

The White Side of Burgundy

As the French legend goes, the Corton vineyard, which belonged to King Charlemagne (circa 775 AD) was originally planted with Pinot Noir. Due to excess consumption, his grey beard would become stained. At the behest (aka nagging) of his wife, he asked the Corton winemakers to grub up the Pinot Noir vines and plant Chardonnay in their place. From that point forward, his whiskers were stained no more.

In reality, there is no factual basis to the story. Pinot Noir's first appearance was in the 1370s and Chardonnay only appeared in the middle ages. None the less, it shows the Burgundian reverence for the emerald grape.

Today, Chardonnay is the most planted grape in Burgundy, accounting for 46% of all plantings. But contrary to popular belief, it is not the only white. Aligoté, Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Blanc, Pinot Beurot (Gris) and the mysterious Sacy grape are all grown. Of all the cohorts, Aligoté is probably the most famous, as it is the base for Kir. Just add crème de cassis, another Burgundian specialty, and you have concocted the famed aperitif.

Burgundy is also famous (or infamous, depending on your point of view) for its somewhat convoluted 4 tiered AOC system. The best way to understand these is to draw analogy to the Russian wooden nesting dolls (babushka) - as you open one, a smaller one appears inside. Theoretically, as you go smaller and smaller, the quality increases. Why do I say theoretically? Two reasons! The first is vintage variation. Inclement weather is part of the growing cycle. But when a warm/dry year comes to pass, there is no denying the allure of great white Burgundy. Second is producer. A top producer will make a top wine regardless of appellation level or vintage conditions, and a lesser producer will do a disservice to the very best of grapes.

Entry level wines are classified as Regional (and Sub-Regional). Grapes are generally sourced from the flat land and are labeled as Bourgogne or the name of the sub region. Appellation laws allow the name of the grape to be printed on the label at this level.

A step up in quality is the village (communal) wines. All grapes must be sourced from within the boundaries of the stated village. In most cases, these locales are at the bottom or top of Burgundy's famed slopes. Seventy three percent of all wines at this level are Chardonnay.

The best of Burgundy are the famed single vineyards-Premier and Grand Cru, which are located within the villages. A 1er Cru will state both the name of the vineyard as well as the name of the village. The pinnacle, Grand Cru, will just state the name of the vineyard. These vineyards are located on mid slope, benefiting from maximum sun exposure, drainage and air circulation.

The Sub Regions (North to South)

Chablis

Chablis is easily the most recognizable name of Burgundy, but in global wine circles, it is also a name that is the most bastardized. Many bulk wines are labeled with the generic Chablis name.

Real Chablis has pinned its entire fortunes on its geology- the famed Kimmiridgian limestone soil, that is, chalk (aka crushed sea shells). It is this soil which imparts the famed minerality/steeliness to the wines. The apogee of Chablis is the 100ha of Grand Cru, located on perfect south west facing slopes over the town itself. The allure of the famed seven vineyards-Vaudésir, Valmur, Bougros, Les Preuses, Le Clos, Blanchots and Grenouilles is undeniable. Prices have increased steadily over the past decade, so those wishing to purchase affordability in mind might look at the 40 Premier Crus. Personnel favorites include Fourchaume, Vaillons, Montée de Tonerre and Montmains.

Cote d'Or

The golden hillside is the heartland and apogee of great Burgundy. It is divided into two parts-the Côte de Nuits and the Côte de Beaune. A ridge of limestone is at the basis of these fabled wines.

The Côte de Nuits is primarily red wine land, but there are a few villages which make small amounts of white. Fixin and Marsannay make village level wines. The village of Vougeot makes 1er Cru whites, and contrary to popular belief, there is indeed a white Grand Cru. It is the famed two hectare parcel of Musigny Blanc, which is owned by Domaine de la Comte Georges de Vogüé.

The Côte de Beaune is where blue chip whites come to life. In the north, within the village of Aloxe-Corton (and parts of Ladoix-Serrigny and Pernand-Vergelesses) is the famed hill of Corton, which produces the famed white Grand Crus of Corton and Corton-Charlemagne. Ladoix and Pernand also produce good value white wines at the village and 1er Cru level.

The village of Beaune is the capital for the Burgundy wine trade and home to famed Hospices de Beaune auction. The best whites are 1er Cru, with Clos des Mouches being the most renowned.

Continue south on the Route Nationale 74, and the road leads to Meursault, which is renowned for producing the richest and oakiest of all white burgundies. If you like the new world style, this is your drop of juice.

Further south still are the fabled twin villages for white wine, Puligny and Chassagne-Montrachet; known for their profile of mineral, fruit and judicious oak. Within these two villages are the five renowned Grand Crus, all with the name Montrachet appended. Whereas Criots-Bâtard-Montrachet is firmly entrenched within the boundary of Chassagne, so are Bienvenues-Bâtard-Montrachet and Chevalier-Montrachet with Puligny. The vineyards of Le Montrachet and Bâtard-Montrachet straddle both. The Premier Crus from both are also worthy of praise.

