

BURGUNDY 2014: VINTAGE REPORT

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The winter between 2013 and 2014 hardly happened at all. It was wet to begin with, drier later, but rarely cold. Spring got underway rapidly during a warm March and the first vegetation appeared exceptionally early, suggesting a repetition of the cycle of 2007 and 2011. While the weather remained largely clement in April, May was a little cooler and the cycle slowed. Indeed there were frost fears which very nearly caused damage in Chablis around 11th/12th May. One or two outlying spots may have been slightly affected throughout Burgundy.

The bizarre part of the weather pattern through the spring was that the wind blew, often quite forcefully, either from the north or the south, so either cold and dry or warm and dry, yet never switched to the western airflow which brings humidity. Vine growth slowed, especially for the old vines, and it began to look as if the flowering might become strung out, though at least there was a healthy set of fruit. Then a period of exceptionally hot weather, especially over the weekend of Pentecôte (Whitsun) allowed the flowering to happen very rapidly and very successfully – though it was in fact too hot in Chablis and caused some of the embryo grapes to abort.

For once the growers were happy: the prospect of a full crop with a relatively early harvest, perhaps around 10th September, and no disease pressure in the vineyards. As June progressed, spirits rose, perhaps the weather gods were for once going to breathe favourably on Burgundy. After the catastrophic storms in 2012 and 2013 which had done so much damage in Meursault, Volnay, Pommard, Beaune, and Savigny, surely better luck was in store this year? But no, the clouds rolled in on Saturday 28th June bringing several waves of hail, once again trashing the vineyards of Meursault, Volnay, Pommard and Beaune.

This year there was some damage in the Côte de Nuits as well, especially in Echezeaux and Clos de Vougeot, while separate storms affected the northern part of the Mâconnais, around Chardonnay and Lugny.

Happily there were no further serious storms for the rest of the summer, though they threatened throughout July, when warm and sunny days alternated with a mix of showers and storms. This relatively inclement weather continued into August, with a noticeable drop in temperature from the middle of the month (fires at home every evening from the 14th!). Though other disease pressure had been avoided, growers began to worry about rot instead and véraison struggled to go through evenly. Harvest dates began to recede.

As August gave way to September the weather warmed up once again and was largely sunny, though occasional showers persisted. Nonetheless the forecast was good for the rest of the month, optimism returned and harvest dates began to creep forwards again as samples showed sugar levels developing faster than expected. The very first pickers could be seen in the Mâconnais over the weekend of 6th/7th September and a few people began tentatively in the Côte de Beaune during the following week, but 'Le Grand Départ' was signalled from the 13th.

The weather remained consistently warm, tempered by a coolish northern breeze through to close of play on Tuesday 16th, with the following day equally warm but becoming muggier with a change in wind direction. The Côte de Nuits was fully underway by now, growers hoping that some storms and showers forecast for later in the week would not materialise in any significant form.

Thursday proved to be fine during the day until spectacular electrical storms with locally heavy rain appeared after dark, and further very heavy showers accompanied by rumbles of thunder punctuated most of Friday 19th. Saturday and Sunday were somewhat clearer and the wind soon turned back to the north, drying out the vineyards, though much cooler. However, most picking had finished by Tuesday 22nd, even in the Côte de Nuits, except for hardened retardataires.

Yields were once again very limited in the hail-damaged area from Meursault to Beaune especially. Otherwise they were fairly generous, albeit still usually below the full complement, in the white wine villages further south, but rather below par in most red wine villages.

*The main talking point this year has been the vinegar fly, *Drosophila suzukii*, which has been around for the last few years but this year has become a plague, having fed off the exceptionally bountiful supply of cherries and then plums. Unlike most such flies which take advantage of rotten fruit, this particular drosophile pierces into healthy fruit to lay its eggs, causing rot with an acetic taint. Measures to ensure no taint in the wine included meticulous triage in the vineyard, very thorough cleaning in the cellar, keeping the grapes cool until fermentation, then fermenting at a higher than usual temperature, and early sulphuring.*

*Vinification posed no particular problems, assuming the drosophile problem had been adequately managed. There was no particular pattern to how and when the malolactic fermentation took place, though in some cases it was quite late. Some producers are considering bottling the wines a little earlier for 2014 than in other vintages – though quite often producers thinking this way subsequently change their mind as *élevage* progresses.*

Overall we appear to be set for a fine vintage for red Burgundy with delicious, fruit-forward wines suited to medium-term drinking, and a truly beautiful vintage for white wines, the most consistent for decades.