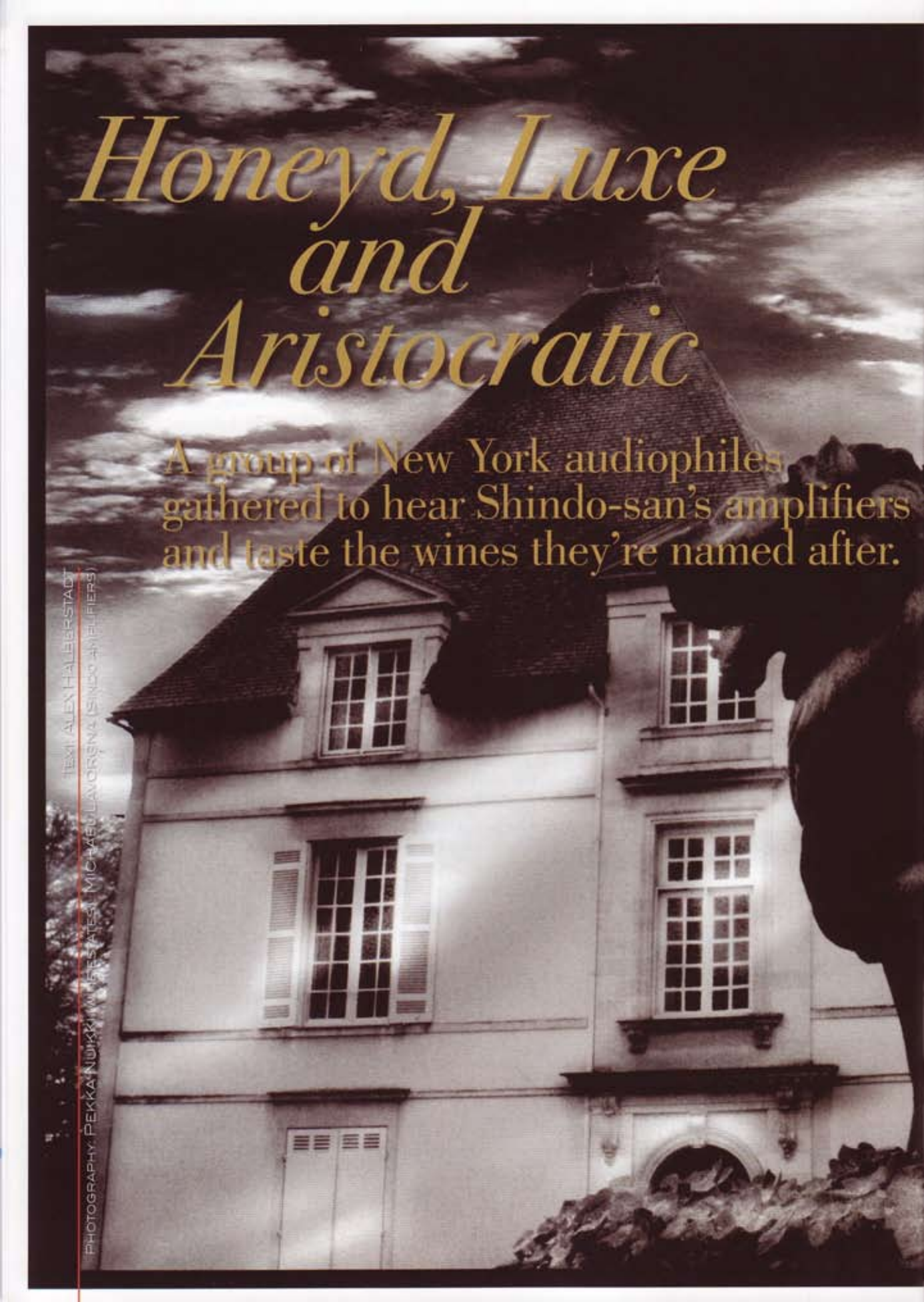
