Whatever happened to white burgundy?

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Knocking French wine has been a global sport for some years now and is much enjoyed by all players outside that hexagonal country blessed with great growing conditions for such a wide variety of wines.

Setting the question of staggering overpricing on the part of some Bordeaux producers on one side, I would argue that at its best France still manages to produce an amazing range of superlative and distinctive styles of wine - champagne, red bordeaux, red Rhône, white Loire and red burgundy in particular.

The obvious omission from this list is that classic of the dinner table white burgundy and I make no apology for this. It seems to me that while more and more ambitious and successful producers of red wine emerge from the Burgundy region each year, white burgundy has not been improving at anything like the same rate. And to stay in the game in today's ultra-competitive wine market, you do have to keep on making better and better wine every year - a fact which too many French wine producers are ignoring at their peril.

Recently I have taken part in quite a number of blind tastings of some of France's supposed greatest dry white wines as well as a blind comparison of some of the world's top chardonnays (including *grand cru* white burgundies of course) with Austria's own speciality white grape Grüner Veltliner.

In every single tasting there were some huge disappointments among the white burgundies. In fact at the Austrian tasting when the scores of 17 top (non-Austrian) tasters were collated, it emerged that burgundy, which comprised seven out of the 35 wines tasted, occupied five of the seven bottom placings. But this was no freak result. It not only confirmed results from previous tastings organised by the Austrians along the same lines but confirmed my own mounting frustration with the quality of the great majority of white burgundy.

I know I have gone on record as being no enthusiast of chardonnay at its most basic: those bland, off-dry, heavy blends at the bottom of the heap. But I can certainly appreciate great chardonnays such as those of Coche-Dury in Meursault and Kistler in Sonoma as some of the best wines on the planet. You have only to look at my purple pages to find a host of chardonnays, including white burgundies, that have tickled my fancy.

But in my professional tastings such as those to select wines for British Airways or blind comparisons of recent vintages, I am increasingly worried by the high incidence of two worrying sorts of white wine currently emerging from Burgundy.

The first disconcerting phenomonen is that an increasing number of Burgundian producers are turning out wines that taste like New World Chardonnay. *Terroir* is not tosh. Burgundy really is blessed with an array of fantastic vineyards which are, if allowed, well able to impress their own identity on the wines grown in them. Once winemakers decide to junk that concept and merely turn Chardonnay grapes grown on the Côte d'Or into copies of stereotypical New World Chardonnay with its toasty oak, tropical fruit flavours and discernible sweetness, then Burgundy is lost. These people are simply wasting an asset.

I do realise that Chardonnay is essentially an extremely neutral grape which does not imprint its personality on a wine nearly as forcefully as, say, Cabernet or Pinot Noir - so you do have to work harder with it to produce something distinctive.

And at least these lackadaisical winemakers who have embraced New World techniques are making wine that is technically fit to drink and perfectly capable of giving pleasure. My greatest criticism is reserved for the number of winemakers in Burgundy - still worryingly high - who are turning out wines that are technically faulty.

There is supposed to be some sort of tasting committee that vets applications for Burgundy's *appellation controlée* wines. I can only assume they are either very poorly trained or asleep at the wheel.

In a recent British Airways tasting, out of 12 meursaults submitted for the delectation of first-class passengers, five were indistinguishable from a Limestone Coast or Stellenbosch chardonnay at a quarter of the price, four smelt unclean (with wet wool aromas particularly common), four exhibited no fruit character whatsoever on the palate, two had obviously been

made from very hard-pressed grapes and several suffered from an excess of alcohol and a hot finish. The numbers don't add up because some wines were spoilt by more than one of these faults. And this in wines carrying one of Burgundy's most famous names - which may of course be the problem. Some of these producers simply don't care. They reckon they can find a customer somewhere for a wine called Meursault whatever it tastes like.

In the British Airways tasting room we have become accustomed to some of the larger producers submitting outrageously bad wines hoping that somehow we won't notice and award them a lucrative contract.

Even more worrying is the incidence of faults in wines from the smaller domaines, some of them quite well regarded. My tasting notes on seven Chassagne Montrachet Morgeot 2000s, for example, from the likes of Jean Noël Gagnard, Château de Maltroye and Jouard include the following: 'hot, wet wool odour, over chaptalised, reduced, not clean, hot and dull, sulphidic, no core, jagged, falling apart'. That's not good.

You can argue that red burgundy is far from faultless and I would agree. But at least red burgundy tends to have its own distinctive personality. Perhaps the rot set in for white burgundy when producers in the region were allowed to add acidity as well as sugar - not, in theory, to the same wine, but, hey, who's checking?