From Fabien it passes to his two kids, his daughter or his son. His son says, ‘I don’t want to go to school; I want to be like daddy.’ He’s 9 years old. If one wants to take over they will, no problem.”

Fabien is happy with the domaine as it is; he can control everything, despite working alone in the cellar. “I can trust my vineyard workers completely,” he says of the team that has been in place since the beginning in 2002. “The customer needs to trust that when we are out [of stock], we can replace it with the next vintage. We don’t want to go into big volume.”

Expanding means buying vines, but growth can create problems. Besides, Christian Moreau has been there, done that. “It’s easy to say ‘buy,’ but there are no vines for sale,” he explains. “When you have vines for sale, it is a question of heritage, fighting in the family, where the children are fighting each other. One day there will probably be something for sale, but who will be there? Finance people that can invest millions,” he observes. “Then the spirit of the family, even if it bears the name, the spirit of the family domaine is gone.” □