

Red, White and Beautiful in Burgundy

In 2002, thanks to the extraordinary harvest, both red and white wines are outstanding

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When harvest time comes and the vintage hangs in the balance, Burgundy lives on the edge. More often than not, autumn storms betray summer's promise, and winemakers must settle for less than outstanding quality. In 2002, there was even more suspense than usual, as storms pounded wine regions all across Europe. But just when all seemed lost, a miraculous turnaround in weather conditions, combined with courageous decisions about when to harvest, helped many Burgundian vintners make extraordinary wines. This past October, December and January, I visited more than two dozen estates and négociants in Burgundy and tasted more than 200 wines from barrel. Everywhere I went the winemakers were impressed by the harmony and balance of the natural sugar and acidity levels of the 2002s. The Pinot Noirs are delicate, refined, subtle, bursting with red berry aromas. The Chardonnays are ripe and fruity, with a seductive opulence.

"What is fantastic with 2002 is that right from the beginning they were very good," says Nadine Gublin, winemaker of Domaine Jacques Prieur in Meursault, which makes both whites and reds. "They are elegant, racy and classy."

I give the 2002 vintage tentative ratings of 92-96 (outstanding to classic on the Wine Spectator 100-point scale) for red Burgundy and 91-95 for white Burgundy. Chablis also harvested a remarkably healthy and ripe crop. Many '02 Pinot Noirs and Chardonnays will be delicious on release but should also age for a decade at least.

It's rare for Burgundy to be successful in both colors. In the past two decades, there have only been four other vintages in which both reds and whites were outstanding: 1996 (95 points for both Pinot and Chardonnay); 1990 (98 for red, 92 for white); 1989 (90, 92); and 1985 (93, 94).

In Burgundy, winemakers have raised prices moderately, taking advantage of global enthusiasm for the 2002s after holding the line for the previous two vintages.

"It's out of the question for us to lower prices on the 2002s," says Joseph Henriot, owner of Beaune-based négociant Bouchard Père & Fils. "There is strong demand for these wines, and we won't have enough supply to fulfill demand."



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The smallness of the 2003 vintage is another factor pushing 2002 prices higher. According to Louis-Fabrice Latour of Maison Louis Latour, "the '02s are expensive because there is very little wine from '03," when yields were up to 50 percent below the five-year average in many Pinot Noir vineyards.

Jim Elston, president of Boston-based broker Chemin des Vins, says the recent fall of the dollar against the euro has also made the 2002s more expensive for Americans. A 2001 red premier cru that retailed for \$50 will go for about 20 percent more in the 2002 vintage, says Elston, who sells Burgundies to U.S. importers. The increases on some wines will be even steeper.

"The producers know that if they don't sell their 2002s in America, they will sell them elsewhere, so winemakers haven't lowered their prices to match the fall of the dollar," says Elston.

We have had extraordinary luck," says 82-year-old grower Henri Jayet of Vosne-Romanée. The legendary vintner has now retired but was still active during the 2002 harvest. He predicted that the Côte de Nuits would "make the best [red] wines in France" given the dismal performance of many other regions that year. From a wine lover's perspective, Europe looked like a disaster zone in 2002. August brought floods to Austria and hail to Piedmont. Then a huge storm hit the Southern Rhône on Sept. 8 and 9. It turned Châteauneuf-du-Pape vineyards into swamps and lakes. It crumbled roads, destroyed homes, killed dozens of people.

Burgundians watched warily. Their own harvest was scheduled for the following week. Would the Côte d'Or and Chablis be next? It looked that way when a pattern of overcast skies, drizzle and some local storms affected the Côte d'Or through the first 12 days of September.

"Arrived in Dijon," Alex Gambal, an American who has a négociant business in Beaune, wrote in his diary on Sept. 8 as storms struck southern France. "Sun in and out. Overcast toward 4 p.m. A few sprinkles; walked the vineyards. Vines look beautiful, very green. Grapes healthy. On verra, we'll see."

Both the Pinot Noir and Chardonnay grapes showed decent natural sugar levels. "The [vineyards] only needed a bit of sun and light to complete the photosynthesis," says Prieur's Gublin.

However, on Sept. 10 the Burgundians' fears seemed to become reality. "Rained from 10:30 p.m. to 7 a.m.; steady all night," Gambal reported from the Côte de Nuits, Côte d'Or's northern half. "Gloom sets in. Amazing how we hang on every word of the weatherman."

As harvest approached, the weather forecast became downright alarming. Domaine Denis Mortet in Gevrey-Chambertin wasn't risking it; the producer jumped the gun and starting picking before the *ban des vendanges*, the official harvest date. (This is permitted, so long as the grapes have reached the legal minimum maturity and authorities approve the request.)

But then a miracle took shape, according to the winemakers. For six days, Burgundy enjoyed blue skies, cool nights and mornings and a flag-flapping wind that dried the vines and concentrated the grapes. The modest amount of rain (1.2 inches) that had fallen in the first 12 days of September was soon forgotten. Sugar levels increased quickly in the grapes, as much as 2 percent potential alcohol in some vineyards in just a week to 10 days.

