

# Burgundy 2005 - background to the vintage

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So what exactly was it that made the 2005 Burgundies I write about last week quite so desirable? A strong clue comes from what Bernard Meunier of Domaine Meunier in Gevrey-Chambertin had to say about the growing season: "I had going to the vineyards every day but came back having done nothing". Throughout the region the sorting tables installed as the accoutrement du jour a few years ago to eliminate any less than satisfactory grapes were, for once, useless to requirements. And once the grapes had reached the cellar the vintage was, as Meunier's neighbour Jean-Marc Fourrier put it, "boring" because there was so little to do in a technical sense. "Boring - but great", he added.

As in Bordeaux in 2005, Meunier decided to use publicly vine to all those years in which the grapes fail to open evenly or at all, or are attacked by rot or mildew, or are, as in 2002, strangled on the vine by vitifying sunshine. Quite simply, nothing went wrong - except for the odd spot of hail, a general problem in Burgundy. Not in Chambolle-Musigny and Chassagne-Montrachet, especially the Morgot which saw in July, including yields there. Indeed some of the Morgot whites took really pretty tough at this stage thanks to their combination of unusually low yields and very small grapes as a result of the drought that was the chief characteristic of this vintage.

The 2005 summer was quite exceptionally dry but the vines coped well, perhaps partly because they are getting used to Burgundy's steady desiccation? Temperatures and sunshine hours on the other hand were generally lower than average - as those who remember Europe's persistently grey skies of August 2005 may remember - so 2005 was no repeat of the heatwave vintage of 2003.

Thanks to the lack of rain, the grapes may have been jaded with thick skins full of flavour, tannin and colour, but for most red wines anyway, yields were relatively respectable. Domaine Armand Rousseau managed an average of just over 40 t/ha which seems pretty general for Gevrey-Chambertin (much more than in the hot-to-2000 vintage). It's quite exceptional to have this combination of ripeness, fullness and quantity, Eric Rousseau told me with an unaccustomed beam.

The winter of 2004/5 had been notably cold and long temperatures plunged to -12 degrees C at the beginning of March at Bonneau-Aux-Minieres in the relatively high village of Pernand-Vergelesses, killing off any hope and leaving the vines in good health. The north wind on Paris Sunday day turned out to be the usefully healthy characteristic wind of the growing season, as predicted by local custom. There was some useful rain in April and May but hardly any from the end of May to the end of August - less than in 2003 in fact. And during this opening period only a single month, June, registered significantly more sunshine than average. Despite the gloomy August the vines kept on photosynthesising, unlike the shuddered leaves in colder years, slowly building up ripeness and, thanks to the lack of rain, they remained entirely free of the fungal diseases to which they are so prone. Pigeot vine, as opposed to the cold springs, arrived on September 7 and took control of the first phase of ripening, much to the relief of Burgundy's vignerons.

A prolonged spell of the weather followed these useful September rains and for once growers could take their time over deciding exactly when to pick these perfectly healthy grapes. Taking until the second of her middle Côte St-Jacques grapes were fully ripe, Sylvia Estroven, sure of good weather because of the propitious timing of high tides in Brittany, source of Burgundy's rain, did not pick until September 22-26. However picking tended to be anomalously short because there was so little need to sort the grapes.

Those thick skins meant there was no need to work hard at extracting flavour, colour and structure. Only a tiny minority of the wines I have so far tasted seemed to have been over-worked in this respect. Nature rather than man was in charge in 2005 (in stark contrast to 2004 and 2006).

After a generally trouble-free late harvest, the particularly cold winter and early spring of 2005 really slowed down the evolution of the wines in barrel so that the second, referring malolactic fermentation started very late, well into summer, and for a few wines, almost incredibly, had not finished by the beginning of this year. Generally, though not invariably, the wines were racked, moved off the lees from one barrel to another, in September or October 2006.

There is a wide variation in bottling dates too. As usual, one of the first to market her new 2005 bottles under specially selected corks was Lolo-Etze Leroy at Domaine Leroy. On December 10 I was the first person to taste her 2005s from bottle. At her old address, also in Vittey-Romanée, the Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, Adrien de Villaine will bottle later than usual because the fermentations were so slow and late - probably at the end of April.

A common spot in Burgundy is to compare the current vintage with similar predecessors. As Bernard Dugey pointed out, 2005 is not like the super-ripe 1989 and 1990 vintages because it has so much more acidity, and much riper tannins. Nor is 2005 like that other drought vintage 1976 because it was significantly cooler. Some vignerons suggest it is a little like 2002 but with more intensity.

If there is one dominant characteristic of these wines it is their fitting combination of ripeness and acidity. The fruit really does taste as refreshing as a sorbet, as François Millet, the particularly articulate winemaker at Domaine Comte de Vogüé, put it during our tasting in his vast cellar full of Grand Cru. His neighbour in Chambolle-Musigny, Fred Mugnier of Domaine J.F. Mugnier, sees a contradiction in the 2005s because they have both the freshness of a cool vintage and the richness and texture more reminiscent of an overripe vintage. "This makes the wines very interesting," he assured me, "because they have great current appeal but also real potential for ageing."

Vignerons are divided about the likely progress of these wines once they are bottled. Some, such as Louis Bédier of Chambolle, are convinced they will close up and their very high tannin levels start to dominate the fruit that was so charming in youth, while others are convinced that this magic vintage will manage to charm throughout its life because of its exceptionally ripe fruit. Christophe Fourrier of Chambolle, whose wines are wonderfully convincing in 2005, declares it is a particularly transparent vintage in which tannin differences are very clear. I would agree with that, but with the additional observation that simple wines are, for once, as lively in their frame of reference as the grand cru. And even usually severe appellations such as Pernand-Vergelesses and the Hautes-Côtes seem to have had enough sun to shine in 2005.

And what of the whites specifically? They may not be quite as outstanding overall as the reds in 2005 (especially not Chablis). Certainly they are so ripe that some of those with particularly low yields can seem hot and over-alcoholic, but the best are completely stunning. Anne-Claude Leflaive of Domaine Leflaive in Puligny-Montrachet reports that average acid levels in 2005 were only very slightly lower than those in 2004 (4.2 rather than 4.5 grams per litre) and the pHs very similar. The harsh malic acid portion of the acidity was much lower in 2005 than 2004. Jean-François Coche (Doux) of Meursault, not given to hyperbole, describes 2005 as "legend" whereas the 2004 whites are "boring and boring" without the grandeur of the 2005s.

I found very little evidence of the black cherry flavours of over-ripe over-ripe vintages such as 2002, nor of the soft-focusy flavours associated with some oak which were evident at this stage in 2004s whose fruit was not strong enough to displace them. Indeed there was real confidence in letting the vintage's characteristics express themselves through sugar jacking, appealing but which sometimes had an intriguing almost quinine-like and not unpleasant bitter kick to it on the finish.

In general all the wines are charming, full succulent and they faithfully express their origins. Can one ask for more?

See [background](#) on 1,200 2005 Burgundies on purple pages.