



BURGUNDY 2020

With so many winemakers finishing their 2020 harvest before the end of August, everyone here in Burgundy expected that this hot, sunny vintage would produce atypical wines, overripe, fat and flabby. Why it did not is a mystery to this day.

In fact, 2020 Burgundy, both red and white, is being lauded by the Press and professionals alike as an exceptional vintage, brilliantly fresh, pure, elegant and focused. Yes, the wines are ripe and concentrated, but there is good acidity that more than brings things into balance. This, in fact, defines the Burgundy 2020 style: high acidity and high concentration.

So let's look, as we do every year, at how the growing season developed, to try to get some idea of what shaped these unexpectedly energetic wines.

In a word, from start to finish, 2020 was precocious. After a mild and humid winter, the vegetative cycle started a month early under sunny skies, with bud burst in mid-April and the first Chardonnay flowers in early May. Then the weather deteriorated. Pinot Noir flowered in cool, damp conditions, and was less successful than Chardonnay, explaining the smaller Pinot crop.

From that point on, there is not much to report weatherwise. It was hot and dry from June through to the end, the driest year since 1945. The grapes started to change color in mid-July, and harvest in August seemed likely.

Now you may think that an August harvest lets everyone get their jobs done and go home early. But remember that there is a big difference between the heat and luminosity of an August afternoon and the cooler, shorter days of September. When maturity comes galloping at you in August, you have to react quickly; a day or two can mean considerable differences in acid and sugar levels.

Indeed, there may have been more stress on the winemakers than there was on the vines. 2020 was in fact an easy growing season, dry, with little risk of fungal problems. The tough part was deciding when to harvest. Do you put off harvesting to try to get to phenolic maturity, or do you pick sooner to keep acid levels up and to avoid higher alcohol levels?

Many opted to pick early. And for the most part, it proved to be the right decision...though we still do not understand why!

Many 2020 wines have alcohol levels of 13%-14%, but many are higher. Delaying picking increased the potential alcohol levels by as much as a degree a week.

At the same time, good levels of phenolic maturity gave ripe, but not overripe tannins. Some call the 2020s 'crunchy', which is a tannin level riper than 'green' but less than 'fine'.

Total acidity was generally high, but most of that was tartaric acid. Malic acid, which would normally make up a big percentage of the total acidity, was low. In fact, the wines changed very little during malolactic fermentation, as there was little malic acid to transform into lactic acid.

So, again, we have a vintage that is characterized by high acidity and concentrated fruit. Some are saying that there has never before been a vintage where ripeness and acidity combined to give such brilliant wines with great aging potential. And this is true for both red and white. Freshness, balance, moderate alcohol.

The whites are rich and ripe, but with a crystalline, almost razor-sharp edge. That little touch of lactic acid makes them complex without adding weight.

The reds might bear a resemblance to past vintages. 2005, maybe. But they made wine differently in 2005. Back then, extraction was the goal: get as much out of the ripeness as you could. Today, Pinot is not so much 'extracted' as 'infused', like tea. This gives wines that are fresher and more energetic, with no less intensity and maybe more spice.

Drink them now, both red and white. There is astounding vitality in the youthful 2020s. But stick to the regional appellations for now because this is above all a vintage for aging, again both red and white. Keep the premier and grand crus for 10-15 years; longer for the best wines. They have the balance to age, and will reveal little by little the complexity that we just get hints of today. These are wines that may shut down for a few years in a few years, that's to be expected. But be patient; you will be overjoyed to pull 2020 Burgundy from your cellar down the line.

But even just that little touch of lactic acid made the complexity of the whites.