"We were surprised how the maturity of the grapes rose so quickly," says Gublin. Prieur harvested its Pinots and Chardonnays with an impressive 13 percent to 14.9 percent potential alcohol.

The official harvest date for Côte de Beaune was set at Sept. 16; for Côte de Nuits, Sept. 18. As if on cue, a storm driven by southern winds unleashed rain in some areas of the Côte d'Or on Sept. 19—nearly an inch

fell on Pommard that day. It was like a lottery; Vosne-Romanée was spared, but not Marsannay just a few miles to the north.

However, the storm didn't cause much damage, according to winemakers. "Whatever rain fell didn't matter," says Jayer. "Especially since we had the northeastern wind that dried the grapes, ripened them and concentrated them. They were in perfect health."

Côte d'Or had been in the grip of a drought for most of 2002; in July and August, it rained 15 percent less than usual. The spillway dried up in a mill near Nuits-St.-Georges; holding basins went dry and grew grass. With groundwater in short supply, authorities told people not to water gardens or wash cars. And the thirsty vineyards struggled to ripen their fruit.

As a result, the grapes were small, with thick skins, and many winemakers worried about producing hard wines with excessive tannins. But the rain that fell in early September softened the grape skins, according to some winemakers, who were also careful not to extract tough and astringent tannins during the winemaking.

"We were the driest region in France," says Philippe Prost, winemaker of Bouchard Père & Fils. "The rain that fell before harvest was miraculous; it stimulated the vineyards, where the photosynthesis process had been blocked."

It was important in 2002 not to pick before the grapes were fully ripe. Some wineries, fearing low acidity levels or the threat of storms, dilution and rot, rushed to harvest and wound up producing lean wines, according to various sources. But with an Indian summer that stretched well into October, later-picking wineries were rewarded with grapes of sound acidity and sugar levels.

In its yearly vintage report, the authoritative Service Régional de la Protection des Végétaux, a state agency, concluded: "The grapes completed their maturation in excellent and totally unexpected conditions."

It's mid-October 2002. The days are balmy and a strange quietness fills the Côte d'Or. With picking behind them, winemakers watch over their fermentation tanks without stress. The pace is leisurely in the wineries, where machinery hums softly and crews take long lunches.

From north to south, from Gevrey-Chambertin in Côte de Nuits to Chassagne-Montrachet in Côte de Beaune, winemakers report that they are "letting the wines make themselves." They are more midwives than surgeons. Except for the storm of Sept. 19, Burgundy basked in fine weather for nearly a month, from Sept. 12 to Oct. 10.

"Look at this," says Christophe Perrot-Minot, winemaker of Domaine Henri Perrot-Minot in Morey-St.-Denis (see profile, page 44). He climbs up a ladder, then reaches down into a bubbling fermenting vat and grabs a handful of tiny Pinot Noir berries. The grapes are sweet; the must tastes balanced already. Perrot-Minot's brown eyes convey his high hopes for the vintage.

When I returned to Burgundy last fall and this winter, most of the 2002s I tasted were still aging in barrels.

The Chardonnays from Côte de Beaune, in Côte d'Or's southern half, tasted ripe and fruity; they don't have the steely, mineral profile of the whites from 2000, also an outstanding vintage (90 points), but they show more opulence.

"2002 reminds me of 1992, which tasted well at all stages and aged well," says Jean-Marc Roulot of Domaine Roulot in Meursault, which specializes in age-worthy Chardonnay. Roulot made tightly wound, ripe whites in 2002. "And 2002 is above 2000 or 2001 because [of] more homogenous quality."

Vineyard yields, which can indicate concentration, were 10 percent lower for Chardonnay in 2002 than in 1992 or 2000, according to sources.

The rain in early September led wine growers to harvest Pinot Noir before Chardonnay; the whites ripened in the subsequent nice weather and north wind, which prevented the spread of rot.

"Even the early pickers realized there was no point of harvesting unripe Chardonnay grapes at 10.5 percent potential alcohol," says Jacques Lardière of Maison Louis Jadot. After the Pinot Noir harvest, the Chardonnays reached 13.8 percent potential alcohol, which is plenty to produce rich Chardonnays, Lardière added.

At first, more attention was lavished on the reds than on the whites. The whites didn't show their potential until the spring or summer of 2003, according to some winemakers. At Jacques Prieur, Gublin has produced a series of splendid whites. "I prefer the '02s to the whites from 1999 because the '02 wines are fresher and more dynamic," says Gublin.

Today, demand is strong for the '02 whites. "Not since 1996 have I seen such interest for a white Burgundy vintage," says Latour, who is also president of the Syndicats de Négociants-Eleveurs de Bourgogne. "But then again, I must say it is the best vintage since 1996." Latour is raising prices: "We have to allocate all our wines from premiers to grands crus," says Latour. "Demand is there, the wines are very good, there is no wine next year, and so on."

