

INFORMATIVE NARRATIVES
ARE PROVIDED ON
ALL VINTAGES FROM
1845 TO 2015

1845 ★

In 2013, Burgundy experienced one of its now exceedingly rare October harvests, which were far more common in the 19th century. It is an ancient Burgundian rule of thumb that the harvest will usually begin 100 days after the midpoint of the flowering. Thus a late harvest may result if bud break is retarded by poor spring weather or if June is cool or rainy, leading in either case to a late flowering. Sometimes the lost time may be regained if there are especially warm temperatures during the long days of July and August. More often the vines must struggle to ripen the fruit during the shorter days of late September or October, which may even increase the period to maturity beyond 100 days. Although late harvests are not necessarily indicators of lesser quality, the risk is that late September and early October become colder and rainier as the maximum hours of available sunshine diminish.

Burgundy Vintages

A History from 1845

Allen D. Meadows and
Douglas E. Barzelay

THE 2014 GROWING SEASON BEGAN WELL AND ended well, but conditions in July and August were less propitious, and for the third year in a row the Côte de Beaune endured serious damage from hail.

From January to June conditions were warmer and drier than normal. Coupled with good levels of luminosity, this jump-started the vegetative cycle and by April it was already three weeks ahead of normal. The extremely dry weather became a concern though, as by this time the rainfall deficit for the Côte d'Or had reached nearly 75%.

Warm and dry weather continued into June, and the flowering proceeded rapidly: by June 3rd it was already 90% completed in some of the chardonnay vineyards. The beginning of the month was windy, and while the flowering was relatively quick, some of the earliest ripening parcels had

The harvest began on September 29th in the Côte de Beaune and on October 3rd in the Côte de Nuits (Chablis didn't begin until the 8th) and took place under wet, cool conditions that encouraged the spread of rot. Worse, the extended flowering had resulted in highly variable ripeness levels, and many berries were still green. Some growers chose to wait for better weather and ripeness and were still picking in the third week of October. Temperatures rose slightly, but high humidity encouraged even more rot—while waiting to pick helped ripen the fruit, there was even less of it to pick.

Sorting was essential, although as Paul Pernot dryly remarked “we tried to sort, but some parcels were so badly damaged that had we eliminated every substandard berry there would have been nothing left at the end.”

1984 ● RED: NO STARS
★ WHITE

A COOL AND RAINY SPRING DELAYED THE START of the vegetative cycle, and conditions remained difficult through June. The flowering was not only delayed but exceptionally extended, starting on June 20th and not concluding until July 30th. As a startling comparison, the flowering the following year, which also began on June 20th, finished after nine days. Predictably, the protracted and troubled flowering caused a high incidence of shatter and shot berries while destroying any hopes of an abundant harvest.

While July and August were not as cool and wet as spring had been, several severe storms caused considerable damage and further reduced anticipated yields. *Véraison* finally began around August 20th and had mostly finished by the first week of September. It rained heavily for much of September, and even with a relatively small crop, maturities hardly budged. As Bernard Gros remarked, “even the *grands crus* barely registered 9% potential alcohol at the harvest and in the Hautes Côtes we had a higher level of total acidity than potential alcohol!”

VINTAGE ASSESSMENT

As the tasting notes attest, the best '71s are still magnificent. These are complete wines that have complex aromatics and are balanced, rich and harmonious, with energy, grip and focus. Of course age and storage variation have taken their toll, and 750 ml bottles can be irregular. The hail also affected some wines, and where the bottling was done barrel by barrel there can be significant bottle variation. Additionally, especially among wines from growers who had yet to equip their *cuvées* with even rudimentary temperature controls, the wines can show noticeable levels of volatile acidity.

