

HOWARD RIPLEY WINES

BURGUNDY, GERMANY & PIEDMONT

2021 BURGUNDY VINTAGE REPORT

2021 saw frost, rain, mildew, hail, storms, rot – not really the makings of a great vintage. *Au contraire!* Against all odds, both red and white are the most perfumed, seductive and poised wines of the last twenty years, focussed and pure, with a clear sense of *terroir*. It was not easy, and is one of the one of the smallest crops on record, with yields down mostly by half, more so for whites. Hard work and skill at every stage of the process made all the difference, and the best growers have made wines that are immediately appealing but also have the stuffing to age.

Nature threw a lot at Burgundy in 2021, but the season began promisingly. A warm winter and unusually temperate spring encouraged early vegetative growth, so by the beginning of April budbreak was well under way. Then the weather turned, and from 5th – 8th April, three successive nights of heavy frost caused massive damage to the vulnerable buds and emerging leaves. Nowhere was spared: hardest hit were *1er* and *grand cru* vineyards, which mostly lie on warm south-facing hillsides, where the vegetation was particularly advanced. Many growers resorted to burning anti-frost candles, but they were of limited use in these extreme conditions. Further north in Chablis, the threat was even more severe: Didier Séguier of William Fèvre reported having to take action for seventeen nights in the Spring.

Chardonnay buds earlier than Pinot Noir, so the Côte de Beaune was particularly affected, but all over Burgundy the vines were in shock and did not grow for a month. In May the surviving primary and secondary buds resumed development, but the vines remained fragile. They had used their reserves to recover from the blow in April and had little resilience for what came next – steady rain and wind for the next three months, followed by inevitable heavy attacks of mildew and oidium, both of which reduced potential yields still further. Aerating the canopy to halt this spread became the major concern. This was hard to do effectively, as a mix of primary and secondary buds made growth uneven resulting in an untidy canopy. The wet weather made the ground muddy and access for most vehicles difficult. Treatments – particularly organic ones – wash off quickly in the rain, and it was challenging to find windows to spray.

Poor flowering compounded the problem – there were many unfertilised grapes (*coulure*) and bad fruit set (*millerandage*). Localised hail and rainstorms caused further damage, so that by mid-August the growers who had not given up entirely faced a potentially tiny crop of unripe grapes. They were exhausted, and morale was low. Then the weather turned, and the next six weeks saw warm, fine weather. An attack of rot in September was a final nasty flourish, but those who had aerated their canopies properly suffered less.

The harvest began in September, a full month later than 2020. The bunches did not look great, and a lot of sorting was required, but growers remarked that the grapes were delicious. Fermentation was easy, alcohol a degree lower than in the previous three years, and colours much lighter. The must was more fragile, however, and had to be handled carefully, with more gentle punching down of reds to extract colour, and many whites were racked off their gross lees early to preserve their delicate fruit.

How can the wines be any good having gone through all that?

At first they behaved as expected, and were thin and charmless, but over the winter and spring they began to put on weight, and by November they were transformed. Paradoxically, the vintage was saved because its size: the small number of grapes were able to use this narrow window of fine weather at the end of the season to ripen quickly and achieved just the right state stage of phenolic maturity. And it was not easy. Nicolas Groffier remarked 'anyone can make good wine in an easy vintage, but 21 was the hardest I have been through. Everyday there was a problem that required a quick decision. Cumulatively you had to get those right to produce grapes of high quality.'

And to everyone's surprise, the best growers have produced a charming vintage, the most appealing I have ever tried in cask: both red and white are bursting with very fresh floral and fruit flavours, they have just the right amount of pointed but ripe and integrated acidity, and the reds are buttressed by silky fine tannins. They are graceful: without the pressure of ripeness behind them they are easy to drink, positively moreish in fact. Growers talk about a 'Pinot' vintage, where the fruit is so ripe that it can blur terroir, and a *terroir* vintage, where the vineyard comes to the fore. 2021 sits happily in between. The best growers achieved perfect phenolic ripeness, and the wines have perfect poise and persistence.

So is this a 'great' vintage? For some, great means blockbuster wines you have to put away for thirty years. If you love the immediacy of fresh, scented wines, elegant, fine, and balanced, then these are for you. 'Light' vintages like this are often dismissed. The great Charles Rousseau described 2000 as 'far too charming to be taken seriously'. As fans of that vintage can attest, the wines are still giving great pleasure over twenty years on. 2021 is denser and more persistent than 2000. It has the energy and precision of 2010, and all the charm that Burgundy can give. What's not to love?