

White Burgundy 2011 vintage report: Jeannie Cho Lee MW

by Jeannie Cho Lee

After an erratic spring and summer, and an especially early harvest, there were concerns that the 2011 vintage would be too light. Were those fears realised? Jeannie Cho Lee MW reports



(Monday 4 February 2013) 2011 is a vintage for those who prefer elegance and purity over power and concentration. It is the size of the wine that worried some white wine producers – many whites were willowy and gentle with low alcohol and modest acidity levels. This contrasts with the past several vintages – 2010, 2009 and the 2008 – where the overall frame and size of the wine was bigger. With the 2011s now either in bottle or about to be bottled, the wines have gained stature and flesh, though they will remain slim. What the best 2011 whites offer are seductive delicate flavours, purity of expression and delightful aromatics.

The 2011 whites were a joy to taste. What impressed me was how charming and balanced many of the wines were given the challenging summer weather. A hot, dry spring was followed by good flowering, but July and most of August had bouts of heavy rain, high humidity and heat spikes. Conscientious growers were vigilant to keep botrytis and other fungal diseases at bay. The 2011 harvest was the earliest since 2003 for many growers, including Benoît Droin. Most in Chablis picked early – some at the end of August and many in the first week of September.

The harvest date was crucial in determining quality in 2011. Bouchard said its Chardonnay was picked after the Pinot Noir in early September. Most growers had to chaptalise to get 12% to 12.5% alcohol levels. There were hardly any

whites with naturally high sugar levels. Depending on vineyard management and harvest date, the whites can be balanced, pure and delicate, or dilute and short.

Appealing results

In Chablis, 2011 is a good vintage that may not have the longevity of the 2010s or the 2008s, but has immediate drinking appeal; wines possess purity and clarity of expression. Similarly, in the Côte d'Or, where I spent two weeks and returned with nearly 700 tasting notes, the clarity of terroir expression among the top producers is brilliant. The expressions are clearer than even the 2010s because of the vintage's openness and softer acidity.

Top Puligny-Montrachet whites were charming even at the village level, including those from Etienne Sauzet, Jacques Carillon, Domaine Leflaive and Château de Puligny-Montrachet. Despite the weather, assiduous vignerons harvested Chardonnay with delicate, layered flavours at low alcohol and moderate acidity. At Domaine Leflaive, 2011 was the earliest harvest in history, beginning on 25 August and finishing six days later.

Despite the early harvest, there was a long time between flowering and harvest – about 110 days. Most flowering occurred in mid-May. Vignerons made comparisons with the 2007 vintage where similar conditions also led to early flowering.

Summer weather was erratic: off and on heavy showers and thunderstorms, alternate periods of coolness and sudden high temperatures, such as the heat spike in June that peaked at 40°C, and high humidity. Ripening came late, and even by early August was not complete. Hail was not a serious issue except in Côte Chalonnaise, in particular Rully and to a lesser extent Montagny.

Reminders of 2007

While comparisons with 2007 are common, the 2011 whites are more exuberant and expressive at this stage. The drinking window of many 2011s is wider, starting earlier and for some, longer than the 2007s. Jérôme Flous of Faiveley says: 'At the village level, we had rot because the soil stayed wet and humid. On stony soils and on most grand cru sites, the soil dried quickly and rot was not an issue. Our best whites are pure and aromatic.'

Village Meursault is round and approachable, and perhaps a bit easy. However, top producers, such as Arnaud Ente and Guy Roulot, crafted Meursaults that have the focus of the 2010s and the accessible flavours of the 2009s. Their best have elegance and precision with lower alcohol, glycerol and body. Packed with flavour, the 2011s are trimmer but no less delicious and balanced.

The best news about the 2011 whites is that yields were good – most reported them as being between average to slightly higher than average. This was not

the case for the reds (see my red Burgundy 2011 vintage report, next month). I tasted only a handful of unbalanced or dilute wines, even from the massive portfolio of large negociants.

The 2011 whites are not homogenous, however, and some wines are thin and lacking in flavour. Philippe Prost, winemaker at Bouchard Père et Fils, warns: 'In 2011, one needs to take care because purity can be neutral, like crystal water. Each decision taken in 2011 was very important.'

My conclusion is that 2011 whites have wonderful purity, expressiveness and aromatic appeal. Most of the wines have found balance in their slimness and have masses of drinking appeal. With moderate acidity and low malic levels, these wines are not for long-term cellaring, but I will be buying them. The 2011 whites are a celebration of slimness – a declaration that white Burgundy is just as seductive when it whispers as when it shouts.