Dominique Lafon, winemaker at Domaine des Comtes Lafon in Meursault, says 2002 might be the most successful of the past four vintages. His whites are seductive and fruity as well as powerful. Tasting barrel samples in his cellar, I thought all his Chardonnays were outstanding.

Chablis also produced stunning quality in 2002, as harvest took place in near perfect conditions, according to winemakers. "2002 is an exceptional year in Chablis; we got maturity while the wines remained distinctive and kept good acidity," says Frédéric Drouhin, CEO of Maison Joseph Drouhin in Beaune, which also owns vineyards in Chablis. "I have rarely seen Chablis harvest such a perfectly healthy crop." He says that in 2002, no Chablis was chaptalized (a legal process by which sugar is added to boost alcohol levels).

With the reds, too, quality is consistent across the board in top estates. The wines show an impressive balance between natural sugar and acidity. Gublin prefers Jacques Prieur's 2002 reds to those from the outstanding 1999 vintage.

Indeed, debate over the relative merits of the reds from 1999 and 2002 is ongoing in the cellars. Winemakers seem evenly divided between the two camps.

In Côte de Beaune, the reds from 2002 might be slightly less impressive than the reds from 1999, which was a stellar year in this district. Yet that doesn't mean the 2002s aren't delicious, winemakers argue.

"The 2002s don't have the color of the 1999s," says Lafon, who specializes in white wines but also makes fine Volnays. "In 2002, the wines are more elegant and refined. We don't have the same expression of fruit in 2002 as in 1999. And the maturity is a bit below 1999 in terms of natural sugar levels."

But the 2002s show better balance, and Lafon neither chaptalized nor acidified, he says. "The 2002 is what Burgundy is all about. If you seek power in a wine then 1999 is best for you. But I think I will have more pleasure drinking 2002 than 1999. I like the elegant, silky, joyful character of the 2002 reds."

However, in Côte de Nuits, many 2002s are superior to 1999s. The '02s were born with better balance between fruit and acidity, and yields were lower, which can translate into more concentrated wines.

The yields in 2002 were about 20 percent to 30 percent lower than yields in 1999, according to a Beaune-based agency, Union Générale de Syndicats. In some vineyards, yields were up to 50 percent lower in 2002, which explains the natural concentration in the midpalate of those wines. In 1999, wineries often resorted to saigné, or bleeding-off liquid. This technique attempts to concentrate the wines by reducing the juice-to-solid ratio, but it can also make the wines taste harder.

In 1999, some winemakers chaptalized in order to boost alcohol levels. In 2002, winemakers needed to chaptalize less, if at all, as natural sugar reached sufficient levels in the Pinot Noirs, especially in the Côte de Nuits. It's difficult to confirm independently the techniques used by winemakers in their wineries. But in 2002, most winemakers report that they didn't acidify because the wines had enough natural acidity; there was more acidification of 1999s than of 2002s, according to some Burgundians.

As a result of this innate equilibrium, the '02 wines are textbook Pinot Noirs—not deep in color or massive in structure, but subtle, refined and expressive. They deliver incredibly sweet fruit. The smooth, ripe tannins caress the palate with softness, and the finishes seem endless. I've rarely tasted better-balanced red Burgundies.

Morey-St.-Denis, Chambolle-Musigny, Gevrey-Chambertin, Nuits-St.-Georges and Vosne-Romanée produced beautiful Pinot Noirs, many of which I rated outstanding (90-94 points) and classic (95-100) from barrel. Many of the wines I tasted exceed the quality of versions from 1999 (overall vintage rating 90 points) and 1993 (91), and many match the great reds from 1996 and 1990.

"My 2002s are the best wines of my career," says Nuits-St.-Georges négociant Dominique Laurent of his lineup of remarkably refined Pinots.

Some estates, like Domaine Henri Perrot-Minot, made ultrathick and deep, silky, inky '02 Pinots. But in most cases, the 2002s have lighter colors, running from ruby to cherry. That doesn't make them less interesting, however.

"I like a lot this '02 vintage. I like the wines' elegance; personally I've never made very dark and extracted wines," says Christophe Roumier of Domaine G. Roumier in Chambolle-Musigny. His Pinots taste lovely, ripe and fresh. "Often when you have high sugar levels, as in 2002, you lose the acidity. For some magical reasons, the acidity remained good."

Maybe Roumier is right; maybe it was magic. Compared with the nearby Rhône, France in general or even Europe as a whole, Burgundy's harvest weather was miraculous. Roumier added that on Sept. 19, the day of Burgundy's deluge, no rain fell on Chambolle at all.

"We escaped," he says. He is talking about his own vineyards, but in two words he has summed up Burgundy's good fortune in the perilous autumn of 2002.

Senior editor Per-Henrik Mansson is Wine Spectator's lead taster on the wines of Burgundy.