



Decanter PANEL TASTING

Chassagne & Puligny 1er cru 2008

Love white Burgundy but can't afford Le Montrachet? Try the premiers crus of these communes from a vintage saved at the 11th hour, says **SARAH MARSH MW**

The neighbouring communes of Puligny-Montrachet and Chassagne-Montrachet share the holy grail of white Burgundy – Le Montrachet. This grand cru vineyard and appellation straddles the border and was added as a suffix to the two communes in 1897. But this should not detract from the wealth of premier cru vineyards: 17 in Puligny and 54 in Chassagne, the best of which are far less expensive than the grands crus, but shimmer with hints of its stardust.

Puligny is an unassuming village, where growers are few. Its 208ha (hectares) are planted almost exclusively to Chardonnay, with less than 2ha of Pinot Noir. The 96ha of premier cru vineyards produce nearly 4,891hl (hectolitres) of Chardonnay annually.

The Puligny style is mineral and direct. It has grip, density and definition. The vineyards climb the stony Mont Racher, where the topsoil becomes meagre and the premiers crus are nervy and delicious in warmer vintages. The best premiers crus in both regions are found between 240m–300m, the same altitude as the grands crus. Here limestone soils make fine, structured whites. Puligny's Les Caillerets lies next to Le Montrachet, sharing its Bathonian limestone soil, albeit more pebbly. But its slightly more easterly orientation is not quite as good, showing the subtle difference between an outstanding terroir and a fine one.

Chassagne is a larger commune with a divided personality. It used to be mainly a red wine area, but a colour conversion began after phylloxera and continues to be driven by fashion for white. Some 116ha of the 150ha of premier cru are now

planted to Chardonnay and produce an average of 5,933hl annually. The premiers crus on the lower slopes are well suited to red and produce beefier whites, as the soil is heavier, with more clay. At the top, where the premiers crus produce high-toned, racy wines, lies La Romanée.

The Chassagne style is typically more rounded and floral than Puligny, with smoother edges and is generally more forward. Traditionally the premiers crus here have been given less time to develop in the cellar than in Puligny, with even the grands crus bottled before the next harvest. But this is a dynamic commune with a high proportion of young growers who have set a trend to keep the wine in barrel a second winter and then bottle in spring. This gives the wine more time on the lees to develop structure and weight.

Growers in both communes have pulled back considerably on new oak and are using battonage (stirring of the lees) more judiciously to add richness. Many now only stir at the start of ageing to help the malolactic fermentation begin.

2008 was a challenging, cool, wet vintage. Chassagne and Puligny escaped the worst of the hail that hit Meursault, and the vintage was miraculously saved in its final three weeks when a north wind concentrated the grapes. It was a small harvest needing careful deselection



of rot. Dehydration led to high levels of sugar and acidity, giving rich, powerful, spicily exotic wines. It's a good, classic year.

Puligny performed well, proving how the best keep their structure, edge and minerality even in richer years. Chassagne is broad, exotic and less energetic. **D**

'These wines would make most New World Chardonnay producers weep'

Stephen Brook

Turn the page to see the results

CHASSAGNE & PULIGNY: KNOW YOUR VINTAGES

2008 Drink up the village wines. Enjoy the lesser premiers crus until 2011.

2007 Light, fresh, lively, mineral wines akin to, but better than, 2004. Even the best premiers crus should be drinking.

2006 Best are full and ripe with fruity acidity. Drink village wines and lesser premiers crus. Best will last to 2013.

2005 Flashy, full, concentrated wines of good, even quality. Drink them up.

2004 Straight, crisp, mineral wines with cool acidity. Premiers crus are mature.

2003 Heavy whites – flabby to richly aromatic and exotic. Done and dusted.

2002 Good ripeness and acidity. Classic style and good quality. Drink up.

THE TASTERS

Stephen Brook, *Decanter contributing editor*; Ian d'Agata, *director, International Wine Academy of Rome*; Tim Marson MW, *Burgundy buyer, Bibendum Wines*; Margaret Rand, *wine writer*; Michael Schuster MW, *DWWA Burgundy Regional Chair*; Steven Spurrier, *Decanter consultant editor*; Philip Tuck MW, *wine director, Hatch Mansfield*; David Wainwright, *fine wine consultant*

Chassagne & Puligny 1er cru '08: results

One of our most successful tastings had our judges rapt by the wines' quality given the tricky vintage, and already making room in their cellars. **TINA GELLIE** reports

Wow! We haven't had a tasting as good as this since the 2007 Meursaults
[Decanter, December 2009]

'I'm stunned by the quality of these '08s,' said Steven Spurrier. 'Other Chardonnay regions of the world will shudder at their consistency. There wasn't a single wine I thought would disappoint – well, maybe on price, but certainly not on quality.' David Wainwright praised their 'blistering display of minerality and purity – very few faults and tremendous consistency.'

But wasn't 2008 a dodgy vintage?

