

The
WINE
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The 2002 RED BURGUNDIES

The Best Since 1990?

By Pierre-Antoine Rovani

The 2002 vintage will long be remembered for having yielded many of the **finest red Burgundies since 1990**. Those producers who harvested fully ripe fruit produced **stunning red Burgundies** in 2002. My notebooks are filled with terms such as “**Suave, supple, sappy, super-ripe, sweet, lush and exquisite**”...and those were words used to describe the tannin. Of the eight Burgundy vintages I have reviewed in depth for the Wine Advocate, none has displayed the **sensuality, ripeness and fruit** of the 2002s. Taking the Cote d’Or as a whole, 2002 is **unquestionable the finest vintage since 1990**. The successful 2002s have **enormous depth of fruit, purity, freshness and concentration, sumptuously ripe tannin, and seamless, harmonious personalities**. Those who wish to experience Clos Vougeot at its best are well-advised to seek out some of those recommended in the following pages as they will set new benchmarks for this large vineyard’s potential. Readers who have determined that Nuits St . Georges is not for them due to its perceived earthiness, firm, hard tannins and ungenerous nature, should seek out 2002s finest for the same reasons.

THE 2002 WHITE BURGUNDIES

Good Things Come to Those Who Wait

By Pierre-Antoine Rovani

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“There has been enormous optimism throughout the wine world concerning the 2002 Burgundies, both for whites and reds. This optimism was born at the very time the vintage was being shaped by a glorious change in weather, a week before the harvests began. From Topeka to Singapore, Burgundy fanatics were euphorically exchanging information on internet websites, **proclaiming 2002 a spectacular year**. After counseling patience and calm on eRobertParker.com. Now, 18 months later, with the majority of the wines facing bottling, and having spent four weeks tasting through them, it is clear that **2002 provided Burgundy’s vignerons with the opportunity to fashion great wines, in both red and white**. As is always the case, those producers who had moderate yields and the courage/patience to wait for their fruit to ripen produced the most successful wines. This report focuses on the 2002 whites, an excellent to outstanding vintage from the northern half of the Maconnais to Chablis.

The growing season was demoralizing for most vignerons. The mid-June flowering, which lasted 12 days on average, was hugely successful for most parcels. Some older vines flowered a few days later and caught some cool temperatures, so millerands (the non-fully formed tiny berries with concentrated juice that result from perturbed flowerings) were not uncommon. Subsequently, Burgundy faced a dreary, cool, and overcast season. Interestingly, while the vignerons would watch French television describe the incessant rains plaguing their colleagues in the South, the Cote d’Or remained the driest Department in all of France. In time, the fear of those southern storms inching their way North was more than some Burgundians could handle. “We were all gnawing at our fingernails,” said more than one grower. By mid-August, some vines were suffering from drought conditions (many growers say some had even gone dormant). In short, the grapes were a long way from being ripe, and apprehension among the Burgundians increased. The front that had all but destroyed the vintage in France’s southern Rhone and Languedoc vineyards moved to the North. Warm, rainy days, and a few storms (which many vignerons claim causes stress to the berries) blanketed the region. Most growers I spoke with admitted to being depressed at this stage, believing they would watch a vintage deteriorate before their eyes. Then, on the 11th of September, the rainy, warm front was pushed south by a dry, cool wind blowing from the North. What followed was “magical” (the term used in many cellars).

The vintage was saved by the combination of the rain and the subsequent sunny days and North wind. “The vines clearly needed the water to jump-start ripening, having sunny cool days after those storms was exactly what they needed.” The vines’ leaves were in excellent condition to perform photosynthesis. “When the sun arrived, the leaves went immediately to work, so it was a combination of drying wind and photosynthesis that ripened the vintage.”

