

• Antonio Galloni vinOUS

Dealing with the New Paradigm: Burgundy 2018

BY NEAL MARTIN | NOVEMBER 22, 2022

"Burgundy is dead," announced a provocateur during a recent *soirée*. I enquired whether his *ex cathedra* statement stemmed from market prices or global warming. Maybe both, since they each overhauled how we perceive the region's wines and the princely sums paid to enjoy them. Prices aside, nobody will deny that the succession of warm and dry summers has presented winemakers with a novel set of challenges. Whereas once they aspired to reach phenolic ripeness and chaptalized any shortfall, nowadays the aim is to contain sugar accumulation to mitigate against high alcohol, protect the sensitive Pinot Noir from hydric stress and capture all-important freshness in bottle - there's nothing worse than a flabby Burgundy of either colour.

The 2018 vintage was the first in the trio of unseasonably hot vintages that introduced a new paradigm, a new normal. It posed a conundrum for winemakers: try to maintain some semblance of their signature style or acquiesce to the meteorological conditions that Mother Nature sets out, uphold the moral duty of translating the season into bottle? Being the first, 2018 arguably came as a significant shock, the steepest learning curve for vine and vigneron. Burgundians just had to wipe the sweat from their brow, keep calm and carry on.



I took this photograph in Chassagne-Montrachet, just down from Montrachet, during the harvest. Athleticism is on display.

The Growing Season

I refer readers to [my original barrel report](#) for a detailed rundown of the 2018 growing season. However, a brief summary is helpful. Winter was mild, with rainfall in the early months that replenished underground moisture reserves that would prove vital later in the year. Warm temperatures in April provoked rapid budding, turning the vines' ignition on a fortnight earlier than usual. Thankfully, 2018 was not another addition to the roll call of frost-affected vintages; only minor episodes took place in Puligny and Chassagne-Montrachet. Rainfall was average through June, which led to some mildew pressure. July was hot and dry, punctured by a severe hailstorm on 15 July, centered upon Nuits Saint-Georges, so powerful that it caused mudslides in steeper vineyards, most dramatically at Domaine de l'Arlot. Some growers reduced yields, for example, Domaine Leflaive and Armand Rousseau. In contrast, others believed that a large volume would disperse ripeness and keep a lid on alcohol. August was particularly dry with

around 20mm of rain, perhaps just enough to stave off hydric stress; however, the final two weeks saw torrid heat up to 40° Celsius.

The dilemma for growers was whether to pick early, to avoid excessive sugar accretion but risk phenolic ripeness, or wait. Hang times were curtailed, around 80 days instead of 100 days, as the harvest kicked off with the whites at the end of August, something winemakers like Frédéric Mugnier had vowed would never happen in his lifetime. Picking was conducted quickly, as dry conditions meant there was minor disease making minimal sorting necessary, though that posed challenges in terms of logistics and getting pickers in the right place at the right moment. Yields were higher for the whites than expected but slightly lower than average apropos the reds. Grapes were in vat by 12 September with just a couple of exceptions. Vinification was not as straightforward as the harvest since indigenous yeasts had to “eat” more sugar than they were accustomed to. Hence some winemakers encountered stuck ferments as the yeasts acclimatized to their highly saccharine environment. High ripeness levels and the ratio of seeds to berries meant that many winemakers took a “softly, softly” approach to macerating the fruit, “infusion” the byword.

How the Wines Were Tasted

I have participated in the annual “Burgfest” tasting since 2013. It was established by Clive Coates MW, whom we sadly lost earlier this year, a toast raised in his memory on the first day. As in recent years, we convened at the secluded Hameau du Barbaron in the Savigny hinterland, with just our group, many wines and wild boar roaming the woodland, hoping to avoid being served as dinner. We used to examine the vintage three years prior, though COVID meant we lost a year, so it is now four years on, which I do not mind as the wines have an extra 12 months in bottle. It is the same dozen or so participants each year, all with immense experience and views - the exercise is as much about learning how your palate performs as learning about the wines.