1975

● RED: NO STARS
○ CÔTE D'OR WHITE: NO STARS
★ ★ ★ ★ ★ CHABLIS

QUICK TAKE

1975 was the worst vintage in the Côte d'Or since 1968. A miserable end to an incessantly rainy growing season produced distinctly rot-tinged and unripe reds and whites. The quality was so bad that Jadot, for example, produced no reds and only three whites, while Domaine Marquis d'Angerville took the unusual step of declassifying all their reds to *villages* level. Paul Pernot said, "The quality of the chardonnay was so bad that we didn't bottle most of them and the pinot was so rotten that we didn't even bother to harvest it." Gérard Boudot was no kinder, noting that the botrytis was so severe at harvest that "it was as though we could see the fruit rotting before our eyes." Not surprisingly it is difficult to find anything worth drinking from the Côte d'Or.

In contrast, Chablis, which avoided the September rains, produced excellent wines that can still drink quite well.

1978

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ RED
★ ★ ★ WHITE

QUICK TAKE

1978 is the greatest vintage of the decade for red wines, and in our view the best between 1962 and 1999. An up and down growing season was marked by a troubled flowering that materially reduced yields, and by cooler than normal temperatures. The relatively low yields would turn out to be a benefit as the vines were still able to bring the fruit to fine levels of ripeness despite the cool conditions. 1978 would also be among the last harvests officially declared in October in both Côtes, and the wines reflect this, retaining firm cores of acidity and tannin despite the unusually long hang times. At their best, the '78 reds are classic Burgundies of grace, harmony and complexity. The legendary Henri Jayer called 1978 (along with 1949 and 1985) "one of the finest vintages I ever made." Great reds were made in both Côtes and at all levels of the appellation hierarchy. The best wines, though fully mature, were still drinking perfectly 40 years after the vintage and should hold their peaks for quite some time.

The whites, from both the Côte d'Or and Chablis, good as they are, cannot match the quality of the reds. They were nonetheless very fine, well-structured and had excellent acidity. While many are in gentle decline, a few still drink exceptionally well.

1989

★ ★ ★ RED
★ ★ ★ WHITE

QUICK TAKE

The 1989 reds and whites were much praised almost immediately following the harvest—yet in surprisingly few cases have the results justified the early acclaim.

The growing season was warm, then very hot and mostly dry, and these conditions carried through the harvest, producing a large crop of pinot and a smaller one for chardonnay. The style of the '89s reflects the elevated warmth of the vintage: the reds are ripe but low in acidity and often display roasted notes. Although they are rich and full-bodied, many also possess somewhat green tannins as a result of hydric stress. Still there were some successes, which are harmonious, delicious and seductive, though at this point they will not benefit from further aging.

The whites were also quite variable. Meursault and Corton-Charlemagne were more successful than most appellations, but overall the '89s are extremely rich, opulent, low-acid wines that too often are top-heavy and lack refinement, and most are in decline. But the best producers—including Coche-Dury, DRC, Ramonet, Lafon and Raveneau among others—made exceptional wines. However, even these have become subject to the vagaries of age, though superb bottles can still be found.

AN UNUSUALLY PRECOCIOUS START TO THE growing season boded well for an early harvest. Other than some frost damage in Gevrey, Meursault, the Hill of Corton and Chablis, the weather was clement, with bud break occurring around the beginning of April. Fair conditions continued for several months, broken only by a windy and cool first week of June, which caused a significant amount of shatter and shot berries in chardonnay. The pinot crop was later to flower and had no such problems; it was both uniform and plentiful.

Dry and warm but not torrid temperatures continued through July with *véraison* occurring at the end of the month. The good weather was punctuated by episodic hail that affected Meursault, where according to Pierre Morey it hit mostly the north side of the commune and in particular Santenots. Corton-Charlemagne was also struck, and Jean-François Coche said it affected all three communes. In addition Chablis was grievously hit. The general pattern of hot and dry conditions continued in August, although just enough sporadic rain fell to prevent hydric stress in those vineyards that retain water well. In the better-draining sites though, drought problems caused the vines to shut down temporarily, affecting the character and quality of the result.

