An aerial photograph of a Burgundy vineyard landscape. The foreground shows rows of green grapevines on a hillside. In the middle ground, a village with a prominent church featuring a tall, pointed spire is visible. The background consists of rolling green hills and a winding road. The overall scene is lush and scenic.

F&V

Burgundy 2018 Vintage Report

The 2018 Vintage

This is one of the rare vintages that offers both quality and quantity. On the face of it, 2018 was relatively straightforward; a wet winter and spring topped up the water reserves and the warm, sunny summer ensured the grapes reached ripeness without difficulty. The usual threats of disease, rot, frost and hail barely featured, and harvest took place under blue skies in 30°C heat. However, the exceptionally warm and dry conditions posed a new challenge for vigneron, with the need to pick early enough to preserve grapes' acidity, rather than the more familiar wait for ripeness to arrive. In the cellar, handling warm fruit with higher levels of sugar and lower acidity was another test for the region's winemakers. It is therefore arguably both *une année de vigneron* as well as *une année de vinificateur*.

Winter and spring were unusually wet, with rainfall in January and March over twice the average for the time of year. This huge volume of rain – over 120mm in each of the two months – topped up the water reserves in the soil and would prove to be key for the forthcoming growing season. January was exceptionally mild, the warmest since 1945, and nervous vigneron began to worry that the vines would not have a period of cold weather to rest and allow the sap to descend. Fortunately, winter properly arrived in February, with average temperatures barely hovering above freezing. This welcome cold snap was followed by a more typical March and then another bizarre month in April, with temperatures of 30°C pushing the vines' development rapidly. Once again, there was concern about the possibility of frost damage, but thankfully this was not a significant factor in 2018.

Through the rest of the spring and summer, temperatures were consistently at least 1.5 to 2 degrees above the average, while rainfall was a more mixed picture; the Côte d'Or experienced almost tropical conditions in May, with warm temperatures and daily rain showers combining to bring about significant mildew pressure, whereas Chablis and the Mâconnais were somewhat drier. August was universally dry and warm but without the heat spikes of 2003 or 2019, and consequently the vines did not shut down due to stress and there were no sunburnt grapes. Regular small showers kept the vines going, as well as the reserves accumulated earlier in the year.

There were two hailstorms in the southern part of Nuits-St Georges, Prémieux-Prissey and the villages of Comblanchien and Corgoloin in July,

the first on the 3rd and the second on the 15th, remembered because it was the day of France's Football World Cup victory. The damage was substantial, with some small landslides and the loss of a proportion of the crop. Frédéric Mugnier lost around a half to a third of the fruit in the Clos de la Maréchale, while Patrice Rion's vines in Clos-St Marc and Clos des Argillières fared a little better. The saving grace was that the successful flowering and fruit set had meant that there was already a good crop on the vines, so in some ways this acted as a green harvest. Furthermore, the subsequent warm and dry weather allowed the damaged fruit to dry and fall easily from the vibrating sorting tables now used by the vast majority of growers.

The rest of the summer was dry and warm, with only sporadic rainfall. In Meursault, Jean-Baptiste Bouzereau reported that regular small showers of 20mm or so helped the vines to keep going, while in Puligny his records showed much drier conditions. Arnaud Ente was the first to begin picking in the Côte de Beaune on 20th August, with the majority picking the Chardonnay crop in the Côte d'Or from the 27th. The earliest red grapes picked among our growers were some of Domaine de la Vougeraie's young vines of Volnay on 23rd August, and Louis Boillot, also in Volnay, on the 25th.

In the Côte de Nuits the picture was a little less uniform. First out of the blocks was Domaine des Lambrays who began on the 27th of August. There was something of a split between those who went earlier and those who decided to wait, but it depended very much on location and the local weather conditions. Some growers such as Frédérique Sérafin felt that it was not possible to wait for full phenolic ripeness in Gevrey-Chambertin, so picked fairly early – in her case from 3rd September – to preserve freshness in the wines.

