

Beaune

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Front cover

The altarpiece of the
Hôtel-Dieu of Beaune.
The Hôtel-Dieu of Beaune,
a dream residence from
Hainaut.

Back cover

The hall of the Poor in the
Hôtel-Dieu.

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"Can we escape from Beaune if once we have crossed the magic circle of its ancient mediaeval battlements, dented with bastions, flanked with towers, bristling with bartizans? Can we get back to its Saint-Nicholas' Gate when we have lost our way in its maze of Hell and Paradise streets or its parapet walks with their dead ends and stairways to trap you? Beaune la Jolie and Beaune la Vineuse conspire to take you up in their adorned and perfumed arms."

Pierre Poupon, *Toute la Bourgogne*, PUF, 1970



1.

Secretive Beaune

It is never easy to get to know a town, this one probably even less than most. And yet Beaune is very approachable. It has one of the biggest motorway cross-roads in Europe on its doorstep, used by several tens of millions of cars each year.

The Hôtel-Dieu hospital alone attracts over 450,000 visitors. With its noisy crowds, its multicoloured coaches, all the world's languages, the covered marketplace bustles like a major tourist centre. And yet, only a few steps away, the Rue Paradis leads to the apse of the collegiate church on the Place Notre-Dame where time seems to stand still.

Not that Beaune is a museum town. It does have its new neighbourhoods, its industrial estates, its sporting and technical facilities. And most of all, it is a hive of business activity with an international calling; as the capital of Burgundy, Beaune is at the heart of a powerful web of interests. Its economic importance is out of all proportion with its 22,000 population, since several thousand jobs depend on transactions made within its merchant and export firms. On the third Sunday in November, the Hôtel-Dieu auctions off the produce of its vineyards. In the mediaeval covered market hung with tapestries from Flanders, the experts listen out for the auctioneer's cries. Two small candles time the auctions. Everything that counts in the world of the vine holds its breath as the dying candle flame starts flickering...

History has made Beaune a secret town. Its finest hotels are protected behind massive doors; its gardens lie beyond the porches, its carved galleries enclosed to the rear of its courtyards. The high walls of ten convents, the bulwarks of the battlements



2.

1 and 2.

The preserved bastions now defend only cellars.

3.

Notre-Dame watches over the town and Côte de Beaune vineyards.

3.

in the ancient place on the frontier with the Empire, the wrought iron gates protect its inner life. The carefully restored heritage of Beaune is nevertheless placed at the service of present-day activities with the chamber of commerce and industry at the Carmelite convent, government offices at the Ursuline convent and the Hôtel de Montille, the Fine Arts school under the Baronne du Bay's panelling, contemporary painters at the Oratory Chapel etc. But you can stop off at Beaune and hardly see anything of it.

The people of Beaune themselves are slightly stand-offish. There are plenty of scholars, open and welcoming; the library houses a number of treasures; erudite societies and active cultural associations act as benevolent guides. The passing visitor is thrilled with the prestige of famous tables, the inexhaustible range of great wines and the quality of the hotels with over a thousand modern rooms. Business relations are handled seriously and competently, whilst the hallmark of human relations is sober reserve, and even a hint of gravity. Like their town, to be appreciated the people of Beaune need the attention that marked out the great travellers of former times.

Even if you only have a few hours to spend in Beaune, you can unravel its secret. Observe the winegrower tasting a "Clos des Mouches", the bees of our Middle Ages. He has not filled a large glass to down at one gulp. He has poured barely a mouthful into his silver wine taster, embossed so as to bring out the wine's colour. His sight, smell and taste all come alive. The entire history of the wine, the flower, the storm and the sun, is revealed to him...



1.



The Mysteries of Beaune

"Climates"

The Beaune countryside features three types of landscape: the wildly beautiful limestone plateaux of the Hautes Côtes; sloping down towards the rising sun, the Côte, which nurtures the famous vineyards; lastly the Plain, with its crops and forests stretching all the way to the River Saône.

Most of all, it is the meeting of the winds. From the west come the rains and storms. There used to be the harsh old saying: "It's an ill wind and ill folk that come from the Morvan..." The north wind brings frost, which can ruin the entire region in years when it comes late. From the south, the "Saône wind" breathes like a final whiff of the Mediterranean world. The flora and fauna reflect this play of opposite influences; in July, on "the Mountain", you will both see blue Alpine gentians and hear the cicada from Provence.

Since the 2nd century at least, Beaune judges its weather by the requirements of her vineyards. The tropical creeper from the East, which man's sharp pruning forces to produce bunches charged with juice, has adjusted to the "climats". Not only to the glowing autumns which give rise to the northernmost great red wines in Europe, but also to specific biotopes which mean that the same variety of vine on the same soil will produce a different flavour from ten paces away. The vine's enemies, rain, frost and hail, do not strike in every part all at once and with the same

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3.

4.



consequences. In the olden days, they used to fire rockets to fend off disaster; what a fireworks display rose up from the villages! Then they tried seeding clouds with an aeroplane. None of this proved conclusive. Beaune, like a good winegrower, lives with its nose to the wind, the master of its hard labour; its Hôtel-Dieu is crowned with fifty gilt iron weathercocks.