VINTAGE ASSESSMENT

1997 produced reds and whites of nearly equal quality—which is rarer in Burgundy than one might think. The whites were accessible almost from the time that they were released, with good richness, concentration and volume but limited acidity and transparency to the underlying *terroir*; ultimately, they lacked refinement. While they did add depth with time in bottle, they also tended to become softer and somewhat fat, if not actually heavy.

At 20+ years of age; not even the best '97 whites will benefit from additional bottle age. The finest wines came from those *terroirs* that naturally preserve acidity well, including Corton-Charlemagne, Montrachet, Chevalier-Montrachet and Meursault Perrières. Yet even among these, picking dates remained important to quality. Chablis, despite its more northerly position, did no better and, while there is nothing particularly amiss, neither are the wines distinguished. The '97 whites initially reminded some observers of the '92s, but they did not develop as well, becoming more ponderous with age. Too many of them also followed the '96s in succumbing to premature oxidation. As a result it is difficult to find '97s that are pleasurable to drink, whether due to fatigue or the high incidence of premoxy.

The reds range from very good to terrible, and neither Côte did significantly better than the other. When they're good, they can be quite rich and seductively textured, as very ripe vintages often are. When they're not, they can be stewed, excessively tannic or even green while displaying significant warmth on the flat, low acid finishes. Worse, more than a few wines are plagued with technical faults such as volatile acidity and *brettanomyces*. Some reds even have metallic finishes due to ill-advised attempts at acidification that only served to exacerbate the clipped and drying finishes.

Almost all '97 reds have reached their apogees. Although a few may repay several more years of cellaring, the majority are drinking as well as they ever will, and some are declining; virtually all are best drunk before age 30.

QUICK TAKE

2010 may be the most surprising vintage since 1991. The growing season was distinctly cool and difficult, yet almost inexplicably the wines possess remarkably ripe and fine tannins along with balanced levels of alcohol and acidity and an extraordinary, almost crystalline, *terroir* transparency.

The difficulties began even before the growing season, as a severe frost in December 2009 destroyed vines primarily in a band near the old Route Nationale, now the D974, stretching from Nuits to Gevrey (elsewhere, damage was limited). Changeable springtime weather led to an extended and disrupted flowering, a high incidence of shatter and shot berries and, eventually, very low yields. A rainy July was followed by a dry, cool and overcast August and a late *véraison*. Conditions improved in September, but the late-month harvest was cool and interrupted by rain.

Somehow out of this inauspicious season, great red wines were produced—most likely as a result of low yields, a high solid-to-liquid ratio and remarkably good phenolic maturity that developed despite the unsettled conditions. The reds are highly energetic, concentrated and serious. Yet they are also refined despite the presence of relatively dense tannins, and their power is largely hidden by their grace and refinement. Although wines from lesser appellations were starting to be drinkable after five years in bottle, the better ones were still improving, and the best are not likely to reach their apogees until the mid-2020s or later.

The whites, including those from Chablis, are of high quality but more variable than the reds. A powerful electrical storm struck Santenoy, Chassagne and Saint-Aubin on September 12th.

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1910 to 1913

The Prewar Period: Reconstruction Continues

Reconstruction of the vineyards continued into the new decade, and there were some fitful steps toward modernization. The era also opened with the worst vintage in memory followed by one of the best.

Modest improvements to viticulture and winemaking continued during this period. Now that so many vineyards had been replanted in orderly rows with metal wires to support the vines, new businesses popped up to provide innovative support for the new viticulture. In the years before the war, *matériel vitivinicole* (winegrowing and winemaking equipment) became increasingly available, including mechanical destemmer/crushers, pumps, chemical fertilizers, and

back-carried scuba tank-like sprayers for various vineyard treatments along with other enhancements.

Change was also occurring in the winemaking process. There was increased demand for new wooden fermenters from producers seeking to limit the duration of the *cuvaison* but still make firmly tannic and age-worthy red wines. White wine producers ordered them as well, though with the goal of providing a more hygienic fermentation environment. Typically during this era, once the fermentation was concluded, the wine was then racked into older wood.

