

An exceptional work of fabulous depth and breadth

Burgundy Vintages: A History from 1845 Allen D Meadows and Douglas E Barzelay

Published by Burghound Books;
available only through burghoundbooks.com
584 pages; \$79.99 / £61.28 / €73.78

REVIEWED BY
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Burgundy *Vintages: A History from 1845* is, not unexpectedly, a weighty tome. Not that we rate books by the ounce, of course. Before I took a look inside, I expected a very fine book—and this is truly an exceptional work. There is a fabulous depth and breadth to this book, which fully justifies its long gestation period.

The collaboration between Allen Meadows and Doug Barzelay is the crux of the matter. Two opinions, frequently similar in their conclusions, but expressed differently. Two slightly different philosophical approaches to tasting wine. One who has made his living out of it, and one who has made a sufficiently good living elsewhere to be able to afford some great bottles. And who is fortunate enough to be of a generation when it was still possible to buy great wines at more or less manageable prices.

Allen Meadows, the Burghound, is the better known of the two to the Burgundy-loving public, largely through his Burghound newsletter. He is a meticulous researcher, as well as an indefatigable taster, and his writings reflect these approaches. The style is dry, reflecting more the terroir of Chablis than Pouilly-Fuissé, one might suggest. Doug Barzelay has an informal online wine newsletter called *Old Vine Notes*. He doesn't post often, but his interventions are worthy of attention, and he writes fluently, with depth and insight. I can feel his input especially in the earlier sections of the book, where

the tasting notes are infrequent and the historical commentary more to the fore.

It has taken time to put *Vintages* together—the best part of ten years, as Allen first had the idea at least a decade ago. I remember him mentioning to me that he was going to write a book on vintages and was asking the producers if they had anything old and interesting that they might want to share. And I also remember cursing my own stupidity at not having thought of that plan myself earlier! This was around the time that Doug Barzelay was retiring from his legal practice and preparing to devote himself to his passion for wine. They were regular tasting companions in New York, and so the plan for a joint venture emerged.

Doug came to Burgundy, as so many people, from an initial love of Bordeaux. Being disappointed in young Burgundy vintages such as 1983, he went back to more mature bottles and discovered some great wines in the process—wines that had needed time to become what they were intended to be.

Thoughtful insights

We should manage expectations first, because the only reason not to buy this book is if it does not reflect your areas of interest. It isn't a guide to what you should be buying, and it won't tell you who makes the best Aligoté. *Vintages* isn't trying to do any of those things. The vast majority of tasting notes cover the ultimate blue-chip wines, though the claim is made in the introduction that “our tasting notes are full of 95+ point wines from obscure producers or mediocre vintages that did not cost a great deal of money.”

The introductory pages tell us about our two authors and set out the rules of the game: vintage appraisals with reference to multiple sources—and it is indeed impressive how thoroughly these are integrated into the narrative. There are some thoughtful insights as to how to go about evaluating vintages, too, followed by an explanation of how the tasting notes work and a few words

on scores. Meadows and Barzelay both use the 100-point system, and their assessments are rarely vastly different—it's all the more interesting when they do not agree, in fact. The vast majority of wines have tasting notes from both authors, frequently but not automatically tasted on the same occasions. There is a little bit of repartee from time to time, without falling into the trap of being too obviously “pally.” Here is one that I liked from Doug about Allen's notes. Allen is trying to find nice things to say about an 1895 Corton, starting, “The expressive nose has gone entirely tertiary...” and giving it 88 points. Doug responds: “The Hound is being uncharacteristically generous. To reproduce my note in full: ‘Dead.’ Not rated.”

The main body of the book is a fabulous excursion through the history of Burgundy wine across a century and a half. After a preliminary survey of the early history of the wines of Burgundy (skin color?), the book proper starts with an appraisal of 1845—a pretty miserable vintage. The point here is that the oldest wine that Allen and Doug have tasted was Jadot's Clos de Vougeot (in fact ex-Champy stock), narrowly pipping 1846 Chablis and Meursault from Bouchard Père & Fils.

