

DOMAINE DE LA ROMANÉE-CONTI



2011 VINTAGE REPORT

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THE 2011 HARVEST REPORT

by Aubert de Villaine

2011: Never more than this year — notwithstanding the 46 harvests I have watched over since I first became a vigneron in Burgundy — have I felt or understood to this degree the importance of luck and a wager in the success or failure of the vigneron in the face of a vintage.

At present, as I begin to draft this traditional report, trying to describe the broad outline of the vintage just after the harvest, the north wind that we had been hoping for since the month of May has returned, bringing, although a little late, full sunshine and fresh nights. The end of the season is most certainly magnificent, enhancing the play of autumnal colors in the vineyards and intensifying the opulent scents emanating from the cuveries where the wines are fermenting. What vigneron, nevertheless, awakening in these blessed mornings, cannot help imagining what the 2011 harvest would have been. . . if April had not been hotter than July and had not carried the vines along into an ultra-early vegetative cycle in which they were permanently ahead of the normal rhythm of the seasons at our latitude.

2011 seems, indeed, to give credence to those who talk of a climatic change or at least of a climatic disorder. The vegetative cycle of the vineyards was marked by a precocity outside the normal, linked to very high temperatures in early April. Those unusual temperatures were associated with drought conditions that were also unusual in the spring.

The vines like heat and drought, so they were thriving until the stage of flowering, without any attacks from their usual enemies, mildew and oidium; they were progressing at great speed and harmoniously in their vegetative cycle. One sole drawback: under the brutal effect of a few excessively hot days, quite a few berries exposed to the sun were roasted.

However, apart from the very early flowering this year — the mid-flowering occurred on May 20, almost the same time as in 2003 or 2007 — we saw a complete turnaround in the weather with dominant winds from the west and south bringing rain showers and thunderstorms. The north wind, benefactor of Burgundy since it is usually accompanied by the beautiful dry weather preferred by the vines, rarely returned despite the promises of Palm Sunday, April 17, when it blew in and therefore, according to the old saying, should have been the prevailing wind of the year.

It is well known that the gods do their utmost to deceive us humans — Homer repeats it throughout the *Odyssey* — and the vignerons, like poor Ulysses, shaken by the elements, had to cope with those chaotic conditions that persisted through June, July and August in the form of sudden alterations of cold, rain, scorching heat, the dog-days of summer, followed each time by violent storms.

In this general context, the Côte de Nuits was the beneficiary of a certain indulgence; rains were not as frequent as in surrounding areas, notably the Côte de Beaune. It was, nevertheless, as a result of their tenacious efforts and often risky choices for the Domaine, that Nicolas Jacob, our vineyard manager, and his young team managed to protect the vineyards from mildew and oidium that threatened from the end of May forward. They had to use all their wits to accomplish this, while observing strict respect for our biodynamic treatments, carrying out tillage at the requisite times and orchestrating as precisely as possible the other work in the vineyards.

In a year like 2011, the knowledge, experience and resilience of the vigneron were put to the test for months at a time. The challenge was met and mastered.

Meanwhile the ultimate enemy lay in wait: botrytis, the fungus that seemed to comprehend already in July that this year it would find all conditions favorable. Indeed, rains had brought on abnormally large berries, and at veraison (which extended over at least three weeks) micro-fissures and even bursts had formed in the loose skins, where, in humid weather, botrytis loves to develop.

Fortunately, cool temperatures in July slowed down the vegetative cycle and the development of botrytis that thrives in hot, humid weather but stops its activity as soon as it is cold. This cold phase was also a favorable factor as it strengthened and thickened the skins of the grapes.

By August 15, there was a complete change of scenery: hot and stormy weather set in with very high temperatures, almost scorching, and the maturation of the grapes accelerated. Thanks to the reserves of water retained in the soil and the luminosity sustained by the long days of late summer, photosynthesis operated at full blast, and the production of sugars increased very quickly while acidities fell, both in a spectacular manner. The vintage was taking a totally different direction, far more qualitative. We welcomed this with a sigh of relief.

Most certainly the storms that regularly accompanied the return of heat provoked anguish. Certain sectors of Burgundy paid dearly as they were hit by murderous hail storms, but the Vosne area was spared. In these conditions, we should have seen a spectacular progression of botrytis, but that did not happen thanks to the thickness of the grape skins and to the rapid return of the sun after each storm.