Others, such as Etienne Grivot in Vosne-Romanée, waited for the rain which duly arrived in the form of a downpour on 6th September, and picked from the 11th to 19th. Interestingly 20 to 25mm fell on the Côte de Beaune and the southern part of the Côte de Nuits, pushing north as far as the northern end of the Clos de Vougeot and stopping just before Chambolle. It is for this reason that grapes from Vosne and Nuits could be picked later without sacrificing freshness – as evidenced by Grivot and Guyon – but anything picked after the first week of September in Chambolle, Gevrey or Morey risked excessive alcohol as the sugar levels climbed rapidly, often gaining a degree of potential alcohol in just a few days.

The choice of picking date was therefore essential, but as ever it is impossible to draw direct comparisons between one estate and another,

even in the same village and vineyard, because so many factors come into play in terms of the way each grower works their vines, which can change the ripening date by a week or more. Age of vine, exposition, soil type, rootstock, pruning method, the number of bunches on the vine, the treatments used, canopy management and various other factors all influence when fruit reaches ripeness, which in itself is a hard-to-define concept. What appears ripe for one grower may well be lean and flavourless for another, or equally overripe and good for only making jam.

The challenges didn't end with choosing a picking date; harvesting in warm weather meant that fruit was often warm – and skins therefore fragile – when it arrived at the winery. Having done a stint on the sorting table in 2018 I can attest to the difference between warm and cool grapes, with the former often turning to pulp when handled. To combat this, many growers such as Benjamin Leroux have begun renting refrigerated containers to chill down any fruit picked later in the day, sorting and processing it once it is cooled down. In Chablis and the Côte Chalonnaise, where machine harvesters are more prevalent, growers could get out early in the morning before sunrise and pick grapes when they were cool.

Temperature control in the winery itself was key to avoiding stuck fermentations and consequent bacterial spoilage and oxidation, which were a real risk with relatively high levels of sugar in the grapes. Those who are not equipped with the facilities to control the temperature in the winery and their tanks, and who picked late and ended up with grapes around 15 degrees potential alcohol faced a huge struggle to produce clean, balanced wines. Fortunately, they were few and far between in our tastings, but wines have been rejected from our offer because of problems with *Brettanomyces* and volatile acidity.

Once again the question of whole-bunch reared its head. Those who practise it every year, for example Dujac, Domaine Guyon, Domaine de Montille and Domaine de la Vougeraie, used a large proportion (or even 100%) of whole clusters and have had great success. Others who de-stem as a matter of course remain steadfast in their approach. Some others chose to use more than normal, arguing that the stems add a feeling of freshness and dryness that counters the richness of the vintage. Others decided to reduce the percentage of whole-bunch, explaining that it de-acidifies the wine and pushes the pH to a level that runs the risk of bacterial spoilage. As ever, the subject remains a polemic but success has been achieved with both approaches.

The result of this complicated year is what was described by many growers as a “heterogenous” vintage in terms of quality. Arguably the

white wines are more consistent in quality than the reds, where there is much more variation according to when the grapes were picked. It is undeniable, however, that the red wines reach higher peaks and are the stars of the vintage. This variability and the importance of the grower means it is difficult to make generalisations about which areas had greater success. However, from my five weeks of barrel tasting during the autumn, a number of themes became clear:

- Generally speaking, cooler microclimates have done well. St Aubin whites are particularly impressive, as are the wines of the Hautes Côtes, Pernand-Vergelesses and St Romain.
- For reds, villages where tannins were historically somewhat rustic have overperformed, the warm vintage rounding out some of the sharp edges. Nuits-St Georges, Aloxe-Corton and Pommard, as well as Chassagne-Montrachet, Maranges and Santenay, have all produced very good wines. It pays to look outside the classics.
- In both colours the vineyards with deep soils, where water is more plentiful and the temperature lower, the wines really overperform. This includes of the regional wines and lower-lying village sites.
- In whites the quality is good, with the Mâconnais punching above its weight, perhaps because the growers are particularly adept at picking earlier and working with warmer fruit.
- The best reds are outstanding, with a range of styles to appeal to all tastes. While the Grands Crus of the Côte de Nuits will provide the most long-lived wines, the Côte de Beaune has outperformed the Côte de Nuits on a general level. Volnay, Pommard and Beaune are certainly worth seeking out.
- Both reds and whites offer a charming immediacy, but I expect both colours to be capable of ageing, with the reds being longer-lived than the whites. 20 or more years of cellaring potential should not be out of the question for the Premier and Grand Cru reds.
- In the Beaujolais, for once unaffected by hail, the wines are excellent, with some of the richness of 2015 tempered by refreshing acidity.

