



2003 Southern Burgundy

his report concentrates on the 2003s, both red and white, of producers located in the Mâconnais, Côte Chalonnaise, and the Côte de Beaune. A future report will cover the wines made in the Côte de Nuits.

2003 is an average to good year for white Burgundies. On the positive side, they have great mouth-feel, with intensely satiny (glycerin-imbued) characters. Those recommended in the following pages will deliver pleasure, at least in the short term. Purity is another hallmark of the 2003 white Burgundies, as rot was completely nonexistent due to the hot/dry summer. On the negative side, most of the wines lack body (the expression "light to medium-bodied" will be as tedious to read as it was to type, I assure you), depth, flesh, and richness of fruit. In fact, I only tasted one wine, Comte Lafon's Montrachet, which earned an exceptional score. Many wines reveal lack of physiological maturity with hollow cores, others suffer being disjointed due to two generations of fruit having been used (more on this later), and many were destroyed by heavy handed acidifications.

In my opinion, which is shared by the overwhelming majority of growers (with the notable exception of Meursault's Patrick Javillier), most 2003 white Burgundies are meant for near term drinking. Many are delicious and would make for terrific restaurant wines, were it not for the high prices due to the collapsing dollar.

2003 is a heterogenous year for red Burgundies from the Côte de Beaune and Côte Chalonnaise. There are numerous reds that merit serious consumer attention, particularly some of the finest young Pommards I have encountered in addition to many wines from "lesser" appellations that deliver excellent Burgundy at reasonable prices, even with a bottom-dwelling dollar. How heterogenous was it? This vintage produced some benchmark-setting efforts (from Maranges, Bourgogne Passetoutgrains, Pommard, and Bourgogne appellations), a trait found only in the finest years. The depth, density of fruit (mostly black fruits, with licorice and tar often making an appearance), exquisite tannin ripeness, and impressive concentration of 2003s best reds is noteworthy. Yet there are innumerable wines that could not be recommended because they were 1) overly acidified; 2) unripe, green, mean, and astringent; and 3) because the tannin to fruit balance appeared to be strongly in favor of the tannin.

The most difficult question is the ageworthiness of the red 2003s. They have loads of ripe fruit and tannin, two quantifiable factors required for Pinot Noir's long-term cellaring potential. Some believe 2003 is a redux of 1947, another exceptionally

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hot year that produced many wines with considerable fruit and tannin. The few 1947s that survived (Maison Louis Jadot's Lardière made it a point to stress that only a small percentage of them aged well) have set benchmarks for longevity and greatness. Will a handful of 2003s behave in a similar fashion? Time will tell. In the following pages I have erred on the conservative side, concluding that readers would prefer to open a wine that still has life in it rather than a dead one, and my maturity dates reflect this.

Astute readers will note that **traditional vineyard hierarchies must be ignored with the 2003s**. To reiterate, there are innumerable cases of lowly appellations (Bourgogne-Aligoté, Bourgogne Passetoutgrains, Bourgogne, or simple *village* wines) that turned out superior to *premier* or *grand cru* offerings, even from the same estate. Remember, these hierarchies portend to provide typical or "classical" ranking of vineyards. 2003 is atypical. In this vintage, vines with deep roots, those planted near or over accessible water source, or in cool clay-based soils (clay retains water) did far better than those in the limestone-based terroirs that have made Burgundy's reputation. In short, this is a freakish, very unusual year so dogmatic allegiance to hierarchies is a recipe for failure.

The Weather and Resulting Mind-Set

For western Europe, 2003 will long be remembered as the hottest year in recorded history. Unequipped for dealing with tropical heat, Europeans were unprepared. By mid-August, the sweltering temperatures precipitated the deaths of thousands of elderly people. To understand what took place in Burgundy in 2003, one must attempt to understand the mind-set of those who work the vineyards, make harvesting decisions, and later vinify the wines. That mind-set began being formed at the outset of the growing season, in April.

