

The New York Times

March 10, 2010

THE POUR

The 2007 Burgundies Pose a Puzzle for the Experts

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IN the hierarchy of recent vintages of red Burgundy, few will place 2007 among the elite. On first glance the wines seem too pale, too light, maybe even a trifle diluted. Fans of dense, powerful pinot noirs packed with fruit flavors may well wave off the '07s with barely a glance and a sip.

I was among those who wondered initially whether the 2007 reds were little more than light and pretty, pleasant for drinking young while waiting (and waiting) for the highly concentrated 2005s to come around. But I've changed my thinking. In the last year I've come to believe that the 2007s from good producers will not only provide a good deal of early pleasure, they will age well and offer great opportunities for exploring the often subtle differences among Burgundy's varying terroirs.

In short, the 2007s are paradoxical. While 2007 is not considered a great vintage, the wines will amply demonstrate what is so great about Burgundy. In the region's mysterious alchemy, wines rarely behave as expected.

"This is not a vintage of body, fruit and lots of tannins, but of finesse and delicacy," said Aubert de Villaine, the courtly co-director of Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, at a tasting of the estate's 2007 vintage in New York a few weeks ago. He was speaking specifically about his own wines, which are among the most highly prized in the world, but what he said goes for the vintage as a whole.

"These wines are quite elusive — you grasp and lose, grasp and lose," he said, adding — ever the Frenchman — "They are like women."

Vintages are often judged too simply, in Burgundy and everywhere. The focus is on greatness; everything else tends to be dismissed.

In the last decade or so, three vintages have generally been considered excellent for red Burgundy: 2005, 2002 and 1999. Meanwhile, the 2000 vintage was largely considered mediocre. Would you care to guess which vintage has given me the most pleasure in the last few years?

How did you know it was the 2000?

Indeed, as Burgundies from the exalted vintages remain stolid and sphinx-like, the 2000s have been pliable, open and delicious — far better choices on restaurant wine lists, and cheaper, too. I would put the 2007s in the same category.

“In France, '07 is known for being a restaurant vintage as they can give pleasure straight away,” said Jean-Marie Fourrier of Domaine Fourrier in Gevrey-Chambertin. But he warned that consumers have to be astute. Growers battled intense heat at the beginning of the season, and then a miserably cool, wet summer, which caused mildew and fungus issues. Only those who worked meticulously in their vineyards, and then were ruthless in their selection of grapes and diligent in the cellar, were able to make good wines in 2007.

“Know thy producer,” said Becky Wasserman, an American wine broker in Burgundy, repeating the first commandment of wine buying. The '07 whites, meanwhile, can be superb, depending on the skills and diligence of the producer.

From careful producers who did their work, the reds offer unusually transparent expressions of Burgundian terroir, which can differ not only from village to village but from vineyard to vineyard.

Even in the village wines, the lowest level at which the terroirs become discernible, the differences seem striking. A Gevrey-Chambertin from Joseph Faiveley, for example, is light-bodied in keeping with the vintage yet with exotic red fruit and precise mineral flavors that are typical of Gevrey. Meanwhile, a Nuits-St.-Georges from Faiveley's own estate grapes is darker, earthier and more rustic, as is characteristic of this village.

A Marsannay Les St. Jacques from Domaine Bart is light and energetic, the power of the red fruit aromas at odds with the agile dance of the flavors through the mouth. By contrast, a Savigny-lès-Beaune from Chandon de Briailles is much darker, much earthier, and a little tight and tough, a

reminder that wines that typically need more time to develop, like those from this producer, will still need time even in a vintage like 2007.

Moving up the scale a bit, a premier cru Volnay les Mitans from Hubert de Montille is round and sensuous, with a little more definition than the village wines yet surprisingly accessible. Wines from de Montille are often among those that need time to open up. Not this one, which was gorgeous young.

The only grand crus I've had were at the Domaine de la Romanée-Conti tasting. Each seemed a precise expression of its vineyard, with differences etched in sharp relief, all sharing a slight herbal quality that is not at all a sign of under-ripe grapes, but something else.

"What I like is this little touch of green," Mr. de Villaine said at the tasting. "When you have this in a wine, with proper maturity, of course, it's a harbinger of complexity."

The wines lack the concentration and structure that are the most obvious signs that they will evolve over time. It may be that the real key to aging is balance rather than strength.

The balance of the 2007s reminded both Bernard Hervet, chief executive of Joseph Faiveley, and Kevin Harvey, the proprietor of Rhys Vineyards in California and a Burgundy collector, of the 1979 vintage, which was similarly light and elegant. Those wines have aged surprisingly well despite their lack of concentration.

"I am willing to wager that these will follow the classic pattern of putting on some weight with age, and of getting rediscovered by the revisionists in a few years," said Jeremy Seysses, whose family owns Domaine Dujac in Morey-St.-Denis.

Some savvy Burgundy observers, who were able to taste many wines in the cellars before they were released, saw the value of the vintage early on. John B. Gilman, who writes the newsletter View From the Cellar, called 2007 "a very, very fine vintage of forward and sophisticated reds." Meanwhile, Stephen Tanzer, in his newsletter International Wine Cellar, put it this way: "If I were a lab rat in a cage, I would suck this stuff out of a water bottle until I drowned."