The modus operandi is unchanged. Two weeks are set aside, one in May focusing on the whites and the second in September for the reds. The wines are split into flights according to vineyard, grouped if representation is small, with an average between four and nine wines per flight, crucially, all served single-blind. Each of us presents our scores in turn, and the general performance of flights is discussed. The wines are then revealed, eliciting “oohs” and “ahhs” whenever there’s a surprising showing, which is quite often. Scores are tabulated so we can see the average per wine and flight, though these are not disclosed outside the group. No more than 50 wines are served each day, a more leisurely pace compared to its sister “Southwold” Bordeaux tasting. All bottles come directly from producers and vary a little year by year as some producers decide not to submit or forget while new producers enter the ring. But the core producers are pretty constant. The usual number of wines were submitted, around 450 whites and reds, all Premier and Grand Crus.

The Wines

Blind tasting on a broad scale inevitably reveals discrepancies between barrel and bottle. It is statistically improbable that every score aligns perfectly. Frustrating as it might be for

reviewers and readers alike, wines are mutable beings, and their trajectories can deviate either due to winemakers' decisions in the latter stages of *élevage* or at bottling or simply due to Burgundy's innate caprice. As expected, perhaps there were more deviations in 2018 compared to any other vintage that I have broached in this manner over 20 years. There was always something...*untamed* about the 2018s, and I intuitively felt they could go one way or another due to the unprecedented alcohol levels coupled with the sensitivity of Pinot Noir.

I approached the 2018s with some trepidation. Maybe I would find them blowsy, over-ripe, rather "buxom" wines that lack the nerve and acidic spice I seek in Burgundy? For both whites and reds? Indeed, there was evidence of that, though I shall explain later that the growing season's imprimatur is indelibly stamped in some appellations more than others. This blind tasting rammed home that it is foolish to brand every wine the same because of its birth year - some areas/growers fared better than others.

Perusing my scores, I found more positives than anticipated. Appellation aside, it soon became apparent that illustrious terroirs coped better than the less revered. However, 2018 does not strictly adhere to the hierarchy that presupposes Grand Cru > Premier Cru > Village Cru. My scores reflect that. Yet the high-fliers cluster amongst the Grand Cru, and it pains me to write that because it validates their escalating market prices. That is not something I necessarily expected since there is a strong argument that advantages in terms of orientation and altitude are inverted into handicaps in hot growing seasons that theoretically benefit cooler microclimates. However, pedological and geological virtues make the Côte d'Or more acclaimed vineyards more impervious to the season's sway.

The Whites

The first day of Burgfest was dedicated to Chablis. I must admit that this is not my favourite recent vintage for this region that is dutybound to translate the vagaries of an unfettered season. That can work to its advantage in cooler years, but in 2018, the summer's warmth erased the *nervosité* that underpins great Chablis. That does not imply that they should be entirely written off since those facets are substituted with attractive tropical-tinged aromas and flavours that can be fairly seductive, despite denuding the wines of *typicité* and stylistically aligning them more to the Chardonnays of the Côte d'Or. Yet some growers defy the limitations of the 2018 season, namely **Samuel Billaud**, whose Montée de Tonnerre and Mont de Milieu could have come from the heralded previous vintage. I would also namecheck the Montée de Tonnerre from **Charlène & Laurent Pinson** as a great value Chablis. If you want to splash out more, do investigate two Grand Crus from **Domaine Long-Depaquit**, owned by Albert Bichot, both their Moutonnes and Vaudésir performing at high levels. Predictably, several wines from Chablis Les Clos ensured this was the most consistent flight, with superb examples from **Louis Michel** and **Domaine Christian Moreau**. However, nothing demanded a cavalcade of superlatives.

The rest of the week focused on the whites of the Côte d'Or. They follow a similar pattern to Chablis insofar that this is not a vintage for those seeking steeliness, *mineralité* and livewire tension. Yet many whites still contain a creditable energy level, more than you would presuppose, few you could accuse of being genuinely "flabby" - a criticism leveled at the 2003s. One could argue that the vines are adapting to the succession of warm seasons and managing to muster acidity that was in short supply back in 2003.

