

Fields, Morris & Verdin



2018 Vintage Report

In late April of this year, shortly after my visit to Chavignol to taste the 2018 vintage, I received an email from François Cotat explaining that all of his 2018 wines had been refused the Sancerre appellation. The grounds for such a draconian measure: various spurious technical reasons that meant the wines did not stack up to the oenologists' idea of what should constitute a "typical" Sancerre wine. Now, this came as no great surprise, given that there have been a number of similar instances in the past where he was refused permission to include the designation *Appellation Sancerre Contrôlée* on the label, the wines subsequently being declassified to *Vin de Table* or *Vin de France* level. François' policy of pushing grapes to their optimum maturity gives wines that are typically richer in body, less varietally typical of Sauvignon Blanc, and carry more residual sugar than what one might class as "classic" Sancerre. Fermentation and extended lees ageing in old barrels confers upon the wines breadth and richness, the use of indigenous yeasts gives wines of remarkable character and complexity. Indeed, it is the very atypical nature of these wines that makes them stand out from the crowd of rather mass-produced and identikit Sancerre wines.

For the vast majority of the region's output, Sancerre is now an appellation where enormous demand has led to wine production on an industrial scale; yields are often enormous, with harvesting machines working constantly to bring the grapes in for pressing. The juice is run into row after row of stainless steel tanks, artificial yeasts and oenological products generously added as the pressure builds to bottle the vintage before the end of the year and get the first container shipped off to the US. Like Chablis, the wines are so easy to sell that complacency has long since set in, with quality-focused growers the exception rather than the rule. There is little incentive, appetite or benefit to working organically or sustainably. It is against this vast, homogenous backdrop of conformity and technical winemaking that Cotat's wines stand, one of a small number of brave, individual and idiosyncratic winemakers striving to create wines of character and individuality.

As for the 2018 vintage, François – not a man prone to hyperbole – described it as a “miracle vintage”. The volumes produced had not been seen for many years, meeting the maximum permitted by the appellation of 65hl/ha. This came as something of a surprise; while flowering and fruit set passed without incident, meaning there were plenty of bunches on the vines, after three dry months of summer the expectation was that there would be very little juice in the berries. However, come harvest time in the middle of September, the presses disgorged plenty of juice, the frequent rain showers of the spring having filled the water reserves in the soil and supported the vine through the growing season. With such a warm and luminous summer, the fear was that sugar levels would be excessive, while the large yield threatened dilution. Pleasingly, it seemed that the warm weather and generous yields had contrived to balance one another out, giving wines with generous fruit at between alc. 13% and 13.5% vol. As ever, François, who signs his emails off as “*petit vigneron de Chavignol*”, has made a range of wines that are typical Cotat, but gloriously atypical for Sancerre, with a little residual sugar and a thick, viscous texture. I have no doubt they will age beautifully, and after a little persuasion, the authorities relented and have allowed François to label his wines as Sancerre.

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