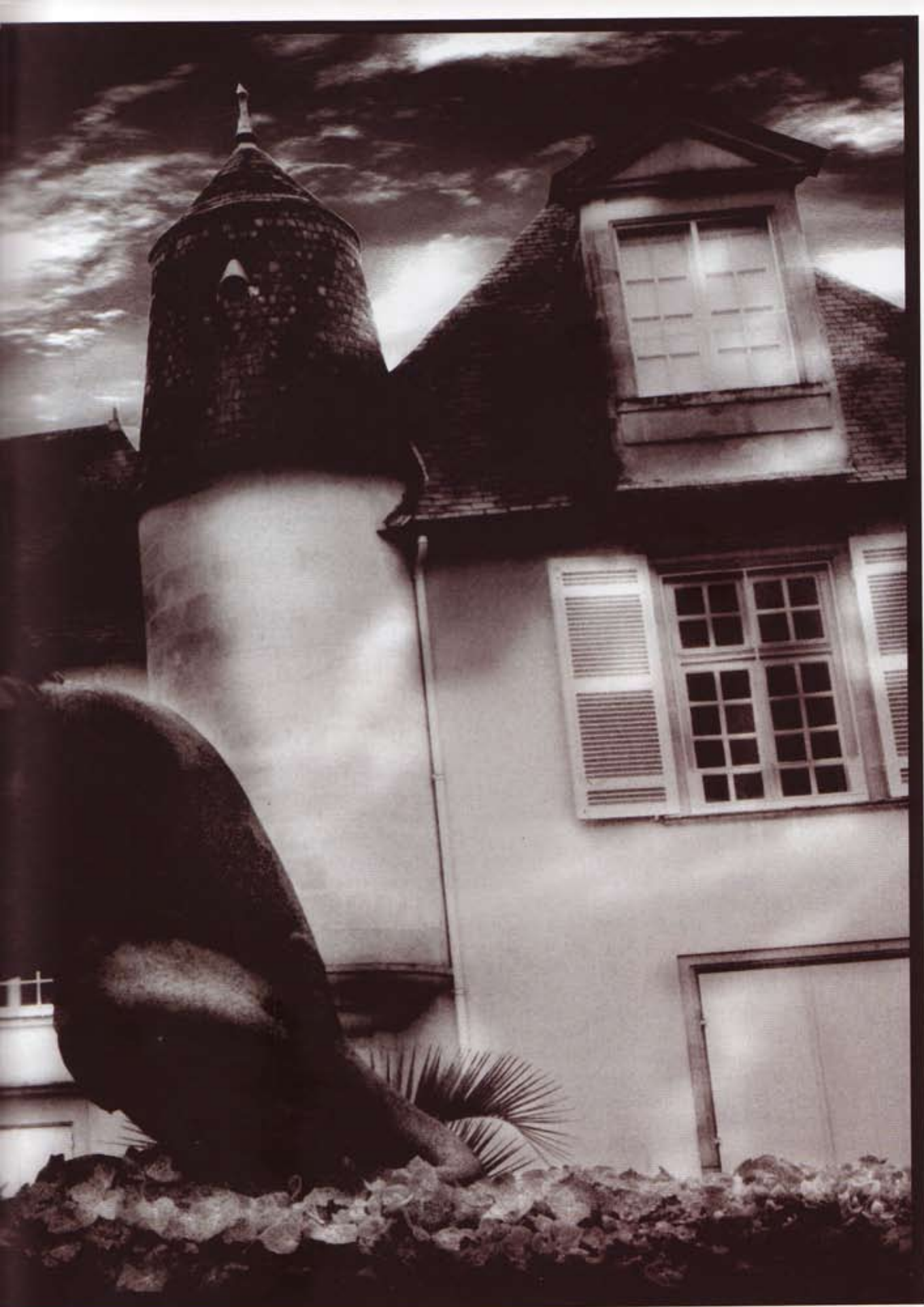