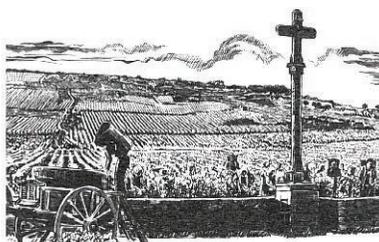
During that time, the Côte de Nuits ultimately profited from the heat and was not much affected by storms. By late August, even though a good part of the advance that had been gained in the springtime was lost as the weeks went by in June and July, the grapes were approaching full maturity. The vineyards were reaching the end of their cycle, but we were also aware that if the storms kept coming back after each period of heat, the botrytis might explode, and we ran the risk of losing everything.

Never more than this year — notwithstanding the 46 harvests I have watched over since I first became a vigneron in Burgundy — have I felt and understood in this respect the importance of luck and a wager in the success or failure of the vigneron in the face of a vintage.

The first rule is absolutely to wait until the grapes are fully ripe. Do this at the risk of losing the entire crop is the second rule. Both are inseparable, and both played their part to the fullest in 2011: 1) We had to wait beyond reason in order to pick ripe grapes. 2) We were lucky not to have any storms or humidity during the entire harvest window, whereas those unfavorable conditions were everywhere around us and could have caused an explosion of botrytis if they had lasted just two or three more days. The gods were with us once again! But what anguish was exposed at the heart of this certainty that above all it must not rain!

THE 2011 HARVEST REPORT *(continued)*

We waited finally until Friday, September 2, to begin the harvest in Corton, and Monday, September 5, for the vineyards in Vosne-Romanée. The weather was hot and dry but uncertain, and we feared the pessimistic weather forecast for the following days. By some miracle, during the entire harvest we did not have the slightest sudden shower of rain in the course of the day.



right one, and we can thank the heavens for giving us a mild end of season and the privilege to harvest perfectly ripe grapes.

It is true that the crop loss, following the attacks of botrytis and other enemies of the vines and grapes, was once again significant in 2011, despite the defenses we employed. One could estimate the loss to be about 30%. But this loss in quantity also constitutes a factor

In early September, mildew had eaten into the upper leaves of the vines and autumn colors were beginning to appear everywhere. Botrytis was present in its dry form (from the attacks of July and early August) and also in its damp form and even its acid form (from recent attacks on the large clusters). There were also many berries that had roasted in spring and an unusual number of green berries that had not passed beyond the veraison stage. We had to eliminate these, but there were likewise in the clusters "figgy" berries we had to preciously preserve for their richness in sugar.

favorable to quality. In fact, it has to be looked at rather like the result of a natural thinning that, in attacking the fattest grapes, reduces the yield, that is to say the quantity of grapes carried by the vines, and permits those that remain to ripen much better. In 2011 we would never have reached full maturity if part of the crop had not been eliminated either by botrytis or sun-scorching.

Consequently, it is needless to emphasize the importance and difficulty of the harvest work this year. The harvester, he who cut the grapes that would be brought to the winery, settled down to a major task: like a miner filtering the gravel by the river's edge in the hope of finding gold, he was asked to harvest in a selective manner (following rules that change every year) and pick out the material, that is to say, the grapes, that the fermentation in vats would transform into Romanée-Conti, La Tâche, etc. The harvester makes the last selective and qualitative human gesture before the grapes arrive at the vats with their definitive qualities and defects.

Montrachet, in the Côte de Beaune, received much more rain than the vineyards in Vosne-Romanée or Corton and was hit by hail in July, although the consequences were not too serious. Thanks to the late veraison of the Chardonnay, the berries resisted the period of heavy rain in early August. The botrytis had less impact than in the Côte de Nuits until September 3, when a storm in the south of the Côte de Beaune resulted in numerous berries "turning" (spoilage). Therefore we harvested earlier than expected, on September 6, and the grapes we picked were wonderfully golden with approximately 10% noble botrytis.

