

2017 CHABLIS

Domaine Jean-Paul & Benoît Droin

THE LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL

It is perhaps a reflection of how desensitized I have become to seeing empty tanks and receiving crushingly small allocations. Or maybe it was a consequence of the positive signs in the vineyard for the 2018 vintage; the risk of frost had passed by my mid-May visit and the infant grapes were plentiful and healthy. It might equally have been the excellent quality of the 2017 wines we tasted, revelling in their Chablis typicity with the perfect level of austerity, yet possessing a charming approachability and the perfect level of ripeness. Whatever the reason, there was a feeling of levity and relaxation about this year's visit to see Benoît Droin, despite the typically breakneck speed at which we tasted in his somewhat clinical cuverie-cum-aircraft hangar which sits beneath the Grand Cru vineyards.

Throughout the region, there is a feeling that finally, perhaps, there is some light emerging at the end of the impenetrably dark tunnel through which the Chabliens have had to pass over the last half-dozen years. The 2013 vintage was blighted by difficult harvest conditions giving rise to botrytis for those who could not pick quickly enough and, while 2014 was excellent in quality terms, volumes were not abundant. The subsequent 2015 vintage was affected by hail immediately before harvest, while 2016 suffered a triple-pronged attack of significant frost damage, violent hailstorms and rampant mildew. It was approaching the point where you could forgive vigneron nervously scanning the horizon for plagues of locusts.

The bad news for 2017 is that the northern sector of the appellation – villages such as Maligny, Lignorelles, Ligny-le-Chatel, Villy and La Chapelle-Vupelteigne – were badly impacted by the 10-day cold snap which ran from the 17th to the 27th of April. Benoît explained that this wasn't a typical short, sharp frost, but more an extended period of cold weather which hampered budburst, and subsequently flowering and the number of bunches per vine. As a result, some growers have made very little wine, while others have a good crop. Similarly, certain vineyards were decimated while others escaped completely unscathed. For Droin, with a broad range of holdings across the appellation, this means that allocations vary widely, from minuscule to generous. Particularly hard-hit were Vaillons, Mont de Milieu and the Grands Crus, while the levels of Village wine have bounced back.

In contrast to 2016, the rest of the growing season was perfect; the sun shone and the rain fell exactly when needed. Had the frost not hit, this would have been a plentiful vintage. Stylistically, Benoît places 2017 somewhere between 2014 and 2012; two of the best vintages in recent memory. From a man who is not prone to exaggeration, this is strong praise indeed. He highlighted the good level of ripeness, giving the wines a rounded profile, but not at the expense of freshness or minerality. The acidity levels are good; having begun very high, these softened a touch with fermentation and maturation, giving harmonious and balanced wines which display their individual terroirs. Every Chablis vintage for the next dozen years will inevitably be compared to the legendary 2014s, and whilst the 2017 doesn't quite possess that piercing minerality, it is a serious, age worthy vintage and certainly the next best since at least 2010.

Adam Bruntlett
Burgundy Buyer



TASTING NOTES

2017 Petit Chablis

Benoît makes this wine with no oak and bottles it in the spring following the harvest to capture the fresh, zesty profile he is seeking from Petit Chablis. The nose is vibrant, with aromas of freshly cut grass, citrus fruit and a pleasant smoky touch. The palate is juicy and shows impressive concentration of succulent peach alongside lovely crisp acidity and a tangy, mineral finish. The grapes for this come from two parcels, both of which are in the best area for Petit Chablis, on the plateau behind the Grand Cru vineyards.

2017 Chablis

Bottled slightly later than the Petit Chablis, you can tell this is Kimmeridgian Limestone rather than the Portlandian of Petit Chablis, the oyster shell notes taking precedence over the fruit aromas. This is however still incredibly energetic and refreshing, with a citrus punch that smacks you in the mouth, wonderful purity and a chalky, grippy minerality to the finish.

2017 Chablis, Vaucoupin, Premier Cru

All fermented and raised in tank, around 1,000 bottles made versus the usual 1,200. The wine is steely, grassy and herbaceous on the nose, but with a floral lift. The palate opens with a voluminous feel – spicy and almost viscous peach fruit – before tightening up on the finish with a twist of salinity that builds, leaving an overall impression of tension. Relatively open and approachable.