I particularly appreciate the quality in Meursault Charmes with noteworthy contributions from **Château de Meursault**, **Ballot-Millot** and **Olivier Leflaive**, the latter's wines with an almost comical knack of trumping all-comers in every round at Burgfest. Château de Meursault and Ballot-Millot also showed well within the flight of Les Perrières. Their wines may well represent better value than equally fine examples from **Jean-Marc Roulot** and **Domaine des Comtes-Lafon**. Meursault was generally more successful than Chassagne-Montrachet, though readers should look out for the Les Caillerets from **Fontaine-Gagnard**. Puligny-Montrachet has its fair share of good performers, particularly the Les Referts, courtesy of **Jacques Carillon** and an outstanding Les Foliatières from **Domaine Sébastien Magnien**. Broaching the Grand Crus, the caliber remained variable within Bâtard-Montrachet. However, it achieved greater consistency with the Chevalier-Montrachets with beautiful wines from **Domaine Vincent Leflaive**, **Philippe Colin** and **Domaine Chartron**.

We were graced with four Montrachets this year. Whereas last Burgfest, the majority shockingly disparaged the "Monty" from Domaine de Comtes-Lafon. This year, normal service resumed as it triumphed over a generally underwhelming flight. A friend recently quipped that Montrachet is the most over-rated vineyard in the world, given the premium paid for the privilege.



The Reds

The differences between appellations were more marked between the reds than the whites - something that I did not foresee. Generally, those that erred towards slightly riper, fruit-forward and texturally rounded wines fared less well than those that tended to be more structured and "square." For example, the flights from Volnay and Chambolle-Musigny lacked acidity and freshness vis-à-vis Pommard and Morey-Saint-Denis, respectively. One can argue that Volnay and Chambolle-Musigny thrive in slightly cooler seasons, and 2018 nudges them beyond their comfort zone. I expected more from Chambolle-Musigny, where some *fêted* winemakers seemed unstuck. I am a huge fan of **Christophe Roumier's** wines and rated his 2018s highly from barrel. Yet he did not have a good Burgfest, at least not until his *Les Amoureuses* rolled into view.

The 2018s from Morey-Saint-Denis felt fresher and seemed to reach a peak with a raft of the outstanding Clos Saint-Denis Grand Crus. Say what you like about **Clos de Tart** when it was snapped by Groupe Artémis and joined the ranks of Latour, Grillet et al., their 2018 is one of the wines of the vintage, some feat given that this was a transitional vintage as Alessandro Noli bedded himself in as winemaker. Doubtlessly it will be jostling with **Clos des Lambrays** in the coming years. This was also an impressive performance in a vintage where the "baby" was handed from one parent to the other, the 2018 made by Bruno Champy, Jacques Desvauges finishing the *élevage* after joining in March 2019. Both these wines surpass my estimations from barrel.

Even the most skeptical members of Burgfest were smitten by the liveliness and acidity levels of these young 2018s. This was exemplified by our day devoted to Gevrey-Chambertin, which showed exceptionally well vis-à-vis other appellations. After a rather middling showing from the Nuits Saint-Georges, it was as if a veil had lifted, and many of the wines shone, particularly the flights focused on Les Cazetiers, despite one errant bottle from **Domaine Bruno Clair**.

The quintet of Clos Saint-Jacques was deeply impressive, which is expected given that it is a Grand Cru in all but name. The one surprise showing amongst this flight of Gevrey Grands Crus was the quality of the Chapelle-Chambertins, not the most *fêted* but here bejeweled with brilliant wines from two Trapets: **Rossignol-Trapet**, whose wines are now in a different league to a decade ago, and Jean-Louis Trapet. Talking of the latter, **Domaine J-L Trapet** had a hugely successful showing in this Burgfest, the 2018s coming top and close to the top of their respective flights. This is a producer that I have applauded in recent vintages, and their wines appear to have relished the challenge of translating terroirs in a hot growing season. Could it be their application of biodynamics that makes the difference? Who knows. Jean-Louis Trapet's wines rank amongst the very finest this year. I also found the Latricières-Chambertins well worth their status with outstanding offerings from Rossignol-Trapet and **Domaine Launay-Horiot**, the latter another who seems to have performed exceptionally well in 2018 under chapeau winemaker and former jet pilot Xavier Horiot.



