

Salisbury Wine Interest Group March 12th 2020

Côte de Beaune tasting

Introduction

The Côte d'Or (d'Orient or east facing hill rather than gold!) in Burgundy is with the Médoc one of the two most famous areas for wine in the old world. It is divided into two halves, the northern Côte de Nuits and the southern Côte de Beaune, the subject of this tasting. The Côte de Nuits mainly produces red wine, whilst the Côte de Beaune makes roughly equal quantities of red and white.

Burgundy has the reputation of being unreliable and poor value, and perhaps still justified. This is said to be caused in part by the Napoleonic inheritance laws dividing land on death to each family member into equal and increasingly smaller parcels. For example in the relatively large grand cru vineyard Clos Vougeot (50 ha) there are over 80 proprietors. An owner may just have 1-3 rows of vines and choose to rent them out, sell the grapes, make wine, or any combination. It is easy to see how inconsistencies would arise with so many individuals involved. Big firms were the rule in the past, acting as négociants+/-éleveurs, but nowadays individual growers try to own or more usually *rent* parcels of vines and decide on the vineyard management as well as wine making, creating their own domaines. However the price of Burgundian vineyard land is now at such unprecedented levels, fueled by stratospheric prices of the most famous Grand crus, that local growers are concerned that they will never be able to afford to expand their holdings.

The tasting has been built around a Wine Society offer in Autumn 2019 of six red Côte de Beaune wines for drinking now, that I have supplemented with another village wine (Santenay) and two whites to tease out the differences between Meursault and Puligny-Montrachet. Burgundy has been fortunate in the 21st century to have run of good to excellent vintages and our tasting wines range from the 2006 to 2015.

Whites

The Montrachet grand crus are said to be the best of all white Burgundy, and it is no surprise that the neighbouring villages (Chassagne and Puligny) have appended its name to theirs in the late 19th century. Meursault adjoins Puligny-Montrachet but its wines are said to be better and better value at village level. The water table is higher in Puligny possibly affecting the village wines, and also causing the cellars in the village to be less deep. Some water stress for the vines in mid-summer has been shown to be important in developing a good crop, by limiting the size of the grapes. The domains in Meursault may age their wines a second winter in oak, also accentuating the differences between the villages.

The wines are 100% Chardonnay although a little Aligoté is grown and vinified for making Kir. Chardonnay takes 2-3 years to start to develop its

fruit and other secondary flavours and at first bottling can taste mainly of the oak used in vinification. Un-oaked chardonnays show a delicacy of flavour with floral scent notes but some oak is often synergistic to the wine, and used all over the Côte de Beaune with its type, newness and toast up to the winemaker. Meursault wines tend to be richer, nuttier whilst Pulignys are said to be more floral and delicate.

Reds

All the reds are from 100% Pinot Noir generally reckoned to be at its apogee in the Côte d'Or, the most sought after being in the Côte de Nuits, while the Côte de Beaune remain a source of good value reds. Pinot Noir likes cool climates, buds early, and is susceptible to frost. It is a thin-skinned grape, prone to mildew, and notoriously difficult to grow outside Burgundy. Finicky says Jancis. It has sweeter fruit characteristics and less tannins than Cabernet Sauvignon. Cherries and raspberries with some autumnal fruits. Hints of mulch – farmyards, hay and veggie aromas often mix with violets, fungi and truffles and even medicinal, iodine like, scents always with an underlying sweetness. It doesn't need 20 years aging, often very drinkable in the first or second year, sometimes entering a 'dumb' period emerging after 5-7 years. The wines do develop in bottle but many aren't expected to improve much after 15 years.

The Hollywood movie *Sideways* (2005) that demonised Merlot and praised Pinot Noir is credited to hugely boosting demand both in the USA and worldwide, resulting in a lot more Pinot Noir plantings. California, Oregon, South Africa and New Zealand have all been successful, but may often produce wines that are deep coloured, rich and powerful with less scent. Too warm and the wines are just jammy. There are good producers that try to achieve a more perfumed and seductive style, and are a source of great pinot at half the price of Burgundy. My favourites over the years have been Hamilton-Russell and Bouchard Finlayson (South Africa), Au Bon Climat in cooler years (USA), and Seresin (New Zealand). I read there are exceptional Oregon and Washington State pinots, worth a trip I'm told!

Plan of tasting

We start by looking at a premier cru Meursault and a village Puligny-Montrachet, before moving onto the reds. The order has been determined by a bit of guesswork, to taste the wines in ascending order of complexity, but I'm sure we will have surprises along the way. The reds start with Santenay in the south, then we flip to the northern edges with Chorey-lès-Beaune, Pernand-Vergelles and Savigny-lès-Beaune, before ending in middle with the Beaune and then just a little south to the Volnays.

For each wine the slides have comments from the first edition (1971) of Hugh Johnson's *World Atlas of Wine*, then from Jancis' *Oxford Companion to Wine* (2011), some selectively added blurb from the Wine Society, plus a few odd comments from Bill Nanson's 2012 monograph – *The Finest Wines of Burgundy* - to get classic and more modern views.

Frank Smith smiths@zazza.eu