Burgundy 2009 - white wine overview

26 Jan 2011 by Jancis Robinson/FT

***31 Jan** - See more grim news on premox in this thread on our forum*

See our more than 1,500 tasting notes on 2009 burgundies.

In wine auctions it is advisable to be wary of cases containing 10 or 11 bottles instead of the full complement of a dozen. The previous owner has almost certainly tried a bottle or two and been disappointed. But over the last decade it is now positively crazy to bid on such a lot if the bottles contain white burgundy.

Over the last eight years or so it has become apparent that fine white burgundy, the sort of wine that costs hundreds and sometimes thousands of pounds a dozen, has a serious problem. Along with en primeur merchants such as 1855.com who fail to deliver, white burgundy's disappointing track record has been the single most common complaint on our forum. Indeed one frustrated member called his recent thread 'White burgundy problems - can we put an end to this debate once and for all please?' The answer, alas, is a resounding no.

The problem is that an intolerably high proportion of white burgundy - between 9% and 23% according to Los Angeles lawyer Don Cornwell's analysis on http://oxidised-burgs.wikispaces.com - oxidises, turns brown and loses its fruit, before it is 10 years old. Because fine white burgundy is supposed to be aged for many years before blossoming into a liquid complex enough to warrant its high price, the problem came to light only in 2003 with the first widespread disappointments among bottles of the 1995s. Every year at about this time Cornwell holds a series of tastings of several dozen top-quality white burgundies from the vintage picked seven and a half years previously. The bottles have all been stored in ideal conditions and are tasted by knowledgeable burgundy lovers.

Cornwell's site (no ads, no sponsorship) is also continuously fed tasting notes, from laudatory to anguished, as fellow burgundy collectors open bottles from their own collections so that over the years Cornwell has divided the significant producers into five categories, from those with a particularly high incidence of this premature oxidation, so-called premox, to those such as Coche-Dury, Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, Leflaive, Leroy/d'Auvenay and Raveneau, whose wines seem to be unaffected by this mysterious pox. Each producer's winemaking methods are noted in the vain hope that a correlation can be discerned although, so far, no single cause has been identified for this recent and worrying phenomenon - which seems to strike random bottles rather than whole lots of a given wine.

Great swathes of wine-related cyberspace have been devoted to theories involving, variously, decreased cork quality, reduced levels of the antioxidant sulphur dioxide, increased levels of lees stirring, changes in pressing techniques and growing cover crops in the vineyard. In my experience, frustrated consumers seem much more obsessed by this problem than the producers themselves, which is hardly surprising since, athough demand for fine white burgundy has definitely softened, it is produced in such small quantities that it is relatively easy to sell.

The wine academics of Beaune and Dijon have not so far come up with any satisfying cure, but at least two of the most admired white burgundy producers, Dominique Lafon and Jean-Marc Roulot of Meursault, are taking the problem seriously. From the 2009 vintage that was so widely showcased at tastings in London earlier this month, these two colleagues have started to eliminate that portion of the must they believe contains the greatest concentration of premox precursors. They deliberately oxidise the last 10% of must left in the press, settle it overnight and throw out the cloudiest bottom third of what results.

Certainly the 2009 Meursaults (and 2009 Mâcons from the related Les Héritiers du Comte Lafon) that I tasted at Domaine des Comtes Lafon last October were the most impressive set of young wines I have ever tasted in these capacious cellars, and Roulot's were above reproach too - not that anyone is suggesting that it is possible to detect potential premox problems when tasting the wines this early. There are other producers whose 2009 whites stood out and I have listed them below.

The white wines of Jean-François Coche-Dury have for long represented a pinnacle to which young Côte d'Or producers of white wine aspire. He is the most single-minded and least worldly vigneron I have ever met, caring meticulously and in the most minute detail for every vine and barrel. It is always a pleasure, and an honour, to taste young wine in his cellar.

But his 2009 whites tasted at the end of last October seemed to reach a new high of both concentration and vivacity. Even Jean-François, who had not tasted them himself for two months, was agreeably surprised by just how well they were showing, 'more muscular than in August', he nodded approvingly, adding that he'd found the 2009s denser than any vintage for ages and ages - more so than the 2005s and 2002s'.

But if Lafon and Coche made exceptionally good 2009s, there were certainly disappointments - although when I tasted the 2009s at that other landmark (and premox-free) address Domaine Leflaive, the wines were obviously even more youthful than at the two great Meursault addresses cited above. They may also turn into something very special indeed. In Chassagne, Pierre-Yves Colin-Morey, son of Marc Colin, maintained the high standard and tight, nervy style that has won him such plaudits over his first eight years on his own, picking in early September 2009 after some water stress in the vineyards. He deliberately racked the wine four times rather than the usual once because 'the wines need to be helped to open out'. Despite all this, these were some of the most unevolved 2009s I tried. From the same cellar, a range of wines from his wife Caroline Morey is also now available. As a matter of policy in his fight against premox, he uses untreated corks and then protects against oxidation by applying a rather annoying but clearly effective wax capsule.

But the relatively low acidities in 2009, especially low malic-acid levels which accelerated the malolactic fermentations, mean that many white 2009s are relatively soft and rich. Ripe grapes meant no added sugar to boost alcohol levels but yields were relatively high. This suggests they will make satisfying early drinking but should probably be consumed long before the more structured and long-term 2008s. This applies particularly in Chablis to the north of the Côte d'Or.

So, in sum, most 2009 whites should probably be drunk long before the threat of premature oxidation is realised - although it is worth noting that some serious burgundy merchants are willing to replace or refund disappointing bottles bought from them, and are generally advising their customers to drink modern white burgundy, whatever the vintage, earlier than used to be the norm.

Producers whose 2009 whites shone

Daniel Barraud
J M Boillot
Coche-Dury
Philippe Colin
Pierre-Yves Colin-Morey
Vincent Dancer
Arnaud Ente
J P Fichet
Patrick Javillier
Lafon
Leflaive
Morey-Coffinet
Fernand & Laurent Pillot
Paul Pillot
Château de Puligny-Montrachet
Roulot

For offers, see wine-searcher.com and see also our more than 1,500 tasting notes on 2009 burgundies.