'As difficult as any I can remember,' said Phillip Tuck MW: 'A disastrous July and August – some thought they might bin everything on the vine. But the second half of September rescued the vintage.' 'When I tasted these wines in cask in October 2009, I found them hollow. Now they've rounded out, though the acidity is still high.' Margaret Rand agreed: 'They're much better than I expected. At January's *primeurs* tastings I was impressed by their texture and minerality and this has now come through even more.' Tim Marson MW had envisaged wines that combined the richness, texture and forward fruit of the 2006s with the mineral and linear style of the 2007s 'and in that respect my preconceptions were delivered', he said.

So what caused this change in fortune?

Careful vineyard management, said Tuck. 'The wines' consistency is very impressive given the tricky conditions. Louis Jadot discarded 30% of the fruit that came into the winery and left a lot on the vine. I imagine others did the same and that has shone through in the consistency of what was bottled.' Stephen Brook praised the winemaking: 'It was a vintage of high acidity, so the trick was to balance it with fruit. A few wines are angular, where the acidity is too assertive, but 80% got it right.'

Any other negatives?

'A few from Puligny were a bit overoaked, but that's just nitpicking,' said Brook. Tuck suggested winemakers may have done this 'to mask the hard vintage'. Marson also found a few woody examples but said the greater problem was premature oxidation. 'Several wines lacked freshness

THE SCORES:

100 WINES TASTED	
★★★★★ Decanter Award	6
Outstanding (18.5–20pts)	
★★★★ Highly recommended	47
Very good to excellent (16.5–18.49pts)	
★★★ Recommended	46
Good (14.5–16.49pts)	
★★	1
Fair (12.5–14.49pts)	
★	0
Poor (10.5–12.49pts)	
Faulty	0
£	
Good value (under £33)	11

and fruit, and had a hollow, cidery note. That's a concern at premier cru level in wines that are still young.' Ian D'Agata was unconvinced. 'Premature oxidation has been a major problem for Burgundy and I think they've learned from their mistakes,' he said. 'Producers might not admit it, but they probably upped sulphur use to prevent this, and I think they've done a fine job.' Tuck was also impressed: 'Given the challenging conditions and threat of disease, there are very few duds.'

Were there noticeable differences between the communes?

The styles stuck to stereotype, said the judges: Puligny being more linear and mineral and the Chassagnes weighty and rich. What didn't follow the norm was that

Chassagne (seen as secondary to Puligny) came out on top, thanks to the conditions of 2008. Wainwright said the lean, high-acid vintage suited Chassagne; Brook gave them his highest scores: 'I liked their crispness, purity and subtlety. The ones I marked down were broader and fleshier.' Rand found the Pulignys 'a bit safe, with a bit too much oak'. D'Agata spoke for many when he said 'the single best wines were Pulignys, but for overall consistency, the Chassagnes came out on top'. Brook praised the improvements to winemaking in Chassagne: 'Ten years ago it was not as good as in Puligny, but I'm not sure that's the case now.'

How about individual crus?

Folatières in Puligny was singled out by Tuck, Marson, D'Agata and Brook as the star; Morgeot in Chassagne was the least fancied, due to its large size (54ha) and subsequent lack of consistency. D'Agata also liked Puligny's Champ Gains. Brook praised Chassagne's Maltroie, Vergers and Chaumées and said Chenevottes and En Cailleret 'were very consistent but not among my top scorers', while Rand felt En Cailleret was 'austere, but with lots of fruit and length'. D'Agata had the last word: 'There are up and downs depending on the producer, but Burgundy is magical in how it can express such different nuances from a single limestone soil.'

So how long will these wines last?

Wainwright summed up for the group: 'They are good for the medium term, with a prime drinking window from now to 2015. You can put them away for 10 years – the best ones will develop well – but you don't have to. I say enjoy them now; they are just great to drink.'

But are they good value for the money?

'It's a shame the euro was so strong when these wines first went on offer,' said Tuck. 'That, in addition to the fact that '08 was deemed a poor vintage, will have put people off. But sceptics should revisit them – they're an extremely good buy.' Brook concluded: 'These wines would make most New World Chardonnay producers weep. Nowhere else do you get this minerality, raciness and purity. And that really was on show here.'

Domaine Vincent & François Jouard



Highly Recommended

16.5-18.49pts



Chassagne-Montrachet 1^{er} cru « La Maltroie » 2008

Score : 17/20

'Lifted floral elements combine with citrus, apple and quince notes that leap from the glass. Race and lively with a mineral aftertaste, it is well-sustained with a laser beam of acidity. Delicious, pure and long. 2011-2016.'



Chassagne-Montrachet 1^{er} cru « Les Chaumées - Clos de la Truffière » 2008

Score : 16.75/20

'Almost medicinal note with oak, yellow fruit, citrus, cream pie and minerals on the nose. A buoyant wine with assertive acidity, it is pure and crisp. Lovely flavour and will age well. Now-2018.'