The flight of Chambertins and Clos-de-Bèzes validated the reverence afforded those Grand Crus. I was particularly impressed by the showing of **Nicolas Groffier's** Clos-de-Bèze and also by Bruno Clair. Amongst the quintet of Chambertins, **Rousseau** was absolutely breathtaking in quality, though it shares top honours with another fabulous wine from Jean-Louis Trapet.

The final sessions focused on Vosne-Romanée. There are some excellent wines, as you would expect, though generally, I do not believe they reach the same level as the 2019s or the 2020s. Vosne is less consistent than you would like, considering that these are not cheap wines. Our bottle of 2018 Grands-Echézeaux was severely corked...that's a high price to pay for a wine that reeked of cardboard, a pity because their other cuvées were impressive, a sign that winemaker **Michel Mallard** is producing some of the appellation's finest wines. Market prices are skyrocketing to ever-higher levels, yet it cannot be denied that **Comte du Liger-Belair's** wines have a glorious sense of harmony and a sensual sheen that exploit the precocity of the growing season without detriment to their terroir expression.

There were some producers that I immensely respect whose wines seemed to stumble during this blind tasting. Thibault Liger-Belair has made some beautiful wines recently, but his 2018s did not show well on this occasion. The same can be said for **Domaine de la Vougeraie** and, surprisingly, **Ghislaine-Barthod**. These are all talented winemakers, yet the vintage threw so many curveballs that I feel any weaknesses in wines are amplified by bottle age.

The Pitfalls

There are some caveats to the 2018s. Firstly, I was dismayed by the number of TCA-affected bottles, scuppering oft-heard claims that incidences have reduced to an acceptable level (if one countenances that zero is an impossible target - something I don't necessarily agree with considering alternatives such as Diam). There were more corked wines in 2018 compared to recent Burgfests: 14 of the 220 bottles under natural cork displayed levels of TCA ranging from barely detectable to rendering my wine glass unusable. Even one under the supposedly faultless NDetec cork revealed some TCA, the *second* time within a month that an NDetec cork was found faulty (the other down in Hemel-en-Aarde in August). There were a handful of volatile wines, as you might expect in a hot vintage when it was harder to control temperatures during picking and fermentation. Sometimes it just gave the wines a little kick; others compromised an otherwise promising 2018.

My biggest bugbear of the 2018 vintage is Brettanomyces. Bacterial spoilage tends to be more prevalent in warmer conditions when wines have high pH levels and slightly higher levels of unfermented residual sugar, allowing Brettanomyces to bloom. Of course, detection levels vary between each person, just like cork taint. A handful of wines provoked debate about whether spoilage was detrimental or part of its character, perhaps dependent on that strain of Brettanomyces - 4EG, that can impart more pleasant peppery scents or 4EP, less attractive sweaty, fecal aromas. I look for the kind of Brettanomyces and the extent to which it occludes the terroir expression and/or freshness. The truth is that a more significant than usual percentage seemed compromised by bacterial spoilage, something that will only worsen with age. This negative aspect of the 2018 vintage will have to be monitored. In the future, in light

of global warming, the imperative is to maintain clean, hygienic cellars and control temperatures throughout the vinification process.



The Market

Should you buy 2018s? Well, many top-name allocations will have sold back in 2019, and even then, many are pre-allocated to high-spenders. Such is the escalation of market prices that recommending a Burgundy vintage is a moot point, not unlike putting your child down for the top local school while they are still in the womb. The more pertinent question might be: How much disposable income do you have? Nowadays, there is a misalignment between quality and price, so quite ordinary or even subpar wines quickly achieve high prices. Demand cares less about the intrinsic virtues of a wine and more about that a) it's Burgundy and b) you can probably sell it for a tidy profit in a few months. Supply remains small and finite, and demand gives the apparition of being insatiable. However, there has been some cooling off behind the scenes, a more cautionary approach from some wary of extraneous global factors that could rein it in, not least given the possible economic repercussions of the energy crisis, global inflation and the Ukraine war. The counterargument is that investors will seek to invest in safe assets, so it would not surprise me if this will sustain current prices or even fuel them even higher.