Chablis

In Chablis more than perhaps anywhere in Burgundy, freshness and acidity are key. This is a wine which is defined by its minerality, the steely freshness and saline purity that scream out for half a dozen oysters. 2018 – warm, sunny and dry – is a vintage which challenged that freshness like very few before.

Winter and early spring were unusually wet, with twice the average rainfall in both January and March. While the very start of the year was unseasonably warm, February was pleasingly cold, with temperatures barely above zero ensuring the sap descended in the vines and disease and insects were kept at bay. Late spring and early summer were characterised by almost tropical weather, with warm temperatures and daily showers being the norm. There was a resultant threat of mildew in the vineyards, but fortunately an extended dry period began in mid-June, lasting until harvest and ensuring the vineyards remained healthy and disease-free. The wet start to the season brought the benefit of topping up the water supplies in the ground to the very brim, providing the vines with the water they needed for the growing season and preventing any threat of drought. Many growers felt that this was the reason behind the surprising volume of juice that came from the berries. The long, warm and dry summer meant that the question vignerons were faced with was not when would the grapes ripen, but how would they preserve balance, in the form of freshness and acidity.

The vast majority of our growers began picking on Monday the 3rd of September (easy to remember as it was back-to-school day) but Benoît Droin was once again the earliest, setting out on the 1st and finishing within ten days. He machine harvests a majority of his vineyards – a practice frowned upon by some purists, but which allows him to begin picking at 5am when the temperatures are still low, bringing grapes to the cellar in under 90 minutes. With recent harvests frequently taking place in warm conditions, the key is often to pick quickly and preserve freshness. The machine harvester avoids the problem of the grapes heating in the sun as they stand in the vineyard, skins degrading as the mercury rises. On a practical level, it is becoming more difficult to find pickers, and the machine allows the flexibility to pick as each site ripens, whereas it is simply uneconomical to pay pickers to sit around waiting from each parcel to ripen. Others who pick by hand reported an exceptionally long harvest period, simply because of the unusually large

yield; after the disastrously small crops of 2016 and 2017, this was a welcome surprise. Everyone had finished picking by the 20th September.

The wines are on the whole very successful, with an approachable and pleasant style. I particularly like Laurent Pinson's description of the 2018s as "*avenant*" – likeable, affable or appealing – although I think it risks doing them a disservice. I am fortunate enough to have visited Chablis twice in 2019 – once in April and once in November – and it was clear on the second visit that the wines had gained in precision, complexity, freshness and *terroir* expression in the intervening period. This positive evolution bodes well for the second winter, and I fully expect the wines in bottle to be fresh, precise and more classic than many commentators initially predicted. In this respect, there are some parallels to be drawn to 2015, a vintage whose reputation for white wines has improved year on year.

There was something of a split between growers when discussing which "bank" of the Serein river had come out on top; Samuel Billaud feels that those wines on the right bank (the same side as the Grands Crus) had the edge, whereas Sébastien Dampt argues that those on the left bank were more successful. There may be a little self-interest here, but there are good wines to be found across the appellation, and following a good grower is arguably a safer bet. On the whole, the individual vineyard character has overcome the warm conditions of the vintage and the wines are recognisably Chablis, with each vineyard's profile clearly visible when tasting. This is not necessarily a vintage for extended ageing, but the wines are approachable and will drink well in the medium-term. With the scarce 2019 vintage to follow and 2017 having all but sold out, 2018 has its merits.