Honeyd, Luxe and Aristocratic

A group of New York audiophiles gathered to hear Shindo-san's amplifiers and taste the wines they're named after.

TEST: ALEX HALBERSTADT
PHOTOGRAPHY: PEKKA NIUKKI (WINE TEST: MICHAEL LAVORSNA (SHINDO AMPLIFIERS))







The moment when everything I believed about hi-fi abruptly changed wasn't a moment, exactly, more like two or three hours whiled away in the back of a hi-fi shop in downtown Manhattan where my friend Jonathan Halpern worked as a salesman in the summer of 1996. The two of us sat cross-legged on the floor of a tiny listening room crammed with expensive audio equipment of recent manufacture and stared at a pair of homely, squarish plywood boxes; earlier that afternoon, an elderly widow had traded them in for a few hundred dollars. The fronts were covered with fuzzy brown fabric of the kind you might see on a vintage guitar amp, and each box concealed a ten-inch "dual-concentric" driver and a crossover made by Tannoy in the late 1960's. We didn't speak much after Jonathan put the first LP on the turntable, except for

grinning at each other and nodding our heads. Neither of us had heard recorded music sound so unrestrained and exciting, so richly present; the widow's beat-up boxes made everything else in the store sound compressed and bleached of color. We didn't know much about what Tannoy was all about, but after we'd gone through every LP in the room I announced that I was buying the speakers. I don't think I even asked the price. Jonathan told me that he'd already decided to buy them, and of course, he had dibs. So that night I went online, located a shop somewhere in north England, and arranged to have a clean pair of Tannoy 3LZs shipped to New York.

Unlike Japan and to a lesser extent Europe, US didn't have an active market in older components recognized over the years as classics. The domes-

tic hi-fi industry was a cult of the new, confined mainly to newish companies marketing "high-end" electronics and speakers, many essentially recycled concepts executed with brand-new boutique bits, and reinvented every few years with suffixes like "Mark IV" or "Ultimate." Seemingly there was little to be gleaned from listening to vintage hi-fi; how could it hope to compete with digital amps and ceramic tweeters? Yet a few hours with the homely Tannoys managed to fundamentally rewire our thinking about how recorded music should sound. Today, the hi-fi I listen to mostly predates my birth: various Tannoys, Altec 755s, a Garrard 301 with an Ortofon SPU. And some years ago Jonathan began to import a line of smallish green electronics, field coil speakers and phono esoterica from Japan made by Ken Shindo, equipment



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that had already developed a legendary reputation among hi-fi aficionados in Asia and Europe.

Shindo-san's take on amplification is nearly the inverse of the "high-end" engineers'— he executes highly original circuits with a slew of antique parts, like World War II-era oil capacitors and extinct German tetrodes. While most designers model their ideal sound on electronics from the likes of Audio Research or Conrad-Johnson, or even the McIntosh and Marantz components of the 1950's, Shindo's references go back to the invention of electronic recording and industrial equipment pioneered by companies like Western Electric and Klangfilm. The Shindo sound bears out the approach—it captures the musicality, richness, and unrestrained dynamics of these classics while improving their technical beha-



viator beyond even most contemporary standards. Several weeks of living with Ken Shindo's least expensive preamplifier, the Aurieges, left me scratching my head; nothing I'd heard drew so much attention to the musical meaning of the performance, yet the little preamp also restored an octave of bass and reams of detail to my hi-fi while remaining dead quiet even with the volume knob open. Despite their sometimes pulse-quickening prices, other components in the line impressed me even more. And I couldn't help but notice that the model names, written in flowing gold script on the Altec-green faceplates, referred to French and North Italian wines, both well known and obscure.