The north wind is the guardian angel, the savior of Burgundy. Paris cabbies have St. Fiacre, and Burgundians have “**La Bise**,” the name they’ve given the dry, cool wind that blows in from the north in the late summer/early fall, saving countless vintages. It chases away the humid, rot-inducing air from the south, dries the vineyards, dehydrates the grapes (thereby concentrating them), and typically ushers in clear, sunny days. When studying historical accounts of Burgundy’s harvests, one is struck by how many were saved from the jaws of mediocrity (or worse) by “la Bise”.

I was in Burgundy for the 2002 harvest (wearing shorts and Hawaiian shirts) and was amazed by the luminosity of the days and the mildness of the weather. Vignerons were joyful, the gloom of Burgundian falls and winters had been postponed, the harvest was saved. By the 15th of September, the days were warm and sunny, with an appealingly cool wind blowing in the evenings, dropping temperatures significantly.

There are few things more pleasurable than to stroll aimlessly before hard-working people, and that is about all a wine critic can do during harvest. So I’d stroll, look at how they were doing their work, and check the grapes they were harvesting. There was no noticeable rot to speak of, with only very slight (5%) patches in some of the villages and Bourgogne parcels. Sadly, many vignerons harvested too early, before the Bise could have much of an affect on their parcels. Some grapes in Meursault that were harvested before my eyes were spectacularly sweet and golden, others in Vosne-Romanée- picked the same day- were neon green on the inside.

There are three important variables at the end of the growing season that are inexorably related – yields, harvest dates, and ripeness levels. This is 2002’s quandary. The entire year came down to a few windy days and the harvest date (in conjunction with the yields). This determined exactly the quality of what vignerons produced. Sure, the early bird catches the worm, but the early vigneron harvests unripe fruit and we all know what that means with Chardonnay – lean, angular “unripe” acidity, and compressed citric finishes. Those who chose to harvest on the ban de vendange (unless they had abnormally low yields) could not have ripe berries. Those who patiently waited, allowing the Bise to concentrate the juice in their berries, saw their potential natural alcohol levels soar in time.

The Wines

The 2002 vintage offers a range of wine styles, from gloriously fleshy, ripe, supple, deep beauties to those that were obviously harvested too early, producing lemony, lean wines with clipped, compressed finishes. Of course there is everything in between. Overall, however, consumers will be ecstatic with the 2002s.

When Burgundians are asked to compare their 2002s to previous vintages, there are two years that are constantly mentioned, 1996 and 1992. **The vintage’s finest offerings reveal a glorious sappiness, with fleshy cores filled with resin-coated mineral flavors. Tropical fruits, a trait of warm years, are not common in 2002, yet poached pears, herbal teas (linden, chamomile, and verbena), candied apples, and toasted hazelnuts are common.** Those growers who waited patiently before harvesting produced wines with the textures, flavors, and personalities of beautifully ripened wines along with the freshness and pure finishes associated with cooler vintages. The finest whites of the Cote de Beaune appear to be from precocious vineyards, like Batard-Montrachet, that had achieved full physiological maturity prior to being harvested.

The Maconnais, to the South of the Cote de Beaune, found itself to be the demarcation line between the dry north and rainy south for much of the season. In the northern part of the Maconnais, rain was much less of a factor. Here too, the Bise saved the day, quickly drying vineyards and allowing those who waited for it and the sunny days that followed it to “blow dry” their vineyards. The finest 2002 Maconnais wines come from hillside vineyards that ripen late, particularly the best of Pouilly-Fuisse.

Chablis, which is much further north than the Cote de Beaune, was barely affected by the southern rains and enjoyed not only a hugely successful growing season, but one of the best in memory. The wines have the flesh and texture of exceptional ripeness with all the complex flavors responsible for this extraordinary terrior’s reputation. The vintage’s superb quality, combined with improving viticulture in the area, mean that consumers should not miss the opportunity to acquire wines from Chablis’ top producers.

Is 2002 a great vintage across the board for whites? No, because it is too heterogeneous, with too many unsuccessful wines. **It is, however, an excellent to outstanding vintage, providing consumers with abundant quantities of wonderful wines.”**