2017 Chablis, Vosgros, Premier Cru

This is a wine for fans of citrus fruit; the nose bursts with confit lemon, lemongrass and verbena, while the palate follows a similar theme, offering plenty of tangy acidity and a touch of creamy richness to add depth before crushed oyster shell comes through on the finish. Delicious.

2017 Chablis, Vaillons, Premier Cru

Twenty percent of this cuvée goes into oak, of which a tiny portion is new. It's very well-integrated and supports the slightly richer profile of fruit here, but the overall impression remains one of vibrant, citrus freshness. The acidity is excellent, giving a cleansing, lemon finish. An excellent early-drinking Premier Cru for purists.

2017 Chablis, Montmains, Premier Cru

There is 30 percent oak here, Benoît explaining that the deeper, marne soils give a richer profile, which he feels pairs well with more oak. Immediately the wine is richer and more weighty, with stone fruit and a touch of lavender providing perfume. More showy than the Vaillons, it's a pretty and charming wine with lacy acidity.

2017 Chablis, Fourchaume, Premier Cru

Sadly, Benoît is losing his original parcel from 2018 as the fermage contract comes to an end. To cover the short crop this year, he has purchased some grapes from 2017, and will continue the contract from 2018. The parcel is very close to his previous vines, in the same lieu-dit of Vaupulent. The two cuvées were made separately and will be blended together. Both saw around 50 percent oak and were remarkably similar in profile; quite open on the nose with peach and nectarine, a lovely suave, caressing texture and some sophisticated, smoky notes.

2017 Chablis, Mont de Milieu, Premier Cru

This is one of the parcels that suffered frost damage, which reduced the crop but seemingly did not have an impact on quality. A charming combination of steel and citrus fruit, this is a classy wine with a gourmand centre which is easy to love. The firm, acid backbone and finish of classic oyster shell notes scream Chablis.

Fields, Morris & Verdin

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2017 Chablis, Montée de Tonnerre, Premier Cru

As so often, this is the sweet spot for pure Chablis lovers. The nose is incredibly complex, with bacon fat, gunflint and smoky oak jostling for position with the chiselled citrus aromas. The palate is perfectly weighted, giving the impression of carefully judged power underpinned by a thread of steely acidity which runs the length of the wine. The finish is spicy, chewy, dense and long-lasting.

2017 Chablis, Blanchot, Grand Cru

Unusually perhaps for a Grand Cru, this wine is always vinified and aged in steel, with no oak influence at all. Consequently the nose is delicate, floral and, unsurprisingly, steely. The palate is lean, wiry and austere; Benoît describes this as “rusiticity”. Intense and prickly, this needs time, being a little backward at present.

2017 Chablis, Vaudésir, Grand Cru

With around 35 percent this year, there’s a touch less new oak than in previous vintages as Benoît fine-tunes the profile of the wine. Powerful and concentrated, this is a serious wine with a warming feel, smoky notes and spicy acidity on the finish. The oak is not yet fully integrated which reinforces the warming feel of the wine, but it will integrate with time, giving a little more grace and elegance than is presently in evidence.

2017 Chablis, Valmur, Grand Cru

As befits a wine which I always feel has more than a passing relationship with Fourchaume, this has an intensely floral nose, with notes of lavender and honeysuckle, as well as some spicy peach fruit. The palate is broad, with an oily texture, ripe stone fruit and a spicy, chewy finish. The minerality is presently hidden somewhat under its puppy fat, but will break through given time. Promising, if a little backward in its youth.

2017 Chablis, Grenouilles, Grand Cru

In contrast to the Valmur, Benoît’s Grenouilles is more of an open book. The fruit is similarly rich and ripe, but the acid freshness is already in evidence, giving an energetic edge to the wine that makes it more approachable now. The deeper soil means this is not as mineral as some of the other Grands Crus, but there is impressive power and the wine’s openness and generosity is charming and endearing.

2017 Chablis, Les Clos, Grand Cru

Sadly, Les Clos was the worst-hit parcel in terms of the cold weather and around half the crop was lost as a result. Benoît explained that in many cases there was only one bunch per vine, leading inevitably to concentration in the resulting wine. The nose offers some hints as to the class of this wine; concentrated, dense fruit combines with flinty smoke notes and spicy buttered toast. The palate is powerful and concentrated, perhaps slightly richer than usual, but with its hallmark intense minerality and chewy phenolics at the finish. Great potential here; it’s not showing any ill-effects from the frost.

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