However, progress soon came to a halt. The war was the obvious defining event of the decade, and it is discussed

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1970 to 1979

Burgundy Loses Its Way

As the decade opened, Burgundy was slowly poisoning itself.

The soil through which vines draw nutrients was becoming sterile. Though little recognized at the time, the combination of powerful, inexpensive herbicides, pesticides and cryptogamic sprays was poisoning the soil. It was also being plowed less and heavier tractors were constantly in the vineyards, compacting the soil and squeezing the life out of the microfauna and flora that are the vines' critical support system.

At the same time, overly prolific clones were being widely planted and yields were then further boosted by ever more potent fertilizers. Dilute wines, both red and white, were an inevitable result. And the potassium buildup from these chemical fertilizers was adversely affecting wine pHs as well, requiring ever greater doses of sulfur dioxide at bottling, which robs wines of their color and hardens the structure.

Production figures for AOC-eligible wines in the Côte d'Or provide compelling evidence. Average annual production from 1951 to 1960 was 29 hl/ha; by the 1970 to 1979 period, it had risen to 40.7 hl/ha (and it would continue to increase; the comparable figure for the decade of the 1980s would be 44.8 hl/ha).

of the AOC laws. But the postwar years saw that idea trivialized—or perhaps bastardized is a better word. Even if a *négociant's* Échézeaux now all came from Échézeaux, often it was just a pale imitation of what a *grand cru* wine from that vineyard should be.

Nor had the era of enhanced Burgundies ever really ended. Many less scrupulous *négociants* still practiced it, as did bottlers outside France. If the wine was thin, weakly colored and underripe, as it too often was, cutting it with low-priced but ripe and robust wine from Algeria or elsewhere was easy enough. “Before 1973 most of the wine that was being sold as Burgundy was nothing of the sort,” as Russell Hone, a member of the English wine trade at the time, explained to Allen. “It was heavy, alcoholic, rich and generally pretty awful, in fact so much so that any resemblance to the real article was at best coincidental. Moreover, this practice had been going on for so long that the average Englishman honestly believed this concocted style was what Burgundy was supposed to taste like. When England was subjected to the same wine laws as were in effect in Europe in 1973, the practice of buying and then cutting this excess production had to stop, at least legally. The real irony of the situation though



1990 to 1999

A Focus on Quality Ushers in a New Era for Reds but Premature Oxidation Afflicts the Whites

The most critical developments of the decade, which emerged after years of gestation, were not breakthroughs in technology but revolutions in collective perception. As growers learned to approach key aspects of viticulture and vinification with a fresh perspective, the effects on quality were transformational. Combined with relatively benign weather (for Burgundy), these significant changes produced a decade of reds whose average quality was remarkably high — though sadly, the same cannot be said for the whites.

The single most critical development of the decade was the widespread adoption of sorting tables. Although they had become progressively more sophisticated during the 1980s, in the early 1990s sorting tables were still viewed by most growers as too expensive and unnecessary. They believed effective sorting could be done by the pickers in the vineyards — the way it had “always been done.”

This was not the only reason for resisting their adoption. Even though commentators as far back as Jules Guyot, writing in 1860, strongly advocated using only fruit that was both ripe and clean, the traditional way of making Burgundy, be it red or white, was to use not only ripe but also underripe and even rot-tinged bunches. The justification was that the underripe fruit was a source of acidity and the rot-tinged fruit (which was often dehydrated to a degree) was a source of sugar, both of which complemented the attributes of the ripe fruit. The real reason of course was economic: if you were selling your wine to a *négociant*, you wanted as much volume as possible and quality wasn't your primary concern.

Sometimes it requires failure to persuade people that change is necessary; in this case it took the difficult 1994 vintage to induce a radical change in attitude and approach. In 1994 there were three kinds of berries at harvest time:

impossible to sort the fruit thoroughly and rapidly in the vineyards. It was not lost on recalcitrant growers that their neighbors who possessed sorting tables made much better wines.

