

2001 - a connoisseur's vintage in Burgundy

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'I love the 2001s,' says Nicolas Potel, hopping from barrel to barrel in his cellar full of more than a hundred different examples of them. 'They're very classic, quite tough but very pure and expressive. I'm lucky to have had the chance to make them.'

Potel is the son of one of Burgundy's most popular winemakers, the late Gérard Potel of Clos de la Pousse d'Or in Volnay, and as such has favoured access to some of Burgundy's finest growers for his *négociant* business in Nuits-St-Georges. He is experienced enough to have a fine sensibility to the capricious characteristics of various Burgundy vintages but youthful enough to express genuine enthusiasm rather than the more measured reactions of older hands.

The real story of 2001 is how much better the reds have turned out than was initially thought. Indeed Potel's birthplace Volnay suffered the worst indignity, a hailstorm on 2 August that wiped out this year's production from some of its finest vines, and a few in neighbouring Pommard too. Volnay's magisterial Jacques d'Angerville, for example, lost more than half his potential crop.

The main problem was simply underripeness. The flowering in June had been so prolonged that many grapes were at different stages of ripeness - and the crop size is smaller than usual. July brought some exceptionally wet and some exceptionally warm weather - in that order. There was another brief heatwave at the end of the August but the grapes desperately needed two or three weeks of fine, warm weather to bring them to full ripeness in September. Instead, the sky remained resolutely grey and temperatures plummeted - which at least kept such rot as there was from becoming a really serious problem, although frequent showers did not help.

The harvest was unusually extended while growers held on for less well exposed vineyards to ripen. Vintages like this really demonstrate the full worth of the best *Grand Cru* sites on most favourable slopes and orientations for fully ripening their grapes.

In the white wine areas to the south and north of the Côte d'Or heartland, the Mâconnais and Chablis respectively, growers' faces were even longer. There had been much more damaging rain here, and the Chardonnay grapes were suffering from mildew, rot and, again, a sheer lack of ripeness. And in parts of the Côte Chalonnaise hail made 2001 simply, as Aubert de Villaine of Bouzeron put it, an *annus horribilis*, although some concentrated whites were made from such vines as survived unscathed.

Sorting tables were essential for any conscientious grower so that those grapes that were either unripe, or unhealthy or, in some cases even, burnt by the late August heatwave, could be discarded.

In Burgundy more than ever before a chasm is opening up between the really ambitious, dedicated producers who really look after their vineyards and limit yields and can, by and large, sell their wines without difficulty - especially as prices have remained so much steadier in Burgundy than in Bordeaux, for instance - and the ho-hum producers who have until now depended on Burgundy's small quantities and international fame to sell their lacklustre wines. They, particularly those in southern Burgundy, the Mâconnais, have cellars full of 2000 and 2001 wines still awaiting a buyer.

As the 2002 growing season got under way, and looked particularly promising, wine producers started to console themselves that at least 2001's successor would bring them joy. But as the 2001s have developed in the barrels where so much of Burgundy's unpredictable magic is worked, they have begun to show their worth - rather as the 1991s and 1993s did. These wines went into barrel with extremely high levels of the 'green'-tasting malic acidity and, in the case of the reds, very marked, sometimes underripe, tannins without nearly enough ripe fruit character to compensate for their angular harshness.

The conversion of all this malic acidity to softer lactic acid, the malolactic fermentation, was unusually late and prolonged in this vintage but also much more dramatic. The wines have softened considerably and taken on flesh - 'densified', according to de Villaine. In fact in both the Mâconnais and Chablis there is no shortage of examples where the finished wines actually taste rather lacking in acidity now that the *malos* have finished.

The white wines of the Côte d'Or have no shortage of attractively refreshing acidity. They are, like the reds, medium-rather than full-bodied, and are, like all burgundy, extremely varied and depend far more on the producer than the *appellation* for their quality. One characteristic that struck me on many examples was a rather hot, alcoholic finish - perhaps a result of over-enthusiastic sugar addition to make up for natural underripeness? This is only a theory, and the wines should settle down to provide easy drinking over the rest of this decade. I have yet to taste a truly thrilling 2001 white burgundy but some of the better Mâconnais whites make many New World Chardonnays look very poor value.

The reds are also far from concentrated and massive, but with Pinot Noir this is no bad thing at all. As in Bordeaux 2001, with these relatively delicate but astringent raw materials, a gentle hand in the cellar was essential. Skins were relatively thick, giving good, deep crimson colours but it was all too easy to over-oak and over-extract. The best red 2001s, and there are many of them, may not be ultra-powerful but they are ultra-pure, great expressions of vineyard character, their finely etched flavours nicely defined by lively acidity, rather gentler perhaps than in the 1996s at the same stage. But in general, the grapes needed considerable ripeness to compensate for tannins that were far from the ripest in recent history - which usually means that paying more for wine from a decent site really is worth it.

Overall Burgundy's winemakers are making purer and purer expressions of their vineyards, valuing delicacy rather than just mass. Organic and biodynamic viticulture is increasingly common. And there is now no stigma attached to *négociant* wine rather than a domaine-bottled version. Many of Burgundy's better producers are operating a merchant business alongside or instead of growing grapes on land they own themselves.

I tasted hundreds of 2001s, red and white, both in Burgundy in November and as cask samples in London in January. Almost all the whites were bottled but most of these relatively tough reds are still in cask and far from flattering to taste at this stage. Nevertheless, the London wine trade has accustomed itself to putting its customers through this particular hoop in the New Year and Justerini & Brooks, for example, had 700 people on its acceptance list for its crowded tasting at the Institute of Directors. There seemed little evidence of an economic downturn as investors made a beeline for the *Grands Crus*. (Or perhaps they saw Vincent Dancer's Corton Charlemagne as an attractive alternative to gold bullion.)

This is surprisingly good vintage but not a great vintage. As Bernard Dugat-Py of Gevrey-Chambertin, where some particularly toothsome wines were made, put it, 'the 2001s will keep longer than the 2000s but probably not as long as the 1999s.'

For those in a hurry, I offer the following observations with the caveat that, as always in Burgundy, the picture is much too complex for any generalisation to capture.

- prices should be about the same as last year
- this is an even more variable vintage than 2000
- the best wines are beautiful expressions of *terroir* rather than just ripeness or the vintage
- reds are in general more thrilling than whites
- it really is worth paying for *Premier Cru* and sometimes *Grand Cru* wines
- the whites are quite bold but not particularly fine
- this is a connoisseur's vintage.

For detailed tasting notes on over 500 wines of this vintage, see [purple pages](#).