To the west of the twin villages is St-Aubin, a star on the rise. This village produces whites which share similar attributes to its more famous eastern neighbors, but at a price which offers more affordability.

Côte Chalonnaise

Warmer than its Northern cousins, the Côte Chalonnaise sub region is famous for the commune of Bouzeron, one which Aligoté has fallen in love with. It is the only village AOC authorized for said grape. Other villages which produce small amounts of Chardonnay based whites are Rully, Mercurey and Givry.

Mâconnais

With a geology of limestone and clay, it is a land dedicated to Chardonnay. Basic Macon wine, for \$15, offers apple and citrus flavoured wines of good value. More famous and slightly more expensive are the villages, all ordained with the first name Pouilly - Fuissé, Vinzelles, Loché. Recent additions at the village level include Viré-Clessé and St-Véran, and like their more famous confrères, offer more depth, more new oak and good richness, and a price tag which is half the price of the Côte de Beaune.

Beaujolais

Even though not technically part of Burgundy, for administrative purposes, it is usually lumped together, because of proximity. Only 1% of Beaujolais' production is white, mostly from the northern locales, which abut the Mâconnais, sharing the famed limestone soil. The price is right here.

The following are a selection wines which were sampled while 'getting my white on' in Burgundy, and are currently available in Canada.

The Wines

92 Albert Bichot Domaine Long-Depaquit La Moutonne Chablis Grand Cru 2008 (\$75)

La Moutonne is the 8th unofficial Grand Cru of Chablis, located between Vaudésir and Les Preuses. This wine from 2.3 ha monopole of Bichot truly impresses. The pale straw green colour leads into a nose of huge minerals, straw, baked apple, stone fruit and fresh bread. Full bodied, the palate is chock full of powerful minerals, giving a salty tang on the superb expanse. Drink from 2014 to 2025.

92 Domaine Louis Latour Corton-Charlemagne 2009 (\$175)

Still extremely youthful, this wine requires another couple of years in bottle to come together. A bouquet of smokey minerals, pear, apple, spice and white peaches meet up with an extremely spicy palate. There is a long finish to say the least. Drink from 2015 until 2021. (ES)

90 Domaine Louis Latour Corton-Charlemagne 2006 (\$165)

Even though it is now five years old, this wine is still very much youthful, a testament to the age ability of great Burgundy. A bouquet of minerals, toast, vanilla, cream, licorice and apple leads into a creamy mouthful of apples and nuts. Excellent length, it should be imbibed over the next decade.

90 Domaine Roux Père et Fils Chassagne-Montrachet les Chaumes 1^{er} Cru 2009 (\$38.95)

A 1er cru for under \$40! Buy it as it is a no brainer. Ripe, it is medium bodied with vanilla, apple, citrus, minerals and stone fruit qualities. The length is excellent and it is ready to go.

90 Vincent Girardin Meursault Les Grand Charrons 2008 (\$42.95)

This elegant Meursault is all about flowers, smoke, baked apples, pear, stone fruit and vanilla. Acids are firm, so hold until 2013 and drink until 2018.

90 Domaine Saumaize-Michel Pouilly-Fuisse La Roche 2009 (\$30)

This is the best Pouilly-Fuissé I have ever tasted! From steep slopes, this full bodied Chardonnay is endowed with a perfume of apples, licorice, spice, minerals and pear. The same is found on the taste buds. The creamy texture and great length make for a delicious bottling. I also had the chance to try the 1991 side by side with this wine at the winery. At twenty years of age, it was still alive and kicking. Truly impressive!

89 Domaine de La Soufrandière Mâcon-Vinzelles Clos Grand-Père 2009 (\$39.55)

The biodynamic wine is made from vines which average 50 years of age (some are even 100 years), and without any oak. Apples, white flowers, vanilla, licorice and minerals are layered on a full bodied and creamy frame. Added nuances of apricot and spice make their appearance on the finale.

88 Domaine de La Soufrandière Pouilly-Vinzelles 2009 (\$38.25)

Apple, mineral, spice and white peach mesh into a rich and creamy texture. There is very good length, with a mineral core right down the middle. 5 years of life ahead.

88 Domaine Roux Père et Fils Saint-Aubin Les Cortons 1^{er} Cru 2009 (\$41.90)

Mineral, vanilla, apple and spice come together on both the palate and nose. It is mid weight, with very good length and refreshing acidity. Drink now to 2015.

88 Blason de Bourgogne Saint-Véran 2009 (\$20.95)

Light yellow colour, this SV delivers the goods in the form of melon, citrus, spice, banana and tropical fruits. Fine persistency and a certain softness make for a wine that is ready drink.

87 Domaine de La Vougeraie Côte de Beaune Les Pierres Blanches 2008 (\$35.50)

This Côte de Beaune has been amped up with the use of new oak. Hazelnut, toast, apple, pear and spice are built on a light to medium bodied frame. Acid borders on nervy, so pick some rich creamy dishes to pair up with.

85 Louis Latour Bourgogne Chardonnay 2009 (\$16.45)

Here is a basic Bourgogne why is upfront and accessible. Smokey minerals, apple and citrus work in tandem on the light bodied frame. Drink now.