Each chapter, normally covering a decade, starts with the news of the period, technical advances, economic

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conditions, changes in wine styles—whatever might be relevant to the wines of the moment.

Each vintage is discussed, beginning with any contemporary assessments, or indeed those of subsequent major authorities. Messrs Meadows and Barzelay then add their own take, which has emerged over years of sampling the wines. Their rating of some vintages has varied as the decades pass—1952 has overtaken 1953, for example: “The ’53s had the edge for the first 30 years or so, and the ’52s have had the edge since then” (p.222). I slightly suspect that this may be about to happen with the ’78s and ’76s, albeit at 40 years on, though Meadows and Barzelay remain firmly in the 1978 camp.

Vintages get an assessment of zero to five stars. Don’t be in a hurry to nip out and buy anything from 1851, 1852, 1860, 1866, 1871, 1879, 1882, 1896, 1901, 1902, 1903, 1905, 1909, 1910, 1913, 1917, 1927, 1931, 1936, 1944, 1951, 1956, 1960, 1963, 1965, 1968, 1974 (red), 1975 (except Chablis), 1977, or 1984 (red), which between them garner not a single star.

Five-star vintages are rarer: 1846, 1858, 1865, 1869, 1906, 1911, 1915, 1923, 1929, 1934, 1945, 1949, 1962, and in the period from 1971, when the two colors are rated separately, 1978, 1999, 2005, and 2015 in red but nothing in white.

Cautionary notes, beautiful tidbits

One issue that should not be skirted is that of fraudulent bottles. It is addressed in the opening words under the heading “Reconditioned, Adulterated, Fraudulent or Genuine?” Much of this section is about legitimate

reconditioning and historical adulteration. Rudy Kurniawan then hovers into sight, alongside a discussion of how bottles have been faked, how it can be difficult to discern from the look of the bottle what is fake, and indeed how there may be “false positives” (my phrase). Some may feel that there should have been a little more declaration concerning the number of wines drunk by Allen Meadows in the company of Rudy Kurniawan and John Kapon. It was, however, Doug Barzelay who contacted Laurent Ponsot to advise him of the fraudulent bottles of 1959 Clos St-Denis being offered at auction, which was instrumental in the unraveling of the Kurniawan saga. My spies on the New York wine scene tell me that there are still a distressing number of fake bottles of grand wines in circulation.

There are subsequent references to bottles that were clearly fraudulent and spotted as such, including text boxes in the 1945 and 1949 vintage assessments titled “Caveat Emptor” (p.190) and “A Cautionary Note” (p.209). I was intrigued also by the half-bottle that appears on p.233, which had been (impossibly) labeled as 1955 Flagey-Echezeaux 1er Cru.

If you feel like pushing your envy button, check out the occasional boxes headed “Wines of a Lifetime” or “Memorable Moments”—you can imagine the sorts of wines and occasions involved—as well as those titled “If Only We Had a Time Machine,” in which we can see what prices for some of these great wines used to be.

It is important to feel sympathetic to our authors, though, as not everything goes their way. Poor Doug has had “mixed luck” with the 1934 La Tâche, as he details the half-dozen times he has tried the wine. But if you need a serious attack of jealousy, take a look at what the intrepid pair have been tasting from 1945. A wide selection of Domaine de la Romanée-Conti wines naturally, Bonnes Mares and Amoureuses from Georges Roumier, Clos de la Roche from Ponsot and Clos Vougeot from Engel. Mixed in with these are some theoretically lesser stars, and I would have been interested to try the Chassagne-Montrachet Rouge Clos de la Boudriotte from Domaine Ramonet.

