Burgundy 2005 - background to the vintage

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So what exactly was it that made the 2005 burgundies I wrote about last week quite so desirable? A strong clue comes from what Bertrand Maume of Domaine Maume in Gevrey-Chambertin had to say about the growing season: "I kept 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, surplus to requirements. And once the grapes had reached the cellar the vintage was, as Maume's neighbour Jean-Marie Fournier put it, "boring" because there was so little to do in a technical sense. "Boring - but great", he added.

As in Bordeaux in 2005, Nature decided it was payback time for all those years in which the grapes fail to ripen evenly or at all, or are attacked by rot or mildew, or are, as in 2003, shrivelled on the vine by sizzling sunshine. Quite simply, nothing went wrong – except for the odd spot of hail, a perennial problem in Burgundy. Hail hit Chambolle Musigny and Echezeaux very early in May and Chassagne-Montrachet, especially the Morgeot vineyard, late in July, reducing yields there. Indeed some of the Morgeot whites taste 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 desertification? 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 water, the grapes may have been pea-sized 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 hl/ha which seems pretty general for Gevrey Chambertin (much more than in the hail-hit 2006 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 du Martray in the relatively high village of Pernand Vergelesses), killing off any bugs and leaving the vines in good health. The north wind on Palm Sunday duly 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 ripening period only a single month, June, registered significantly more sunshine than average. Despite the gloomy August the vines kept on photosynthesising, unlike the shuddown known in hotter years, slowly building up sugars and, thanks to the lack of rain, they remained entirely free of the fungal diseases to which they are so prone. Proper rain, as opposed to the odd sprinkle, arrived on September 7 and kick-started the final phase of ripening, much to the relief of Burgundy's vignerons.

A prolonged spell of fine weather followed these useful September rains and for once growers could take their time over deciding exactly when to pick these perfectly healthy grapes. Waiting until the seeds of her enviable Clos St Jacques grapes were fully ripe, Sylvie Esmonin, sure of good weather because of the propitious timing of high tides in Brittany, source of Burgundy's rain, did not pick until September 23-28. Harvest periods tended to be uncharacteristically 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 (aka boring) vinification, the particularly cold winter and early spring of 2006 really slowed down the evolution of the wines in barrel so that the second, softening 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 wide variation in bottling dates too. As usual, one of the first to marshal her new 2005 babies under specially selected corks was Lalou Bize Leroy at Domaine Leroy. On December 16 I was the first person to taste her 2005s from bottle. At her old address, also in Vosne-Romanée, the Domaine de la Romanée–Conti, Aubert de Villaine will bottle later than usual because the fermentations were so slow and late – probably at the end of April.

A common sport in Burgundy is to compare the current vintage with similar predecessors. As Bernard Dugat-Py 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 minerality.

If there is one dominant characteristic of these wines it is their thrilling 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 Grands Crus. 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 Boillot of Chambolle, are convinced they will close up and their very high tannins 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 Roumier of Chambolle, whose wines are wonderfully convincing in 2005, declares it is a particularly transparent vintage in which terroir differences are very clear. I would agree with that, but with the additional observation that simple wines are, for once, as lovely in their frame of reference as the grand ones. And even usually leaner appellations such as Pernand-Vergelesses and the Hauses 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 (Duvy) of Meursault, not given to hyperbole, describes 2005 as 'superb' whereas the 2006 whites are 'charming and tender but without the grandeur of the 2005s'.

I found very little evidence of the black cherry flavours of verging-on-overripe vintages such as 2003, nor of the coffee/toasty flavours associated with some oak which were evident at this stage in 2004s whose fruit was not strong enough to disguise them. Instead there was real confidence in letting the vineyard characteristics express themselves through super juicy, appetising fruit 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, truly succulent and they faithfully express their origins. Can one ask for more?

See tasting notes on 1,300 2005 burgundies on purple pages.