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### Pleasant Surprises from a Difficult Vintage

Burgundy's top estates meet the challenges of 2004



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The 2004 vintage in Burgundy challenged growers. There were a number of problems, mostly due to oidium (powdery mildew), hail and large yields. Fortunately, three warm, dry weeks in September allowed those vintners who did due diligence in the vineyards and on the sorting tables to make fresh, pure, harmonious red and white wines.

Négociant Grégory Patriat of Jean-Claude Boisset told me that 20 years ago, "a vintage like 2004 would have been a disaster. People didn't know about the leaves [i.e., canopy management] and yields like we do now." But progress in the vineyards, such as plowing between rows, moving away from fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides, and green harvesting, is more prevalent today. And the best vintners select ripe, healthy grapes at the winery, eliminating any substandard fruit.

I visited Burgundy in June. The 2004s, high in malic acid, were in various stages of malolactic fermentation, or had just finished malo and needed racking, or were just racked (moving the wine off the lees and sediment into a clean barrel). Some had been racked a month or more and showed well, but most were very difficult to taste. Needless to say, it's too early to judge individual wines.

I found some pleasant surprises from 2004, especially reds. Reports from growers and négociants after the harvest were more upbeat about the whites, and they showed well as a group. I particularly liked the *grands crus* whites from Chassagne and Puligny and from Corton-Charlemagne.

But the reds, which I expected to be lean and mean, offered pure fruit and balanced profiles, if slimmer and more delicate in style. The aromas of the fruit reminded me more than once of 2001. The wines of Chambolle-Musigny, including Bonnes-Mares and Musigny, and of Gevrey-Chambertin were very impressive. And despite hail and oidium, I tasted more than 200 wines with no off or dirty flavors.

Due to the cool beginning of the summer, sugar levels in the grapes were low by the end of August. Then September came to the rescue, with three glorious weeks of warm, sunny days and cool nights, courtesy of the north wind. The main problem facing growers was achieving full maturity. The official start of the harvest was Sept. 20 in the Côte de Beaune and Sept. 24 in the Côte de Nuits. Several growers harvested over a three-week period, making multiple passes through the vineyards to pick ripe grapes.

According to the BIVB (Burgundy's trade group), 2004 saw a big crop, with yields 15 to 20 percent higher on average than in 2002 (2002 yields were slightly higher than the 5-year average of 1999-2003 and 30 to 50 percent higher than 2003 in the Côte d'Or). The flowering occurred during perfect weather conditions, setting the stage for a lot of clusters on each vine. Green harvesting, the process by which excess unripe fruit is cut from the vine, was necessary. Maison Champy performed two green harvests, one in July and

then again at the end of August, along with leaf-pulling to expose and aerate the clusters. Of those I visited, only Grégory Patriat made less wine in 2004 than 2003.

Oidium posed a major threat in 2004. Oidium is a fungal disease that spreads in warm weather, but unlike botrytis or downy mildew, it occurs under dry conditions. According to Franck Grux, winemaker at Olivier Leflaive Frères, "The cycle of oidium is complex, because we saw the first sign of it in 2003, even though it was dry."

The disease is controlled by spraying with a sulfur mixture. Otherwise, infected grapes must be eliminated and removed from the vineyard. "If you treated the vines early on, you had the chance of getting the grapes ripe without any oidium flavor in the wines," explained négociant Alex Gambal.

Hail created localized damage in various vineyards in the Côte d'Or, most notably in Volnay, Pommard and Beaune at the beginning of August, but also in spots from Echézeaux north to Gevrey-Chambertin. At Bouchard Père & Fils, winemaker Philippe Prost noted that a north wind dried out the vines after the hail, preventing rot.

At Domaine de la Vougeraie, estate manager Pascal Marchand called 2004 the year of sorting. Oidium and hail were the main culprits, but unripe grapes were also a problem. "We sorted meticulously, berry by berry," Marchand recalled. Franck Grux used two sorting tables to guarantee that only healthy grapes were fermented.

Jacques Lardière, winemaker for Beaune-based négociant Louis Jadot also selected rigorously as the grapes were received. "Before the selection [in vineyards affected by hail], we had the potential of 11.9 to 12 degrees [Baumé]; after, we had 12.9 to 13 naturally," he stated. Overall, Jadot rejected 12 tons of red grapes.

Marchand also proceeded gently with the extraction of flavors and tannins from the skins of the Pinot Noir. "Because of the cold season we had," he said, "I was very prudent with the extraction. The phenolic ripeness was difficult to achieve." All the more reason to keep the yields under control—a large crop delays maturity.

In the end, I tasted some very impressive whites and harmonious, fresh, pure reds. It's a testament to the hard work many are willing to undertake in the vineyards and cellars that 2004 turned out as successfully as it did. Burgundy lovers are the big winners. They will reap the benefits for many years.

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