

Spotlight on Cîteaux

May through October 1998: A Fine Time To Visit Medieval Burgundy

Travelers interested in history, art, architecture—indeed just about any cultural aspect of France and Western Europe—should plan now to attend the great celebrations that will surround the **900th anniversary** of the founding of the monastery of Cîteaux. Besides enjoying the specific events planned for that commemoration, travelers can also discover the many intriguing facets of medieval Burgundy still surviving in our own time.

From May through October 1998, the influential monastery will be celebrated with a series of exhibitions and concerts at the monastery itself as well as in other abbeys, churches, and towns in Burgundy. Visitors will be able to appreciate and experience its accomplishments in art, architecture, technology, and agriculture. There will be stirring performances of Gregorian chant and medieval music to help evoke the spirituality that accompanied the creation and growth of the monastery.

In our sidebar, we list some highlights and where you can get more information. But first, a little history:

A MODEST ABBEY BORN AMID THE REEDS

Cîteaux would wield great influence on the culture of France and Europe, but its origins were humble in intention. In the year 1098, **Robert de Molesme**, a Benedictine monk, was inspired to build the monastery after he had grown disillusioned with what he and many of his time perceived to be the spiritual decadence consuming the Benedictine order. He hoped to create the ideal monastic community—in but not of the world. Molesme could not have foreseen its lasting impact.

St. Benedict of Nursia founded the Benedictines about 529 AD in Monte Cassino, Italy. His rules predicated a community devoted to prayer and work, known for the Latin motto: *Ora et labora*. Monastic work was often manual, for the monks' subsistence, and sometimes intellectual, especially the reading and copying of religious manuscripts. Indeed, monasteries were the main repositories for learning and the transmission and preservation of Western culture throughout the Middle Ages.

By Molesme's time, Benedictine monasteries had evolved from small self-supporting communities into large seigniorial holdings, wealthy from donations and tithes and hierarchical in ceremony and in power. Many monks yearned for the simplicity and asceticism of the past. And so Molesme repaired to an isolated swamp in Burgundy, just south of **Dijon**, that was filled with reeds, or *cistels*, from which Cîteaux got its name. There he built his vision of monastic life.

THE CISTERCIAN LEGACY

Molesme himself soon found that Cîteaux was too severe even for him, and he left to return to a less rigorous Benedictine monastery. Some of Molesme's fellow monks remained at Cîteaux, and they would be joined by the man who was actually to found the Cistercian order.

St. Bernard of Clairvaux entered Cîteaux around 1112 to flee the distractions and corruption of the world, to pursue, as Molesme once said, "a stricter and more faithful observance of the Rule of St. Benedict." Attracting numerous recruits to Cîteaux, and eventually becoming the abbot of Clairvaux (another Cistercian abbey founded in 1115), St. Bernard would not only begin the Cistercian order but would also emerge as a renowned theologian, philosopher, and defender of Catholic church orthodoxy.

The Cistercian order spread quickly throughout Europe. By 1151, 300 Cistercian monasteries were home to more than 11,000 monks and nuns. By 1250, 647 monasteries stretched from Spain to Scandinavia.

The energetic new order revolutionized church governance, breaking with the Benedictine practice of enforcing conformity on its far-flung abbeys through an intrusive, centralized hierarchy. The abbots of Cîteaux on the other hand rarely interfered in the daily operations of the other Cistercian abbeys. Indeed, Cîteaux would call annual meetings (*chapitres généraux*) at which all Cistercian abbots discussed the order's affairs on an equal basis. In 1215, the Cîteaux form of governing was applied to all the monastic orders.

A TRADITION OF SELF-RELIANCE

To free themselves from feudal entanglements, the Cistercians prized economic self-sufficiency, spurring their intense activity—and innovations—in agriculture and technology. All over Europe, they drained swamps, pioneered crop rotation, and cultivated new strains of grapes. They built mills and fisheries, developed more efficient ways to forge steel, and worked wonders with hydraulics, conveying water from lakes to fields through aqueducts and canals. Little wonder then that the Cistercians are sometimes credited with having invented modern rural Europe.

The Cistercians weren't all prayer and work and no play though. They also built wineries. One of them was called **Clos de Vougeot**, located in the Côte de Nuits, the area just south of Dijon that produces arguably the best red wines in Burgundy. Today, Clos de Vougeot remains one of the most respected names in the region.