The Gods

The Gods arrived at the dawn of history. Celtic horsemen with their long iron swords rose up from the East, five centuries before Christ. Very soon there was a crossing of tracks at the foot of the hillside, and priests around the sacred fount of Belena. It took its name from Belenos, the god of spring waters. The market-place brought about by the pilgrimage became Beaune.

Then Caesar came along with the Roman pantheon. Belenos became Apollo, but was barely more latinized than his worshippers. Later, the soldiers of the VIIIth “Augusta” Legion nearly imposed the bloodthirsty cult of Mithra, but the wild god of dark Egypt disappeared with the warring foreigners.

1 and 2.

A single varietal – pinot noir – is used to make red wine. Another single varietal – chardonnay – is also used in most white wines, alongside a traditional rarity – aligoté. In Beaune, there is no trickery or blending – here the wine is plain and true.

3.

The prevailing wind is a determining factor. Depending on the season, this can mean wealth or disaster: a westerly wind can bring either beneficial rain or tragic storms. Beaune’s myriad of windcocks – including those of the Hôtel-Dieu – constantly check how the year’s work will pan out.

4.

The collegiate church of Notre-Dame, a striking example of the early Romanesque period.



1.



2.



3.

1, 2 and 3.

Medicine in the 15th century was uncertain and surgery and treatment daring.

4 and 5.

Prooque music festival in Beaune: a night in July, in the illuminated courtyard of the Hôtel-Dieu.

(Photographs courtesy of Beaune Tourist Information Office)

Wine as a Restorative

In 1727, Lordelot, the Hôtel-Dieu surgeon, received "each year half a hogshhead of white wine to washe and mummyfie woundes". Apparently, if certain strange behaviour was anything to go on, he drank more of it than he used on the sick. Whereupon the authorities placed the fateful cask under the joint supervision of the apothecary, who was henceforth to take a personal part in preparing the lotions, and the nuns who were to hold it "under lock and key in a cupboard, along with the rest of the medicine".

The Archangel's Judgement

In those days, men were neither ashamed of illness nor afraid of death; they only feared for their souls. The soul of the wealthy having ever been in greater danger than others, charitable foundations were richly endowed. The chancellor of the Dukes of Burgundy, Nicolas Rolin, had accumulated great riches that made him hate men; well could he fear divine judgement. He decided to hand over some part to the poor, that is to God. The elder statesman, who had bartered many a betrayal and great act of repentance, knew he could bargain with princes but not with God. So when he chose Beaune in preference to Autun, his birthplace, to raise a hospital, he founded it with infinite respect for the poor, who can only receive as a necessity perfect beauty.

A community of nuns from Valenciennes was established in perpetuity in the service of the sick. Gentleness and humanity would govern the slightest detail of daily life. Each day white bread was distributed at the door of the Hôtel-Dieu. When at the supreme tribunal the Archangel calls Nicolas Rolin and his wife Guigone de Salins, the testimony that may tip the terrible scales will perhaps be that of an exhausted old woman - whose name will be known to the Archangel - submissively crossing the Passage from suffering to joy with her gaze fixed on the Prophets and the Chosen Ones of the great altarpiece.

The Future of the Past

This time of fear and challenge has long since passed. And yet the chancellor's foundation is still alive. The Hôtel-Dieu itself takes in old people, working hand in hand with a modern hospital and its specialist departments.

Nearly every year, it receives donations. Its highly profitable winegrowing domain finances building work and equipment. The "Sisters of Charity" are still there, having exchanged their mediæval hennin for the nurse's veil. Their presence is like a sign of mercifulness.

Beaune is greatly attached to its Hôtel-Dieu. During the Revolution, as elsewhere marked by tremendous destruction, the clubs did not dare disfigure it. At the Chartreuse de Champmol monastery near Dijon, the duke's mausoleum was desecrated, the graves opened, the bones scattered. The paintings of the masters of Sienna and Flanders, the illuminated manuscripts, the crystal reliquaries were all auctioned off. Claus Sluter's great Calvary was overturned and the church taken to pieces. But at Beaune, the poorhouse was mostly left unharmed. Maybe after all, the real masters of the world are not those one might think...

What memory does Beaune keep of its flamboyant age? The historians of the last century were not too optimistic. They felt that a capital that had become a mere provincial town was bound to lose part of its soul. After rising up in the name of "Madame Marie", Beaune appeared to accept its fate. But one cannot break with a great past with impunity. The taste for feasts and processions is doubtless more than just a show; this town where Nicolas wanted that "works of mercy and piety should be magnificently accomplished" in his Hôtel-Dieu has the tenacious will to be, rather than to last.

Mozart in Beaune

On 18 July 1766, the ten-year-old Wolfgang Amadeus played in Dijon at the invitation of the Prince de Condé. A few days later, the Mozart family took the stagecoach to Lyon. The exhausted child slept as they passed through Beaune. His father Leopold raged against the singers and musicians (particularly the violin players) of Burgundy, whom he found dreadful.

An inspired team changed all this. Nowadays, Beaune's baroque music festival in July is renowned all over Europe. Hôtel-Dieu is the main focus for all-night discoveries, creations and new interpretations.

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