The topics covered include dramatically rising auction prices, diseases in the vineyard, the move toward organics and biodynamics, alternative closures, and reductive winemaking. These discussions are lucidly handled and are well worth the attention of any Burgundian student

The notes on the 1947 carry some extra enthusiasm as the Barzelay birth year. The Burghound was not so fortunate with ’54, though a bit of selective dyslexia might have helped.

It isn’t all about dry assessments. There are some beautiful tidbits, such as the box on p.74 titled “All in a Day’s Work.” From this we learn that the working day chez Bouchard for those at the press during harvest in 1890 lasted from 6am to 7pm and was rewarded with the princely sum of 4 francs, plus a bottle of wine at breakfast, another at the 11am lunch break, with overtime of 40 centimes per hour if work was needed after 7pm.

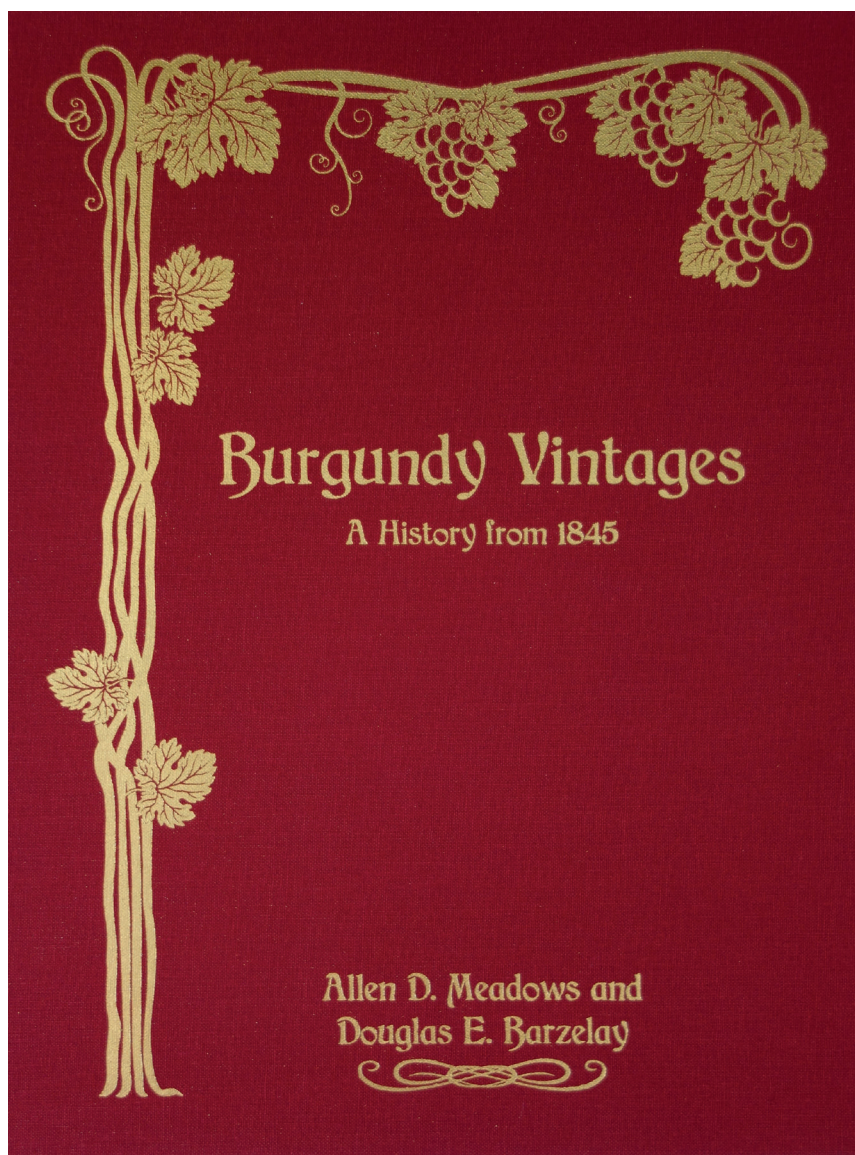
There’s another amusing anecdote on p.163 about the date of the hunting season in 1936. But some observations have a more serious background. Stories of damage inflicted during the war (see p.173) cast a pall. Apparently, the main source for this was a haunting letter from the Marquis d’Angerville to American collector Henry Hollis, which showed a level of human distress that is not so easy to reproduce on the page some three quarters of a century later.