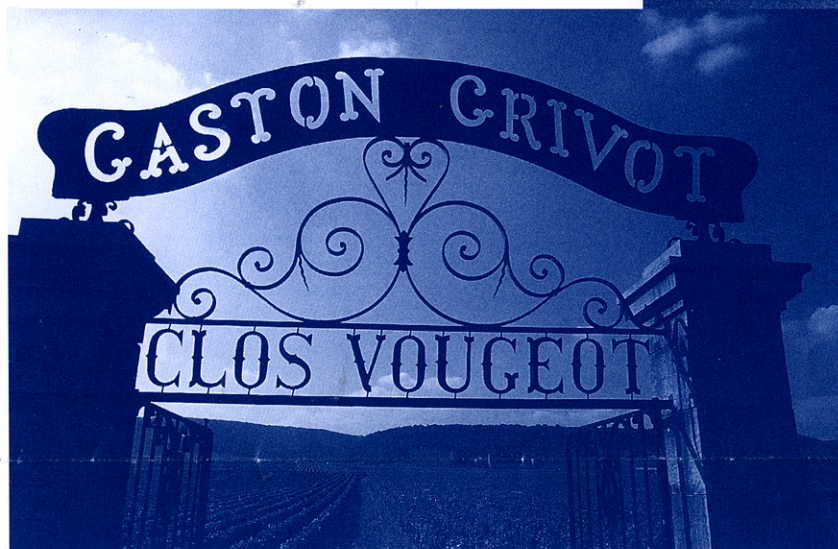
Since 1944, Clos de Vougeot has belonged to a fraternity of a different sort: the **Confrérie des Chevaliers du Tastevin** (Brotherhood of the Knights of Winetasting), an international club whose goal is to promote the wines of France, particularly those of Burgundy. The organization holds a series of banquets every year for its various chapters, and it is open all year to the public (information: 03-80-62-86-09), who can visit the Renaissance château as well as the more properly Cistercian 12th-century wine cellar and wine-press room.

AUSTERE RESTRAINT

The most enduring legacy of the Cistercians may be their art and architecture. They were among the most talented illuminators of their time. Perhaps their most famous work is the Bible translation commissioned by Steven Harding, a 12th-century abbot of Cîteaux.

The hallmark of Cistercian architecture is simplicity, reflecting the order's asceticism. St. Bernard believed many of the churches of his time were ostentatious, their enormous dimensions and ornamentation distracting from meditation on God. His pared-down cruciform church design, duplicated at Cistercian abbeys all over Europe, has relatively extended transepts, square apses, and clean lines. Natural light gleams down on pure volumes of white stone, lending austere grandeur to the interiors. Ornamentation, sculptures, multicolored windows, and paintings are shunned, with the exception of painted crucifixes. Figurative art, so popular in other churches of the time, is replaced with abstract designs, especially notable in the geometric patterns of Cistercian windows and floor tiles.

Sadly enough, during the French Revolution, the structures at Cîteaux were mostly destroyed and its monks disbursed. Though the monastery was revived in 1898, when it again became the mother house of the order, all that remains today, along with the modern abbey church, is a 15th-century library with its original Gothic arches, a 17th-century *définitoire* (where the abbots would gather for their meetings), and an 18th-century monks dormitory.



Though Cîteaux as it looked in the days of Molesme, St. Bernard, and their successors can no longer be seen by the tourist, you can still experience the ineffable devotion that made the abbey so vibrant in its time. Go to the present-day abbey church and listen. The monks still chant and still sing the *Salve Regina*, as their brothers have done down through the centuries.

OTHER PLACES TO VISIT IN BURGUNDY

Today the original abbey at Cîteaux exists only in the imagination of inspired travelers. Yet there are numerous traces left by the Cistercians throughout Burgundy.

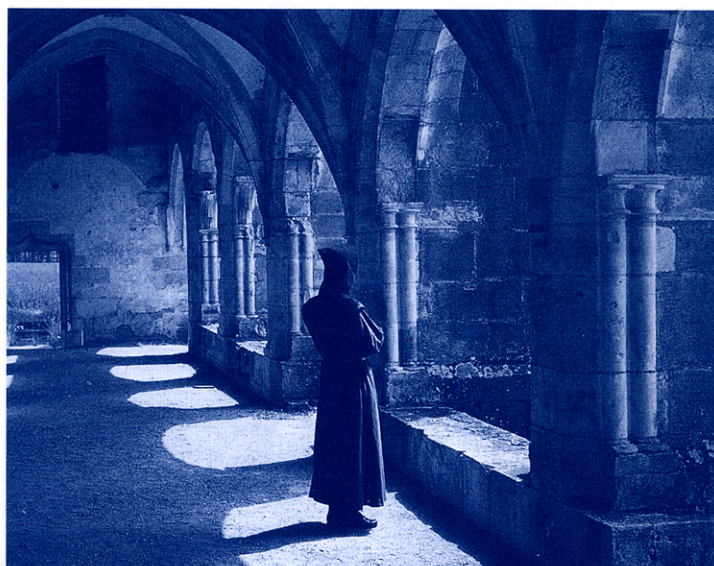
The Romanesque **Abbey of Fontenay**, built in the mid-12th century, northwest of Dijon, has one of the most characteristic Cistercian churches. The façade is sober, its interior spare, its proportions harmonious. The entire abbey merits a visit, as it is the only Cistercian monastery in Burgundy to have survived intact. Replete with its church, cloister, chapter house, forge, and dormitory, it provides an accurate picture of Cistercian life (open all year, information: 03-80-92-15-00).

