

Burgundy 2009 - red wine overview

19 Jan 2011 by Jancis Robinson/FT but this is longer

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There's a problem with the 2009 vintage in Burgundy. It's too attractive. So attractive that some UK merchants have already sold their allocations of the most sought-after wines. The good news, however, is that there are many delicious wines among the less famous producers and more humbly ranked vineyards. And for once this was a vintage that delivered both quality and quantity - as much as 31 hl/ha even at the hallowed Domaine de la Romanée-Conti - so there is rather more than usual to go round, even if the wines have been priced by merchants to reflect the rise in quality rather than the increased quantity.

Some growers have not increased their prices in euros whereas others such as Méo-Camuzet increased theirs substantially but offered discounts for cash.

For some Burgundy purists, wines that taste charming in youth are decidedly suspect. There could hardly be a greater contrast between the easy, open, ripe red-fruit flavours that were in evidence at the 23 (yes, 23) tastings of 2009 burgundy held in London last week and how the late-picked, reticent 2008s showed at this time last year. But there is no more quixotic wine than burgundy and some burgundy-lovers - not just merchants who have them to sell - are struck by the transformation of these ugly 2008 ducklings into rather gracious, if lissom, swans that might just make some 2009s look a little too galumphing or facile. I shall be re-tasting a wide range of 2008s next month.

Emmanuel Rouget, nephew of the late, great Henri Jayer, was already muttering, '2009 has been oversold; there will be disappointments' back in November 2009. At the same time, Jean-Charles Le Bault de la Morinière of Bonneau du Martray agreed it was too early to judge the quality potential of the 2009s but was still marvelling at how easy they had been to ripen and make. The Comte Georges de Vogüé domaine started to pick their 2009s as early as 9 Sep, compared with 27 Sep in 2008.

The health of the grapes in 2009 was exceptional, without a trace of the rot that perennially plagues the vineyards of Burgundy. Even at a property as meticulous as Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, for once they had no need of their smart new sorting table. Aubert de Villaine of DRC is not the only old hand to see similarities between 2009 and the vintage of exactly half a century before, describing it as 'very amiable and seductive - but perhaps not the most complex.'

The weather was hugely obliging from about mid July onwards, in fact Le Bault de la Morinière maintains they will probably never see such a perfect summer again, with hardly a cloud in the sky from the beginning of August to the end of harvest. And yet temperatures were not excessive and, thanks to a few storms in late July that were very worrying at the time, the vines had enough water. As Denis Bachelet put it, 'the amount of water in the soil facilitated perfect photosynthesis, which gave us very rich musts - richer than ever'. April had also been quite showery after a March that went from sun to snow. May was warm and dry and the flowering at the beginning of June was unusually rapid and even, setting the stage for those generous yields. Hail strikes some Côte d'Or vineyards most years and 2009 was no exception. A 21 May hailstorm was most unfortunately concentrated on some of Morey-St-Denis' best sites, including Clos de la Roche, and resulted in slow ripening and some particularly small grapes here and in some of the grands crus in southern Gevrey.

But in general ripening was fairly rapid and the super-healthy grapes were picked in early September under clear skies. Unusually for Burgundy, the harvest date was determined by fear of losing acidity. And this is really the only question mark over the wines. I will write about white burgundy, in which acidity is so crucial, next week but there are those who fear that the 2009 reds might just be too charming for their own long-term good. In one of at least three sets of smart new cellars in Vosne-Romanée, Sylvain Cathiard told me that he was doubtful the '09s will last because of their low acid, 'but then people said that about 2000'. The charming 2000s, white as well as red, have indeed confounded their critics and many are still providing delicious drinking.

What all red winemakers are agreed on is that the reds had to be vinified so as to retain maximum freshness in the wine. For Rousseau this meant using an even smaller proportion of new oak than usual and retaining 20% of stems in the fermentation vat. 'We were looking for a chance to try this and the low acidity of '09 seemed the perfect opportunity', Frédéric Robert told me - although I for one found Rousseau's 2009s less haunting than their 2008s at the same early stage.

Sylvain Pitiot of Clos de Tart has some reservations about 2009. 'I don't think it was exceptional everywhere; there were parts with too many grapes. It's not as homogeneous as 2005, and it probably won't close up as 2005 has done.' He noted that one distinctive characteristic of 2009 was how early the softening malolactic fermentations took place. In one of their vats, the malolactic was over even before alcoholic fermentation had begun, which is most unusual.

This was a vintage that made Jean-Marie Fourrier feel guilty because he had to do so little. He picked later than most growers, from 17 Sep, 'because that was the traditional 100 days after flowering and my foliage was in very good condition (some other growers' was yellow for weeks before the harvest). It wasn't a boiling summer so I wonder why some '09s are heavy. Perhaps it's because some people systematically pull off leaves too early leaving grapes exposed. Some people do it before they go on holiday. For me leaf pulling has to be done only in late August or early September. Never before because the foliage is useful to shade grapes in hot weather, and the leaves also act as a solar panel that protects from hail and promotes photosynthesis.'

He also noted the very early malos which managed to complete themselves at temperatures way below the theoretical 12 °C threshold and has bottled his 2009s much earlier than usual, two weeks ago, because 'I consider that once a wine has finished malo, it can stay in barrel for up to seven months after that but then the fruit starts to dry out. The magic of the '09s is the freshness and complexity of fruit which I don't want to lose.'

He is not the only one to suggest that there are similarities between 2009 and the very successful 1999s. But it will be particularly difficult for those who buy 2009s to stop themselves pulling the corks for long enough to find out whether they age as well as the 1999s.

The following producers seemed to me to make particularly good 2009 reds.

Denis Bachelet
Ghislaine Barthod
Jean-Marc Bouley
Sylvain Cathiard
Robert Chevillon
Dugat-Py
Frédéric Esmonin
Régis Forey
Fourrier
Geantet-Pansiot
Henri Gouges
Jean Grivot
Anne Gros
Hudelot-Noëllat
Lamarche
Thibault Liger-Belair
Marquis d'Angerville
de Montille
Mugneret-Gibourg
J F Mugnier
Sylvain Pataille
Laurent Ponsot
Patrice & Michèle Rion
Roche de Bellene
Roumier
Taupenot-Merme
de Vogüé

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