Chardonnay, a more precocious vine than Pinot Noir, began sprouting vegetation in early April, a result of mild late March weather. The weather, as often happens at that time of year, turned cold again and light snows blanketed the Côte de Beaune. As Henri Boillot explained, "I went for a walk in the vineyards with my dog late one afternoon in mid-April, and there were 2 centimeters of snow on the ground. The sky was clear, the air was cold and humid, a full moon was on the rise. I knew exactly what my vineyards were in for." Early the next day the temperatures were hovering around 28 degrees Fahrenheit and the freeze had burned much of the new growth in parcels located in the lower as well as upper parts of the hillsides. A week later another freeze struck the region, assuring that yields would be immensely impacted (for example, Boillot's Puligny-Montrachet Clos de la Mouchère sustained 70% damage, Marc Colin's Puligny-Montrachet Enseignières was completely wiped

out). Jacques Carillon reported that the last time Puligny-Montrachet had been so battered by freezes was 1974 (his estate, Domaine Louis Carillon, produced 25% of a normal harvest).

Yet, low yields are not the only effect of Spring freezes. Vines begin the process of compensating for the damage by forming a second generation of shoots and subsequent fruit that will lag in ripeness behind the first generation. "This year, because of the heat, the second generation almost (author's emphasis) got ripe," said Boillot. Also, Spring freezes affect the psyches of growers.

By late May the race was on, with warm temperatures, fast-growing vegetation, and a lightening-quick flowering (officially on the 29th). June brought the next of a series of assaults on Burgundy, in the form of hail. "We were hit three times, twice in one day," on June 12th, reported Carillon who stood and watched the departing storm turn around and come back. "That's something that marks you, knowing it is returning to cause more harm."

Temperatures continued to rise steadily and some astute growers adapted their viticulture to what appeared to be the potential for an exceptionally hot year. Michel Lafarge, Henri Boillot, and others stopped plowing the soils and/or trimming canopies, allowing the vines to protect themselves with vegetation. Others continued on with their chores, perhaps believing that the weather would return to normal. July brought another set of hailstorms around the 20th. Day-time temperatures continued to rise, and precipitation stopped. By late July the French press had officially dubbed the weather as a "*canicule*," a severe heat wave, and forecasters announced that things would get worse. They were right.

Nature's assaults got worse. In an attempt at self-preservation, vines began shutting down in July, either slowing or stopping the maturation process. That process only deteriorated as the first three weeks of August were scorching and dry. Many vignerons reported entire parcels dropped their leaves. Others said the vines looked "droopy," seemingly holding on to the wires for support. The southern face of clusters of fruit, the side that bears the brunt of the sun, were charred. Grapes dried and shriveled, "I had raisins in my vineyard, not grapes," said one grower. By this time the French press and television news shows were obsessed with the "*canicule*" story, and the reports of elderly people dying from the heat were ubiquitous.

By the 14th of August the natural acidity levels of the grapes had bottomed out, as all the malic acid had been burned off by the heat (analyses performed by numerous *vignerons* showed no change in the grapes' acidity from this day forth). Moreover

sugars soared as the grapes dried out.

On August 16th, in a front page story replete with photographs, the regional newspaper, *Le Bien Public*, announced that some had begun to harvest on the 15th, including a well-known estate, Savigny-Lès-Beaune's Domaine Chandon de Briailles. By the 18th, the regional powers met in an emergency session and announced that the following day, the 19th, would be the *ban de vendange* for the Côte de Beaune, the officially permitted starting date for harvesting. According to numerous growers, their consulting oenologists and the *Bureau Interprofessionnel des Vins de Bourgogne* (or BIVB, the organization of Burgundy wine professionals) encouraged the harvest stampede, predicting dire results for anyone who dawdled. Hearing this and watching the news reports, many absentee vineyard owners called the producers who manage their vineyards demanding that the fruit be picked. Yet finding sufficient numbers of harvesters (most were on vacation) led to additional panic.

