



BURGUNDY 2019 VINTAGE

There's a popular saying here in Burgundy which points out that, since the start of the 20th century, vintages ending in '9' have been exceptional. So when 2019 came around, we were secretly anticipating something special. Little did we know!

Every vintage comes with its own hyperbole: best of the decade; greatest of the century; another 1990. And it's true, as the climate continues to warm, there has been some remarkable wine produced in recent years. But in Burgundy in 2019, it got hot.

Both Pinot Noir and Chardonnay like to come to maturity slowly. Too much heat cooks the elegance out of them. So climate change is an existential issue for Burgundy wine as we know it.

But in 2019 something remarkable happened. I hesitate to call it a paradigm shift; it may well be a one-off. But in a year where, in some places, grapes turned to raisins on the vine, Burgundy has given us a vintage worthy of the hyperbole.

You won't find many lacy, delicate wines this year. The vintage will be unapologetically bold and unbelievably concentrated. The whites are indulgent, often explosive, and pinned to a mind-bogglingly good acidic framework, given the summer heat. The reds are sophisticated and elegant, alive.

Perhaps most tellingly, despite the hot summer, this was not one of those late-August harvests that we're getting accustomed to. The harvest got underway in the Cote de Beaune on 12 September. And some in the Cote de Nuits did not begin picking until the 23rd. The fruit was ripe earlier, but the fine conditions allowed the growers to wait for the holy grail: phenolic maturity.

You rarely get fruit maturity (the sugar part of the equation) plus phenolic maturity (the tannins in the pips and stems) coming together at the same time. Usually, you sacrifice one for the other. You can't force it to happen. Nature bestows it upon you. But when it does happen, that, almost by definition, is a great vintage.

2019 will be a great vintage. Think 2018 with more energy. The only downside is that, as opposed to the bumper crop we saw in 2018, 2019 was a small crop. Down by as much as 60% in the southern zones where it was hottest.

Let's look quickly at how the season developed. The winter 2018/19 was mild, with higher than average temperatures in December and February. There was a lot of rain in December which many claim could ultimately have saved the vintage from the summer's drought.

Spring was warm and the growth cycle started earlier than usual. There were precocious zones with bud burst in early April. But cold weather set in on 5 April with frost in many areas. Frost damage would have an effect on yields, particularly in the Maconnais. The cold weather held on through mid-April with several consequential frost risks.

Warm weather returned in May and remained until early June when temperatures dropped again, slowing growth again and hindering flowering. There was a good bit of flower abortion (millerandage), which, again, took its part of the yield at harvest.

Then mid-summer was hot-hot. And dry-dry. The vines, for the most part, were in good shape going into the heat wave, but the stress was excessive. Vines handled the conditions differently from one plot to the next. Consensus is that old vines, with their deep roots, were able to find water in the subsoil. And that younger, well-tended vines, had a similar advantage. Vines with roots that went looking for water near the surface, however, suffered towards the end of the season, as they scorched and shriveled.

There was just a bit of rain in August, and from then on through September was hot but fine. In certain areas Pinot Noir ripened before Chardonnay, so harvest planning was complicated. The first Cremant vineyards were picked at the very end of August, and the harvest continued through to mid-October.

Harvest was a joy for the most part. Good weather. No disease. And the fruit that survived frost and fire was beautiful. Fermentation in both white and red went off easily. Whites finished slowly, gently, giving balance and purity. The length of red fermentation varied a lot, but the tannins are fine and the wine has vigor.