This alone would not have made a difference, had it not been for the continued spread of domaine bottling and the demonstrably higher prices quality-conscious growers received. As it became clear that those who employed sorting tables made significantly better-quality wines (and got better prices) than those who did not, a reassessment began. This resulted in widespread adoption of sorting tables, which though hardly technological marvels proved to be the single greatest contributor to improved quality for red Burgundy in decades. (While it has helped the quality of the whites as well, the change has been less profound, because the skins are rarely used in vinifying the whites.)

Another critical change in thinking that grew out of the focus on using only clean, ripe fruit, was the reevaluation of what constituted ripe fruit. For centuries the most important gauge of ripeness had been sugar levels, measured as the degree of potential alcohol. But during the 1990s the focus shifted to phenolic maturity as being even more important.

To understand this shift, a bit of background is necessary. Phenolic maturity refers to the relative ripeness of the phenols (a term that includes several compounds such as anthocyanins and, most importantly, tannins) in the skins and seeds (and less crucially stems and pulp), which can impart bitter flavors and aromas if not fully mature. Sugar ripeness is easily measured, whereas phenolic maturity has largely been determined by observation, namely tasting the fruit in the vineyards (though more scientific measures are being developed). And because sug-

Véraison. This is the time when grapes begin to turn color, and the push toward final ripening begins. While every vintage is slightly different, the rule of thumb in Burgundy is that the harvest will begin a little more than six weeks (45 days) after *véraison*. Grape skins are especially sensitive at the moment of *véraison* and can easily be damaged by insects, and even careless vineyard workers.

WITH INTRIGUING AND INTERESTING TEXT BOXES:

Enology Education. One positive change that grew out of phylloxera's devastation was the recognition that viticulture and winemaking needed to be based on science rather than tradition and the received wisdom from prior generations. This led to the founding of the *Lycée Viticole de Beaune* in 1884 to facilitate the spread of scientific knowledge. While it was open to all, it was primarily a school for the privileged until the 1950s. Today it is rare to find a young Burgundian *vigneron* who has not attended *le viti*.

Time Doesn't Always Help. Lalou Bize-Leroy has professed that “time supplies what the sun did not.” Sometimes this turns out to be true, but not always. Paul Pernot recounts that “we bottled a few magnums of our '77 Bâtard just for the fun of it even though it was pretty bad. Shortly thereafter we took one to our vacation home, where it was promptly forgotten. In 2015 we found the magnum behind a box in a makeshift cellar with poor conditions. Even though we thought that it would probably be dead, we decided to open it to see and amazingly enough, it hadn't changed a bit, which is to say that it was still terrible!”

Extreme Heat. Exceptionally hot vintages have been rare in Burgundy (prior to the 21st century), and vintages as dry as 1976 have been rarer still. From a viticultural perspective, both cool, wet conditions and hot, dry ones can engender problems that are paradoxically similar. Overly wet and cool weather interferes with photosynthetic activity, making it difficult for the fruit to ripen; too much heat can produce the same result. In the latter case, the vines' leaves begin to transpire too much moisture through the stomata, so in order to prevent the vine from dying through dehydration, the stomata close, limiting water loss but effectively shutting down photosynthesis. This explains why some reds in vintages such as 1976, 1990, 1997 and 2003 can exhibit the odd combination of overripe cooked fruit aromas and flavors that possess an under-ripe greenish edge to the supporting tannins. The Burgundians call this process maturation by evaporation, which can also affect whites.

This problem is pronounced in wines made from young vines that have not developed root systems deep enough to access water sources well below the surface.

Color and Rot. Should you try an '83 red that has an unusually light color in your glass, the chances are high that you will encounter rot-tinged aromas. Why? Because enzymes associated with rot work to degrade color over time.

Satisfying the Customer (Continued). Selling wine wasn't always an easy business. In *Viniana*, Charles Walter Berry recounted the story of one of his customers, whom he described as an "old and friendly client, but one who never seemed to realise the necessity of meeting his obligations." To recoup what was owed, Berry's firm was forced to send a letter threatening the client with "severe measures" to which he replied:

"Gentlemen,

Your letter with enclosure has given me a terrible shock, so much so that I shall require help to overcome it; therefore I beg you to send me six dozen of the best Burgundy at once. I return the offending document, to which you are at liberty to add the cost of the wine and then do your damndest."