Everybody will pick out their own little gems that will resonate. This is from André Simon on the 1909 vintage: “They acquired a faint bitterness with age and a more objectionable rabbit-hutch bouquet at a later stage.” Might this be related to the mousiness that is currently being found in some sulfur-free wines?

Contemporary relevance

The chapter on the 1970s is headed “Burgundy Loses Its Way”—high yields and overfertilization coupled with

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herbicides and pesticides: I don't think many would disagree with that overall assessment. The authors play down the phenomenon that the wines of certain producers (especially in the Côte de Nuits) suffered badly from a lack of balance in the latter part of the decade, apart from the mention that "many of the standout producers in 1971, among them de Vogüé, Rousseau, Trapet, Clair-Daü, and Faiveley—made significantly better wines in 1971 than in 1978."

The 1980s are titled "Back to the Future: A Return to Tradition." Now we enter the period when the authors were visiting Burgundy regularly and seeing the vintages as they unfolded. It was also the moment for the famous young generation—here Christophe Roumier and Dominique Lafon get

the plaudits, but there were of course many others. From this point on, there is less need to reference other experts, since the authors have had their own first-hand experience from the start. The volume of tasting notes bloom, but as from the beginning, it is the insights, text boxes, and commentary that provide the most interesting reading.

The 1990s Vintage Comparison box (p.396) is intriguing because it shows how, in the opinion of the authors, the various vintages of the decade performed. They felt that, at the outset, the general opinion would have been 1990 and 1999; then 1993 and 1996 and 1995, then 1991 and 1998, followed by 1997, 1992, and in last place 1994. A group gathered in 2016 to taste a dozen top wines from 1990, 1991, 1993, 1996, and 1999. The conclusion from this tasting was that

1999 was out in front, followed by 1991, with 1990 a mixed bunch, 1996 disappointing, and 1993 in transition. An interesting take, though I personally think that the best of 1996 (in both colors) is still to come.

Naturally, any discussion of recent white vintages is heavily affected by the sad story of premature oxidation, which is dealt with at some length. It is not quite nailed down—I don't think it can be—and there is no suggestion that the issue is behind us. Nor do the authors subscribe to the theory that it may be a temporary phenomenon that can pass with time.

From 2000 to 2009, we learn that "Quality Escalates, as Do Prices: New Challenges Emerge." The topics covered here include dramatically rising auction prices, diseases in the vineyard, the move toward organics and biodynamics, alternative closures, and reductive winemaking. These discussions are lucidly handled and are well worth the attention of any Burgundian student, however knowledgeable. The final decade—half decade, in fact, as 2015 is the last vintage assessed—is headed "Tradition, Change, and the Future," with tasting notes being omitted from 2013 onward, since the wines are so recent. Instead, each vintage is summed up under a "First Impressions" heading. On the thematic side, the succession of short vintages, the astronomic price of vineyard land, the UNESCO Climats project, high-tech sorting tables, and the rise of négociant bottlings by successful domaines all get an airing. Fill up on these musings, along with the technical text boxes that dot the pages. This book is not just about the ancient vintages.

In their conclusion, beneath an image of the two of them at a tasting in a stone cellar, Messrs Meadows and Barzelay note that "Burgundy is ever changing, and ever tied to its past, as is each and every bottle that is opened and savoured."

In my conclusion, this is a fabulous book that illuminates the story of Burgundian wine over the best part of two centuries. You may or may not be interested in knowing exactly how 1945 Romanée-Conti tasted in April 2007. But do not miss the opportunity to drink deeply of the knowledge and wisdom of this experienced pair.