White wines

Ever since the first grapes were picked, 2018 was lauded as a wonderful red wine vintage, with the whites largely ignored. The warm and dry summer which characterised the season was seen as detrimental to making quality white wines, which rely so much on freshness and acidity, and many critics immediately dismissed the thought that this could be a good year for Chardonnay. The changing climate of Burgundy provides numerous challenges, to which its growers must of course adapt. For those focused on Chardonnay, the toolkit available for combating warmer conditions is arguably more limited than for those specialising in Pinot Noir, because acidity forms such a significant pillar of white Burgundy that there are few hiding places if grapes are picked too late and acidity levels consequently too low.

Heading to Burgundy for the first tastings of 2018s from barrel in the spring, the fear was twofold: firstly, the crop was big, so would the wines be dilute? And secondly, the summer had been very warm and dry, so would the wines be leaden-footed and alcoholic? Only detailed tasting, from Chablis to the Mâconnais and with everything in between, could give a complete answer. The greatest surprise of the year was almost certainly the quality of the white wines. Interestingly, the two threats seem to have balanced one another out; the large crop required a significant amount of sunlight and warmth to ripen. Had the crop been smaller, we would arguably seen a richer set of wines. Had the weather been cooler, we might well have found the vintage to be more dilute.

The weather conditions were therefore almost perfect; the wet winter and spring in 2018 provided sustenance for the vines during the season, ensuring that drought stress was not generally an issue. That said, throughout the weeks of tasting a theme repeatedly reared its head: the low-lying vineyards on deeper clay soil, where water was more freely available, had seriously overperformed, whereas vines planted on especially shallow topsoil seemed to have suffered slightly in comparison. This is great news for Bourgogne and many Village-level wines which are on the plain and generally have deep clay topsoil. There is very good value to be found at the lower levels of the quality scale.

Picking early was essential to preserving freshness, and while phenolic ripeness is not as significant a consideration for Chardonnay as for Pinot Noir, it still plays a role. An interesting point we noted with the

white wines was that many of them possess a mineral or even phenolic freshness and grip that compensates for the modest acidity levels. When asking growers to explain the cause, many were at a loss but this is perhaps the result of a lack of phenolic maturity, which manifests itself as a bitterness which may well divide opinion. On a personal level, it is something I particularly enjoy, a textural element that gives freshness and a certain extra dimension to the wine, a sort of umami character, if you will.

The question of dilution was another which was strongly rebuffed. As Jean-Philippe Fichet argued vociferously, Chardonnay is a variety which can withstand – and indeed enjoy – generous yields. Unlike its red counterpart in Burgundy, it is capable of producing excellent wines with yields of over 55 hl/ha. Indeed, Chardonnay when cropped too low can often be concentrated to the point of austerity. A Chardonnay at below 30 hl/ha is impressive in its concentration, but rarely gives pleasure. Looking at past vintages, many of the great white Burgundy vintages are those in which volumes were generous; 1973, 1979 and 1999 display this clearly. There is a current trend for equating small yields with concentration and therefore quality. In my opinion, and that of a number of vigneron, this is a mistake. While it is important not to go to excess, Chardonnay finds its balance at a higher yield than Pinot Noir, and a white Burgundy at 25 hl/ha is often less well-balanced than one at 55 hl/ha.

The Mâconnais is a region which deserves special mention this year; perhaps it is because of the warmer microclimate that its growers are more comfortable with dealing with warmer conditions, earlier harvests and warmer fruit, but they certainly came out particularly well in 2018, making wines of real freshness and energy without sacrificing the sunny Mâconnais fruit character. These are appellations which typically achieve more generous alcohol levels than their Côte d'Or counterparts and the vintage appears to complement this style of wine. From top to bottom of the scale, there are truly exciting wines in the southern part of Burgundy.

For the ultimate appraisal of the 2018 white Burgundy vintage, I refer once again to Jean-Philippe Fichet, who sum sit up perfectly: "*la bouteille ne va pas suffir!*" (one bottle will not be enough!) The whites show an exceptional level of consistency and although they may not possess the longevity of 2017 or 2014, they will be excellent wines in the short to medium term.

