



BURGUNDY 2021

Nothing abides. Just as we Burgundy purists begrudgingly acknowledged the vitality and variety of the three previous hot-weather vintages, along came 2021, classic Burgundy with its frost, damp and low yields.

Way back when, in pre-climate-change conditions, Pinot Noir and Chardonnay would struggle, year after year, to come to maturity in what was this, the northernmost spot in Europe where grapes could ripen enough to make still wine. That struggle was, in fact, the very definition of viticulture in Burgundy (chaptalization notwithstanding).

But then weather patterns started to change, not drastically, but gradually: milder winters and earlier springs; hotter summers and earlier autumns. By the time we got to 2018, then 2019 and then 2020, those mild winters were breeding grounds for mildew, the early springs were prone to killer frosts, those hot summers forced ripeness onto reticent grapes varieties, and early autumns left little time to the winemaker to sort it all out.

If this all sounds like an accident waiting to happen, hang on to your hat; it's all perspective.

2018 was wet, wet, wet through winter and up to mid-April. Then an explosive bud-burst sent the winemakers scurrying to control the vegetation. But then it got hot, hot, south-of-Spain hot, and mildew never stood a chance. Early harvest, no health issues. Big crop. Great vintage.

2019 was wet through the winter. Early bud burst, then frost took part of the crop. A warm set up flowering, but cold weather set in, taking another part of the crop. Then it got hot and very dry. Well-tend vines and, especially, old vines did well because there was last winter's water in the water table, and good vines can go deep for water. Hot, healthy harvest. Great really ripe vintage.

2020 was precocious. Mild wet winter. Bud burst in mid-April. From that point on, there is not much to report weatherwise. It was hot and dry from June through to the end. Harvest started in August. Indeed, there was more stress on the winemakers than there was on the vines. When to pick? Overall, great vintage both white and red.

See a pattern?

And 2021...well in 2021 things returned to 'normal' (if such a thing is possible in Burgundy!)

First came devastating frosts in the early part of April, which were followed by a cool May, leading to a damp summer with the ever-present threat of hail.

Chardonnay was more affected than Pinot Noir in that the red grapes come into leaf later.

What all this means for the Burgundy harvest is that it will be a story of low yields (miniscule in places) and a late harvest.

When the older winemakers talk about what to expect this year, words such as 'historic' are used and comparisons are drawn with the harvest of 1970

Some say we could be down 30% on 2020s already low yields. But it isn't all bad news. Winemakers are nothing if not hardy, and their optimism cannot be shaken that easily. Fewer grapes on the vine means that those which have survived should have an intensity of flavor which sets them apart and may mark this harvest out as extraordinary. There may be other upsides, too: because the harvest is later, the grapes have had more 'hang time' which could mean good phenolic maturity.