

Food & Drink

Miracle rescue
for 2008
burgundies

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Wine

We all have e-mails that mysteriously go missing. Many are unimportant. But I will forever regret one that was sent but never arrived in my inbox from Aubert de Villaine of Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, the world's most famous Burgundy producer. He was inviting me for lunch before my visit to the Domaine last November to taste the 2008 vintage.

Tasting in Burgundy is much less exhausting than in most regions because vigneronns there stick to such a strict schedule. In my experience, appointments are countenanced exclusively within two periods: 8.30am to noon and 2pm to 5.30pm. Unlike most other wine regions, there is no tasting in the evenings or at weekends, and there is an enforced extended break in the middle of the day during which I tend to huddle for warmth in a modest village restaurant. But apparently lost forever in cyberspace was an opportunity to huddle over a glass of DRC burgundy with one of the most articulate vigneronns in the world. *Zut alors!*

Nevertheless I did have the chance to hear what de Villaine, and another 27 of the more celebrated wine producers of the Côte d'Or, had to say about the mercurial 2008 vintage currently being offered by wine merchants around the world, particularly in the UK, bonus-land.

It was even more difficult than usual to cover the ground in Burgundy last November because, unusually, a significant proportion of the 2008s were still – long after the next, much-trumpeted harvest was safely in barrel – undergoing the second fermentation that transforms harsh malic acid into softer lactic acid. This process was particularly necessary for the 2008s in which the proportion of malic, usually

less than half the tartaric acid component, was its equal. But because there was so much searing malic acid, and because the persistent summer and early autumn rain had tended to wash the yeast and lactic bacteria that get the fermentations going off the grapes, the malolactic fermentations were slow to start and proceeded unusually slowly. So, I had to forgo, for example, Domaine Leflaive's Le Montrachet and Puligny-Montrachet Combettes because they were still slowly bubbling away. (On the rare occasions I was given a taste of a wine still going through "malo", it was so milky, fizzy, harsh and inexpressive that I found it impossible to assess.)

The previous, 2007 vintage had already been very stressful for Burgundy's growers who had to wait until the third week of August before being rescued from the prospect of a vintage that would be rained off, but 2008 turned out to be even worse.

The crucial early summer flowering was strung out over three weeks in 2008 in very mixed weather so that many grapes were lost to *coulure*, or poor fruit set. By mid-July, vigneronns were already battle-weary in their attempts to fend off mildew. A particularly savage hailstorm laid waste to many significant vineyards around Meursault and Volnay on July 26. Everyone reported much lower final yields than in 2007 or 2009.

By the end of August many growers were wondering whether it would be worth even picking the grapes. Then came the first two weeks of September, described as "catastrophic" by Eric Rousseau of Domaine Armand Rousseau, when it continued to rain. Rot and mildew rampaged through the vineyards. All seemed to be lost, but then a miracle happened.

As Aubert de Villaine described it: "I was biking with a friend in Bresse on the weekend of September 12/13. The Saturday was still very wet but, on the Sunday morning, the sun suddenly came out and shone for a month, providing us with proof that if you're careful to take off all the 'not-good' grapes, you can make very good, even great, wine."

François Millet at Domaine Comte Georges de Vogüé said: "We all went to church that Sunday and lit candles for the miracle – the north wind that dried out the grapes." Romain Taupenot of Domaine Taupenot-Merme reported that the persistent, blustery winds of the second half of September were "the best treatment we could have had" since they dried out the vines and the grapes and halted the progress of vine disease.

But temperatures were relatively low – down to 10° Celsius during the harvest days – so a strong characteristic of this vintage is that the grapes did not go through normal physiological ripening. Instead, the sugars were concentrated by the drying wind. It remains to be seen what effect this will have in the long term but, at the best domaines anyway, the results were certainly hugely better than expected.

Millet was bullish. "Skin ripeness was only medium in 2008, but so what? Medium is enough. The grapes matured slowly in late September because of the low temperatures but that helped to preserve the freshness."

These 2008s are nothing if not "fresh". Acid levels are notably high but, provided the vines were not overloaded with grapes that were too numerous to ripen, the best wines seem to have developed enough flesh to compensate.

'Twas not always so, however. For their first few months in barrel, the 2008s looked irredeemably tart, and even the best failed to round out until well into last summer or even later. Jean-Marie Fourrier of Domaine Fourrier confessed in late November: "It has been only in the last 10 days that I have started to like these wines. It took me ages to understand the weather conditions. They were like the 1970s so I had never experienced them before."

Sorting was the single most important activity in 2008 (in stark contrast to 2009). At Leflaive, five to six people were needed on either side of the sorting table, and Stéphane Thibodaux of Domaine Lafon reported just how difficult it was to keep people motivated, picking out damaged or diseased grapes for 10 hours at a time. He summed up this "very complicated" year: "It was a lot of work for a very small crop, with unexpected results, so we're very immodest about them."

Aubert de Villaine admitted that "20-30 years ago we wouldn't have been able to ripen the grapes at all, but now we're helped by global warming and our greater care in the vineyard. There is maturity but only half of a normal crop, for us about 16 hl/ha. We left lots of grapes on the ground and there was lots of *coulure*."

But really conscientious vigneronns who watched their vines every step of the way have managed to produce wines that have enough flesh to counterbalance 2008's sometimes painful acid levels.

Next week: sorting the 2008 wheat from the chaff

See the purple pages of www.jancisrobinson.com for more than 1,000 tasting notes on 2008 burgundies. More columns at www.ft.com/robinson