Final Thoughts

I must admit that I was sharpening my knives approaching this Burgfest, but I came away with a more positive sentiment towards the 2018s. No, it's not my pick of favourite recent vintages. Yet, there is no denying that if you zone in on specific appellations and growers, you will be left wondering how on earth the wine managed to muster freshness and poise in such a hot season. Could bottle maturation rub away some of that baby fat and decadence to sculpt a more classic Burgundy that anyone envisaged out of barrel? Quite possibly. Then again, rereading my conclusions, I would not change a single word, nor its title... "Confounded Expectations." Back then, I speculated that the second winter in barrel might lend the reds more backbone, which seems to have transpired. While 2018 is not a "classic" Burgundy vintage in style, overall, it is more "classic" than you might think, however you define that word these days. The caveat is serious: incidences of Brettanomyces, higher levels of volatility and one spectre that I could not predict at the time, TCA. With current high prices showing no signs of abating, it's like playing Russian Roulette with blanks instead of real bullets, irrespective of the reputation.

Burgundy is certainly *not* dead. Perhaps the only thing that has died is the chance to buy its wines without severe damage to your bank balance.

Domaine Jean Chauvenet

From Dealing with the New Paradigm: Burgundy 2018 (Nov 2022) by Neal Martin

2018 Nuits Saint-Georges Les Perrières 1er CruColor: **Red****90**Drinking Window: **2023 - 2032****Neal Martin, November 2022**

The 2018 Nuits Saint-Georges Les Perrières 1er Cru has a high-toned, opulent bouquet with cassis fruit, iodine and peony, just obscuring some of the terroir expression. The palate is medium-bodied with supple tannins, fine acidity, fleshy and forward, though lacking complexity and *mineralité* on the finish. A typical 2018 Nuits Saint-Georges in many respects. Tasted blind at the Burgfest 2018 red tasting.

2018 Nuits Saint-Georges Les Vaucrains 1er CruColor: **Red****92**Drinking Window: **2024 - 2045****Neal Martin, November 2022**

The 2018 Nuits Saint-Georges Les Vaucrains 1er Cru has a well-defined nose with more Pinoté than Gouge's Les Saint-Georges: more red fruit here and greater terroir expression. Hints of gravel and tobacco percolate through with time. The palate is medium-bodied with fine-boned tannins, well-pitched acidity, taut and fresh with a lightly spiced, quite persistent finish. Clever winemaking here - this is a fine Nuits Saint-Georges that needs a couple of years to assimilate the oak. Tasted blind at the Burgfest 2018 red tasting.

2018 Nuits Saint-Georges Les Damodes 1er CruColor: **Red****89**Drinking Window: **2024 - 2042****Neal Martin, November 2022**

The 2018 Nuits Saint-Georges Les Damodes 1er Cru has a slightly laboured bouquet with dark berry fruit, undergrowth and light bergamot scents. The palate is medium-bodied with chewy tannins, quite dense and sinewy with a grippy, black pepper tinged finish. More dark than light in this Nuits Saint-Georges. Tasted blind at the Burgfest 2018 red tasting.

Domaine Bitouzet-Prieur*From Dealing with the New Paradigm: Burgundy 2018 (Nov 2022) by Neal Martin***2018 Meursault Perrières 1er Cru**Color: **White****89**Drinking Window: **2024 - 2038****Neal Martin, May 2022**

The 2018 Meursault Perrières 1er Cru has an open, quite floral bouquet with pressed white flower scents infusing the yellow plum, Nashi pear and subtle grapefruit. Fine delineation. The palate is medium-bodied with some reduction on the entry. Good depth, quite spicy, although I am seeking more *mineralité* on the slightly lime-y finish. Tasted blind at the Burgfest 2018 white tasting.

2018 Volnay Clos des Chênes 1er CruColor: **Red****89**Drinking Window: **2023 - 2038****Neal Martin, November 2022**

The 2018 Volnay Clos des Chênes 1er Cru has a fragrant nose with redcurrant and cranberry aromas. The oak is neatly integrated, focused and delineated. The palate is well balanced with crunchy red fruit mixed with cracked black pepper. Fine details here, not amazingly persistent but becomes more menthol-like in the glass and, annoyingly, it eventually usurps the terroir expression. However, there is a sense of craftsmanship underlying this Volnay. Tasted blind at the Burgfest 2018 red tasting.