Red wines

From the moment it was in barrel the 2018 vintage has been considered by growers and critics alike to be an outstanding vintage. Indeed, such was the anticipation of 2018 that it was a challenge to keep the winemakers focused on the matter in hand when we were tasting the 2017s last year. It was therefore interesting that it was the reds, rather than the whites, which divided opinion and caused the most debate and discussion.

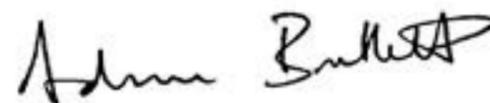
At the same time as we were tasting 2017s and some growers were speaking in hushed but excited tones of the quality of next year's crop, there were whispers that fermentations for the reds were progressing slowly and unusually some wines had not yet finished their fermentations and were still in tank when we arrived in mid-October. It was therefore with a mix of excitement and trepidation that we approached the barrel tastings in autumn 2019. Fortunately, the disappointments were few and far between and the successes far more regular. Against all the odds after such a warm and dry summer, the best of Burgundy's vigneronns have succeeded in producing a range of excellent, well-balanced wines which possess both ripeness and freshness. The meteorological conditions have certainly shaped the wines; the wet start to the year was a blessing, making sure there was water for the vines to draw on throughout the season, and the warm summer has ensured there is a good level of ripeness in the wines. However, the fruit profile on the whole remains red rather than black and the best wines, of which there are many, retain a sense of Burgundian restraint and will age beautifully.

As in every early vintage, the question of picking date is key, and 2018 was no exception. With Pinot Noir growers attempt to find the perfect alignment of the holy trinity of acidity, sugar and phenolics (skin and pip ripeness), hoping to choose the precise moment that all three are in perfect harmony. 2018 is perhaps the vintage where a choice had to be made by many vigneronns to sacrifice one of the three. Some chose to pick early to preserve acidity - Mark Fincham at Domaine Tawse announced that "the days of waiting for phenolic maturity are gone" and his wines are fresh and energetic with no greenness. Others, such as Paul Zinetti at Comte Armand, prioritised phenolic maturity and has produced wines which perhaps show more generosity and sensuality but no hint of overripeness. Both styles are equally successful but in their own ways.

Mother nature further complicated matters with a rainstorm which fell on some areas on the 6th of September, but completely missed others. By this point most of the Côte de Beaune reds had been picked but there was certainly an impact on the Côte de Nuits. This rain and where it fell makes it incredibly difficult to draw direct comparisons between harvest dates in the Côte de Nuits. The showers seemingly got as far north as the top of the Clos de Vougeot and promptly stopped, leaving anything north of that point high and dry. Anyone who had not picked by this time in Chambolle, Morey or Gevrey was in trouble, whereas those who had waited in Vosne have produced some of the wines of the vintage. As ever, these are small margins.

It was important to take care around vinification - with warm fruit, high sugar levels and modest acidities, the risk of bacterial spoilage and oxidation was significant, but those who are well-equipped to cool the fruit and juice, and who are the best vinifiers, have avoided the pitfalls of the vintage. As ever the debate on whole bunches continued to rage. Chemically the process de-acidifies the wines, so posed a risk with already low pH levels in the grapes. However, proponents of the technique were keen to highlight the added sense of freshness and structure it can bring to wines which might otherwise feel heavy. Both approaches seem to have achieved success, so there are no hard and fast rules as to which approach has been the most successful.

As with the white wines, those vineyards with deeper soils or in cooler microclimates appear to have performed particularly well, which is good news for Bourgogne in particular. Equally, sites with plenty of cold clay have really benefitted, with harsh tannins softened to round off the angular corners of wines from historically rustic villages such as Nuits-Saint-Georges, Pommard, Santenay, Chassagne and Maranges. Overall this is a very high-quality vintage for Pinot Noir and the very best wines will age exceptionally well. Stylistically comparisons were drawn with 1990, 1959 and 1945, all of which are outstanding vintages for red Burgundy.



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