Cistercian architecture lost much of its severity, but none of its beauty, when it mixed with Gothic forms at the church of the **Abbey of Pontigny** (northwest of Fontenay). Built between 1150 and 1212, the church is transitional: Its Romanesque groined vaulting sits atop Gothic-style radiating chapels and a hemicyclic choir. Although the church might not follow the strictest rules of St. Bernard, its Cistercian spirit is still evident in its stark white interior, graced mainly by the harmony of clean lines (open all year, information: 03-86-47-54-99).

For the sake of contrast, the inquisitive traveler could visit two churches in the area that reflect the other major movement in Romanesque architecture that arose in Burgundy at the same time as the Cistercian—the more decorative **Cluny** school, named after the influential Benedictine abbey whose early 12th-century cathedral (very little of which still stands) was known for its immense size, high windows, and rich sculptures and reliefs. The 12th-century **Cathedral of St-Lazare**, in Autun, boasts masterpieces of Romanesque sculpture: an Eve carved magnificently in fluid lines and a dramatic depiction of the Last Judgment on the tympanum above the central door. The **Basilica of St-Madeleine** in Vézelay rivals St-Lazare in the beauty of its tympanum sculptures, which depict Christ and his apostles, and its colorful rounded arches give powerful expression to their forms. Both churches are mostly Romanesque, and both feature exterior additions from the Gothic period and restorations from the 19th century.

Burgundy's list of beautiful Romanesque churches, contemporaneous with the Cistercians, is a long one, including those in **Paray-le-Monial**, **Anzy-le-Duc**,

Saulieu, and **Tournus**. All of them attest to Burgundy as a preeminent center of religious and intellectual power in the early Middle Ages, and to the lives of Robert de Molesme, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, and their contemporaries who made manifest their spirituality in the beauty they left behind for us to contemplate.



Above: Throughout the centuries, monks in Burgundy, like the one pictured here, have spent countless hours in silent contemplation amid their peaceful cloisters

Left: It was the Cistercians who first grew vines at Clos de Vougeot, which now produces one of the finest Burgundy wines from the area known as the Côte de Nuits

HOW TO GET MORE INFORMATION

Contact the *Regional Tourism Committee of Burgundy*: TEL: 03-80-50-90-00; FAX: 03-80-30-59-45; E-mail: CRT-Bourgogne@hol.sr. Ask for the Cîteaux 98 Passport, a beautifully illustrated booklet with maps and information on all the local sites and events. Also check the new Web site devoted to the Cîteaux events: <http://www.citeaux98.com>

A FEW MAIN EVENTS

- March through November: Clos de Vougeot will present an exhibition on the influence of Cîteaux on Burgundy viticulture
- March 28 to November 30: The town of Nuits-St-Georges will hold a major show on Cîteaux agriculture
- May 1 to October 30: The town of Pontigny presents an exhibition that focuses on the role of Cistercian nuns on the farms belonging to Cîteaux
- May 31: Gregorian chant at the Abbey of Pontigny
- June 1 to November 1: The library and *définitoire* at Cîteaux will be open to the public for the first time
- Mid-June: Gregorian chant, Orthodox Christian chants, secular medieval music, and modern gospel music at Vauluisant
- June 20 to October 20: Among many other exhibitions in the anniversary program featuring medieval manuscripts, the most important will be at the Archeological Museum in Dijon, with original illuminated manuscripts, including Harding's Bible
- June 27: At the Abbey of Fontenay, cellist Mstislav Rostropovich
- July 5: Medieval music in Beaune
- August 24–31: Medieval music at Châtillon-sur-Seine

WHERE TO STAY

If you enjoy visiting Cistercian sites, you might want to stay in one too. The **Château of Gilly**, in Gilly-lès-Cîteaux, is a former Cistercian abbey that is now a hotel. The site had been in Cistercian hands on and off since the 12th century, but the current building dates from the 17th century, having served as a residence for the abbots of Cîteaux until the French Revolution. Today it is officially designated an historic monument. During the Cîteaux celebrations, the hotel is offering two packages, both of which include tours of the Abbey of Cîteaux, Clos de Vougeot, and the town of Dijon. Additional tours to the Cistercian abbeys of Fontenay and La Bussière are also available. Prices, per person/double occupancy, run from FF2,790 to FF4,680. For more information, call Relais & Châteaux at 800-RELAIS-8, or 212-856-0115; or E-mail the hotel: gilly@relais-chateaux.fr