The harvesters were given clear instructions this year: throw down the berries that had roasted in spring, eliminate with clippers the clusters or parts of clusters that had been affected by botrytis and, most difficult, as it required judgment and experience, leave behind the vines bearing unripe berries or large berries — it was here, moreover, that botrytis had progressed the most. Those vines were harvested in a second passage at the end of the primary harvest, in a selective picking that was equally severe.

The vineyards were harvested in the following order:

Corton: September 2

La Tâche: September 5-6

Romanée-Conti and Montrachet: September 6

Richebourg: September 7-8

Romanée-St-Vivant: September 8-9

Grands-Échézeaux: September 9-10

Échézeaux: September 10-11

The finishing touch was performed at the winery where the grapes, placed on a sorting table, passed by a team of 14 people assigned to reject whatever had escaped the harvesters. It should be noted that the vibrating table, set this year at the head of the sorting table, eliminated an impressive quantity of ladybugs and other larvae, beside the roasted or overly dried berries.

In the cuverie we did not encounter any particular problems except, on certain afternoons, the necessity to cool down the grapes that were harvested in the sun and arrived warm at the winery. Modern methods to control temperatures enable us to do this without difficulty. Bernard Noblet and his team conducted the vinifications with the simplicity and rigor that is customary and were constantly on the lookout for each cuvée that demanded particular attention. Their work was not easy: when the harvest takes place in warm conditions like this year, the vats have a tendency to ferment all at the same time, and vigilance is essential to guide them on their way and rack off at just the right moment.

In the final reckoning, it was a harvest of perfectly healthy, "la crème de la crème" grapes produced in 2011 that were placed in the fermentation cuves. Due to our fastidious sorting to select superior grapes, the harvest did not go quickly. It lasted until September 13 in generally hot weather with the threat of thunderstorms and rain hanging over us every day like the sword of Damocles. . . that never dropped!

Fermentations were especially long: 21 to 24 days, with a good increase in temperature. Devattings have just finished. The wines are full of fruit; they already are showing their seduction and depth, but also a great deal of finesse. It seems that 2011 will be a vintage where elegance and purity surpass power, even if it is too early to have a definitive opinion.

This is the reason I wish to stress that this year once again shows us the importance of luck in the success of a vintage: If the grapes had been wet, even if only after one storm, the crop, given its extreme maturity and the hot weather, would have been lost in the twinkling of an eye. This did not happen. On the contrary, the window we had chosen to harvest was the

Aubert de Villaine, September 30, 2011

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~ TASTING NOTES ~



General characteristics of the vintage: The 2011 vintage has produced surprisingly dense wines with a fine, tight texture. As often occurs in moderately sunny years, the expression of *climat* (terroir) is exceptionally harmonious and precise. The following tasting notes are from the Domaine, written in December 2013:

CORTON 2011

The nose is powerful with notes of forest humus. On the palate, the tannins are deep, powerful and strongly knit.

ÉCHÉZEAUX 2011

This wine best expresses both the ethereal and the structured character of the 2011 vintage. With hints of sweetness, this is a wine of charm and luminosity.

GRANDS-ÉCHÉZEAUX 2011

Showing typical minerality and concentration. The unctuousness and fat reveal a soil that is primarily clay. This wine has excellent cellaring potential.

ROMANÉE-ST-VIVANT 2011

Typical for the terroir of Romanée-St-Vivant, the nose has the serene and feminine grace that recalls its proximity to the Romanée-Conti vineyard. On the palate, this wine is still closed, as is usual at this stage, but with an impressive length.

RICHEBOURG 2011

A Richebourg typical of its *climat*. Already very accomplished, with delicate peppery notes and ample tannins, this wine shows the power and strength of its lineage.

LA TÂCHE 2011

The nose is fresh and young with a touch of violets. On the palate, the fruit is tender and vibrant, with a hint of forest floor that is typical of La Tâche. The finish is exceptionally long on the palate.

ROMANÉE-CONTI 2011

Soft and silky. This wine is concentrated but with elegance rather than power. It assembles and also refines the characteristics of the other wines. As always, the wine has the mysterious distinction that belongs only to Romanée-Conti.

MONTRACHET 2011

Showing honey and mint on the nose. Fresh and lively. Strongly structured, with surprising minerality, this Montrachet promises to have a very great aging potential.