When it comes to wine, Ken Shindo obviously isn't kidding around. Recently he arrived in New York bearing a magnum of Domaine de la Romanée-Conti's 1983 Richebourg, a red burgundy as renowned for its

exquisite bouquet as for its astronomical price. More than any electronics I can think of, Shindo's amplifiers and preamplifiers differ from each other not so much in quality as in their flavor, and over nights of listening I kept wondering about the wines they were named after. Was there a connection? I wondered aloud over lunch with fellow writer Michael Lavorgna, who responded with a fascinating idea—why not find out? So on a damp April night we gathered to hear five amplifiers and taste—okay, drink—four white wines and one red. Speaker designer John DeVore of DeVore Fidelity and art collector and bon vivant Boris Kerdimmun joined Jonathan Halpern, Michael Lavorgna and me at the downtown hi-fi salon In Living Stereo. Owner Steve Mishoe was our genial host. We listened through the Shindo Massetto preamplifier, spun records using Shindo-san's heavily modified Garrard 301 turntable and his version of the Ortofon SPU moving-coil cartridge, while Keith Aschenbrenner's Auditorium 23 SoloVox speakers moved the air. Uncorking was done courtesy of a three-dollar waiter's corkscrew.

We decided to proceed price-wise from least to most, and kicked off the night with the Montille, a diminutive power amp that relies on a quad of EL-84 pentodes. Its partner—Hubert de Montille's 2000 Pommard Les Rugiens. Burgundy's most famous peasant, Montille makes pinot noir that's utterly old-world in approach, emphasizes acidity and terroir, and rewards aging. The Pommard was made in a year usually dismissed as mediocre; modest at first, after twenty minutes it began to show the telltale stink of old pinot and a long, savory finish. Not much in the way of sweet fruit but lots of structure, funk and charm. Perhaps not surprisingly, the little fifteen-watt amplifier had a similar personality. A little on the dry side acoustically, it sounded fast, detailed and balanced, and proved shockingly involving: the Montille managed to extract every last bit of musical excitement from the records, whether Pablo Casals' "Folklore Espagnol" or a Cat Power 45. Things looked promising.

The next contestant was the Montrachet, a chunky 40-watt gangster based around the EL-34 pentode that made jazz and pop—like Elvis singing "Love Me Tender" on the original RCA single—sound vast and smoky, with a terrific sense of scale and drive. Of all the amps, it had the greatest sonic resemblance to the tubed mid-20th-century classics, but seriously improved on their agility and clarity. Ken Shindo, no doubt,





named the push-pull amplifier after the miniscule vineyard that sits astride the villages of Puligny-Montrachet and Chassagne-Montrachet, the most famous in Burgundy. Lacking a sponsorship deal with the Food Network, we opted for a slightly more modest 2006 Puligny from the premiere cru Folatiere vineyard, made by Paul Pernot. The creamy, riotously complex wine was arguably the night's favorite and one of the most baroque chardonnays I've had the

luck to taste. Its kaleidoscopic flavors brought the mind to a delicious halt.

I'd assumed that Shindo-san named the single-ended Cortese after the Barbaresco producer when word came from Kawagoe, Japan, that it was actually inspired by the modest, underloved white Piedmontese grape. The biodynamically grown 2006 Ulivi Monferrato Bianco Montemarino pitched camp far from the splendors of Burgundy: oxydized in style and full-bodied, it tasted

pleasantly vegetal, alive, and tensile in its minerality. The attitude was more tractor than Alfa-Romeo. With its glowing Siemens F2As, Cortese shared the richness but added refinement—it proved sure-footed with every style of music and made the previous two amps sound a little two-dimensional. It had so much color and harmonic flesh to Louis Armstrong's trumpet that its presence between the speakers verged on the psychedelic.



At this point, warmed by the vinyl and the wine, mirth threatened to overtake our analytical abilities. All I can tell you is that the vino-thermionic parallels collapsed altogether when we uncorked the 2005 Les Héritiers du Comte Lafon Macon-Milly Lamartine, a bright, crisp, fairly simple Macon. The sun almost certainly had to set the Lafon's ultra-refined—and early, undimittable—Menthaills when he designed the single-ended

300B mono amplifier, which sounded every bit as honeyed, luxe and aristocratic. The 2004 Corton-Charlemagne from Jean-Claude Belland—delicate, tightly wound, still years from maturity—worked only marginally better with Shindo's Corton-Charlemagne—a Hermitage from Chave might have been more to the point. The 25-watt EL-34 mono amp made every record sound grounded, majestic and powerful, the Rubens to the Lafon's Van Dyck.

