

Burgundy Breaks the Rules **The best 2003 reds are legends in the making**



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Forget everything you know about Burgundy. The 2003 vintage changed the rules of the game.

Two visits to the region--first in June, 2004, and again just last week--showed me that even the oldest, most traditional and classic of wine regions can learn new tricks. The best of the 2003 reds are legends in the making.

After a scorching summer with intense heat and the earliest harvest since the 1800s, growers in Burgundy found themselves with grapes high in natural sugar and low in acidity. The potential alcohol sometimes exceeded 16 percent. Growers and negociants had never experienced such a vintage, and many had doubts over how to handle it. Based on the harvest reports, I expected to find overblown, jammy, cooked reds, devoid of any sense of place; I imagined the whites would be blowsy and lack definition.

But as I tasted through cellar after cellar (mostly sampling Pinot Noir, but some whites also), I felt like I was experiencing **history in the making**. The best vintners truly rose to the challenge of the vintage. **For the top red wines, 2003 will become legendary. It will secure its place in the wine world's lore. It will join other exceptional vintages, like 1959 and 1947.**

It's a paradox. In structure and character, 2003 is the antithesis of red Burgundy, which ideally offers tangy fruit, freshness, elegance and balance. Yet I couldn't get over the freshness in the reds and the richness of the tannins, despite their amplitude. These are Pinot Noirs that express more black fruit than red fruit flavors in general, but also reveal the differences from site to site, not only between villages but also within them. And most growers agreed they will be very long-lived.

How can the vintage be so good? In crucial ways, nature compensated for its extremes. Yields, on average, were half those in a normal vintage. The grapes were very ripe, even shriveled, but were supported by dense, mature tannins. And they were healthy and very concentrated with flavor and color. Grower after grower pointed this out, emphasizing that sorting was less of an issue than usual (sunburned grapes were discarded), and that once the decisions of when to harvest (early) and how to vinify (little to no extraction) were made, the maturation, or *elevage*, was relatively easy.

The whites are another story: very good, even potentially outstanding for the best, but not in the same league as the reds. The growers I visited were very nervous about their whites after fermentation, but once the wines went through malolactic fermentation and had been racked, they came around. The general consensus was that the whites got better and better with time. They are also better and more balanced as you move up the hierarchy from *villages* appellations to *grands crus*. In fact, some *grands crus* are stunning. However, most domaines specializing in whites suggest they are for early drinking, unlike the reds.

As one grower pointed out, 2003 will go down as a historic vintage because of the hot weather, but more importantly, Burgundy does not often produce these low yields without help from nature. Unfortunately, the small quantities combined with our weak dollar will make the top wines very, very expensive.

Another grower summed it up like this: You wouldn't want a vintage like 2003 every year. But once a decade would be fine.