Rot Treatments Advance. While some *vignerons* had used anti-rot remedies (primarily sulfur- and copper-based products) in earlier vintages, 1980 was the first year in which new nonorganic and systemic forms of treatment became widespread. Jean-Nicolas Méo told Allen that Henri Mayer used the new anti-botrytis sprays and reported no rot. Many other growers viewed the new treatments with suspicion and had serious problems as a result. To be fair, these treatments are not consequence-free, as they harden the grape skins and thus delay maturities; depending on the late season weather, delayed maturities can lead to missing an optimal picking window or, worse, fruit that never completely ripens. While these fungicides clearly helped growers produce better-quality wines in 1980 and several succeeding vintages, concerns have grown in recent years about the potential health risks they pose. Ironically some growers claim that vineyards where anti-rot treatments have been used recurrently sometimes produce wines that suffer from *moisissure*, or a moldy smell or taste, which is precisely what the treatments were designed to prevent!

Hot Vintages. One common misperception about a region where, in the majority of vintages, grapes struggle to achieve full ripeness, is that when a growing season is exceptionally hot, the resulting wines must be good or even great. This misperception is shared not only among outside observers but often among growers themselves. Yet in many such vintages the extreme heat causes vines to shut down due to hydric stress (what the Burgundians call *bloquage*). If the heat is prolonged the grapes may achieve physiological (sugar) but not phenolic (tannins and acidity) ripeness, leaving herbaceous or even unripe elements in the resulting wine. For example, wines suffered from *bloquage* in the notably hot and often very dry vintages of 1976, 1990, 1997 and 2003.

In addition the ripe grapes may impart intense fruit flavors but sometimes also roasted notes, and the acidity may be sufficiently low and the

Provignage. Burgundy vineyards in 1845 looked nothing like they do today. There were no evenly spaced rows of vines but rather plants growing in every direction. This was called *en foule*, meaning in a mass or crowd, and was the result of propagation by a system called *provignage*, which had been practiced in Burgundy for centuries. Under this system the trunks of selected vines (usually the most productive and hardy), called *provins*, were laid flat and buried in a trench dug next to the base of the vine. These *provins* would then produce new roots and new shoots. Because they were laid out wherever there was free space, eventually the vines grew everywhere and became incredibly dense—about 250% to 300% more so than today. Among other things, this system lowered grape production per vine because the competition for resources among the densely planted vines forced the roots to push ever deeper in search of nourishment. It did modestly raise potential alcohol levels owing to greater sugar

Tournage. Enormous damage can be caused by the atmospheric electricity released during a thunderstorm or hailstorm, particularly when fruit is approaching optimum ripeness. The electricity can cause the skins to turn rapidly from the natural gold green of mature, ripe chardonnay to rose, then deep gold, then splotchy brown and finally to chocolate. The Burgundians call this phenomenon *tournage*. Electrical storms early in a growing season rarely have a deleterious effect, as grape skins that are thick and green are not usually affected. But the closer the grapes are to being harvested, the thinner the skins, the riper the polyphenols and the more easily they can be damaged. Electrical storms that strike close to harvest time can ruin an entire crop.

The effects of *tournage* have been known for centuries but only recently has a scientific explanation been given. It is caused by electrically charged, atmospheric

Écrivains. These small but highly destructive beetles were called *écrivains* (writers) by the *vignerons* because the patterns that they created in the vine foliage often resembled letters of the alphabet. Using their mandibles the beetles would normally cut the leaves in a straight line, but when several of their incisions intersected it sometimes created shapes that evoked the letters V, A, L, I or N. The damage could be enormous, and the difficult-to-kill *écrivains* plagued many vintages, including 1863, 1864, 1865, 1874, 1875, 1876, 1877 and 1881. In 1870, Inspector General of Agriculture Gustave