So is there a connection? Only Ken Shindo knows for sure. A tonier wine budget and more time could have yielded a more precise conclusion (or possibly just made us drunker). As it is, we left In Living Stereo buoyant and smiling, having tasted a few unforgettable wines and heard some of the most inspiring hi-fi equipment known to man. It was past midnight, and the Stones' "Love in Vain," our coda, spilled out onto the deserted street. ■



The FINE WINE Magazine is a luxurious and visually captivating magazine on greatest wines. Apart from a massive information package on fine and rare wines, including up-to-date tasting notes, the magazine provides fascinating stories and passionate talk of intriguing wine personalities and extravagant lifestyles. The truly extraordinary photography of the magazine is by its Editor in Chief Pekka Nuikki, who is also known as a prolific wine author. His latest book presents 100 Masterpieces of German White Wines.

The FINE WINE Magazines, including the world's only champagne magazine, the FINE Champagne Magazine, are published in three languages and distributed in dozens of countries in all continents. The FINE's Editor Juha Lihtonen kindly provided Innerworldaudio with background information on some of the wines that appear on the face plate of Shindo's amplifiers.

MASSETO

The 100 % Merlot wine made by Tuscany's top producer Tenuta dell'Ornellaia. This Merlot is not only considered as the best Merlot in Italy but the best in the whole world after Pétrus. No wonder it is called Italian Pétrus.

Style: Big but sophisticated wine with rich texture, velvety tannins and vivid acidity.

MONTRACHET

The world's most magical white wine vineyard (8 ha) yielding astonishing Chardonnay grapes. The small vineyard is split between the 40 growers. All producers produce miniscular quantity of this charming wine. The most esteemed ones are Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, Comte Lafon and Noël Ramonet.

Style: Full-bodied white wines with harmonious structure. Rich buttery texture, peppermint aromas and lovely crispiness derived from complex minerality and acidity.



Juha Lihtonen,
Editor

CORTESE

Italian well-appreciated white wine variety from Piedmont region considered to yield the best wines from Gavi area.

Style: Crisp, light-bodied white wines with instant pleasure showing fresh apple and lemon flavours and lean finish.

LAFON

Dominique Lafon is a king of Burgundian whites. He is a white wine specialist focused in Chardonnay variety. He makes very mineral and rich but elegant dry white wines with sophisticated edginess.

Style: Depending on the wine Lafon produces he is able to deliver the best expression of each vineyard. All wines are marked with elegance – great balance of buttery richness, vivid acidity and minerality, and harmonious balance of toastiness derived from careful maturation in the new oak.

CORTON-CHARLEMAGNE

A unique upper hillside Grand Cru vineyard just north of Beaune in Aoxe-Corton that bares its name for one of the most long-lasting Burgundian wines. Yielding mainly white wines but also some reds. The king here is a producer called Bonneau du Martray.

Style: Firm, crisp and restrained style with immense ageing potential. The reds are very refined and delicate with red fruit flavours like Musignys and

Chambertins. Whites are as great as Meursaults and Montrachets. They show less fruity flavours than Meursaults and Montrachets reminding more Chablis Grand Crus whites.

GISCOURS

Historical château with colourful background of ups and downs. Nevertheless this beautiful château is located in the heart of Margaux region.

Style: Elegant, medium-bodied wines with good acidity and level of minerality expressing the delicate style of Margaux appellation.

PÉTRUS

The world's most esteemed wine. 11 hectares vineyard with unique red clay soil located in the highest spot in Pomerol plateau produce the world's best Merlot grapes.

Style: Medium-bodied sophisticated wine with supple tannins and vivid acidity enhanced with minerality and peculiar flavour of black truffles. Long savory finish. ■



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