To put this into perspective, the *ban de vendange* was 80 days after flowering, though experience teaches us it takes 100 days for fruit to ripen fully. Furthermore, no living Burgundian had ever witnessed such an early harvest. Researchers having poured over manuscripts, we now know that picking began on the 24th of August in 1893 and the 26th in 1420, 72 years before Columbus set sail.

The harvest soon became a stampede (only rendered worse a few days later when a weather forecaster predicted hailstorms – that never materialized – for the 27th of August). Burgundy's growers had been subjected to a series of freezes, followed by hail storms, the ensuing record heat wave and the burning effects of the sun. (The season was much the same for the Mâconnais and the Côte Chalonnaise, including severe Spring frosts, though the Mâconnais was spared the hailstorms.) Vignerons watched in horror as some parcels lost their leaves. In addition, they were exposed to incessant news reports on the deleterious effects of the heat on people and vegetation (I was in France in mid-September and was shocked at the site of trees, old hedges, and fields that appeared torched by the sun). Lastly, and as importantly, Burgundians were now in a world they knew nothing about. Virtually every grower I spoke with said some variant of "I was completely lost, I had no reference points."

The Winemaking and Resulting Wines

Harvesters picked what was before them, both the first and second generations for the whites. Numerous producers, including highly regarded ones like Etienne Sauzet's Gérard Boudot and Henri Boillot, were ecstatic to have both generations

were charred and an equal amount were desiccated. Lastly, virtually every consulting oenologist in Burgundy called for the addition of large quantities of tartaric acid.

The Whites: With only a couple of exceptions, every white Burgundy producer I met with informed me that his/her greatest fear at harvest was to produce a New World Chardonnay. "We do not want to make fat wines filled with tropical fruits," went the refrain, "we want to make Burgundies with finesse and minerality." Readers need to keep those words in mind while reading the following few paragraphs as it is the key to understanding the 2003 white Burgundies.

All those who harvested before small rains (20-60 millimeters depending on the commune) blanketed the region on the 27th and 28th of August reported that the must coming out of their presses was so thick that it would not qualify as a liquid. (Those few who waited say that the rains brought a solids-to-liquid balance to their fruit.) Some vigneron, primarily the most obsessed with producing finesse wines in a year of record heat, pressed lightly in order to "get less fat and flesh."

The next stage in white winemaking, for most producers, is decanting the wines off their gross lees, known in French as *débourbage*. Most growers I met performed the most serious *débourbages* of their careers, some lasting up to 48 hours, some combining it with cold stabilizations to further strengthen the *débourbage* (since tartaric acid crystallizes at cool temperatures it means they lost even more natural acidity). Some fined their musts with bentonite during this process to remove even more "fat," and some actually repeated the entire process more than once. All in the name of reducing fat, flesh, and possible tropical fruit flavors.

At this point, the musts were placed in the barrels for fermentation and *élevage*. Here again, the prevailing mind-set in Burgundy was to ensure that the wines would not be so rich they could be confused with California Chardonnay. Since stirring the lees (*bâtonnage*) is perceived by most as an action that promotes the building of flesh at the expense of freshness, it was either completely eschewed or severely curtailed.

There are exceptions to what I've described, but they are just that, exceptions. François Jobard of Meursault crafted his wines the same way he's always made them and Patrick Javillier opted to be a contrarian and to do exactly the opposite of his neighbors. But those gentlemen are truly exceptions as most everyone else forgot Franklin Delano Roosevelt's wise warning: "The only thing you have to fear is fear itself."

The fear of making New World Chardonnays so gripped most of Burgundy's white producers that they prevented their wines

from having the flesh, body, depth of fruit, richness, and flavor that their vineyards and 2003's climate would have provided. As a believer in *terroir*, the complete lack of faith in their *terroirs* exhibited by many Burgundians was shocking. For the most part, *vignerons*' decisions resulted in hiding *terroir* and vintage characteristics, not enhancing them.

That is not to say that 2003 would have been a great vintage if white winemakers had treated it traditionally. In short, the year was much too stressful for the vines. However, when every decision is based on trying to prevent body, richness, fat, and tropical flavors, quality and characteristics of the *terroir* as well as vintage are masked.

The Reds: In a number of ways, the natural incident that marked the white 2003s the most was the early Spring frosts. These had almost no impact whatsoever on the reds because 1) they were centered on white wine areas (mostly Puligny and Meursault); and 2) Pinot Noir, which naturally begins its vegetative cycle slightly later than Chardonnay was not in a vulnerable stage of development. Therefore, the most significant natural phenomenon for red Burgundies in 2003 is unquestionably the heat wave, scorching sun, and lack of rain.

Sorting was mandatory in 2003. Not because of rot (there was none) as in many other years, but to cull out the burned and shriveled fruit that had the potential to impart off-flavors and hard tannins. Due to the early harvest in the Côte de Beaune, most of the reds I encountered were picked before the beneficial rains of the end of August. As with the whites, this meant that there were far more solids than liquid in the vats (as an example, Benjamin Leroux of Domaine des Epeneaux felt compelled to press his Volnay before putting it in the fermentation vat so it would have *some* juice.) According to Jadot's Lardière, the 2003 reds harvested before the 28th of August "needed water to regain their natural juice to solid balance." He explained that the same problem existed in 1947 and that many of the wines from that year that survived, forming 1947's stellar reputation, were precisely those that had been cooled off with blocks of ice (that melted in the vats), or add cold water into the fermenters. "If it were not illegal, it would have been an interesting thing to do with the earliest harvested 2003s."

While fear gripped Burgundians in regards to their reds, it was, for the most part, a useful emotion. Here it was the fear of tannin. The firm skins and sometimes questionable physiological ripeness (the sugar levels were elevated, for example Thierry Matrot has a red Meursault with 16% alcohol!) in the Côte de Beaune led many to take steps to avoid the extraction of hard tannin. Some, like the Muzards of Santenay employed *déléstage* (a fermentation technique common in the south of France),

others simply abandoned or severely curtailed punch-downs (*pigeages*) in favor of sporadic pump-overs (*remontages*). Dominique Lafon elected to do an extended *cuvaison*, abandoning *pigeages* completely.

Final Comments

Heat and Water: Virtually every grower I spoke with stressed the deleterious effects of the heat on the vines. Whenever I asked a question about the complete lack of water during the hottest period of the summer (mid-July to the 27th of August) it was met with scorn. I was often told, "You want to see a drought year, look at 1976 with its 40mm of rain during the growing season, in 2003 we had 250mm!" Also, I was habitually reminded that the water tables were high due to 2002 being a wet year. However, regions of the world that are annually subjected to temperatures far in excess of what Burgundy experienced (such as Argentina's Mendoza and Washington State's Columbia Valley) have learned that vines require water or ambient humidity to mitigate the effects of heat. In other words, if there had been some timely rains or humidity in the air, the vines in Burgundy would not have succumbed to the heat. There would have been no "droopy" vines, nor would there have been vineyards dropping their foliage. The problem was not the record temperatures, it was the heat combined with the summer drought.

Acidity: Many years ago, the famed Henri Jayer of Vosne-Romanée said something that has become a mantra for those of us at *The Wine Advocate*: "If it tastes too tannic then it is too tannic." In November, another dean of Burgundian winemaking made a statement filled with the same wisdom drawn from decades of making and tasting wine. Volnay's Michel Lafarge stated: "Most importantly, we have faith in the *terroir* and therefore we do not acidify ... Acidity is a false problem in Burgundy and with Pinot Noir in general. People seem obsessed with it, but they are wrong. Our wines do not age on acid and never have, sure the 2003s may not have lots of acid but they have loads of pH, they have fruit, so the game is won."

—Pierre-Antoine Rovani