

Red Burgundy 2016 and 2015, Part 1: Two Terrific but Very Different Vintages **by Stephen Tanzer**

Despite extreme weather conditions in both 2016 and 2015, Burgundy's Côte d'Or has produced an outstanding pair of back-to-back vintages studded with hauntingly beautiful reds.

Ten years from now, when their painful memories of the arduous 2016 growing season have receded, Burgundy's producers may be able to enjoy their wines without nightmare flashbacks of the frost blanket and recurring mildew that plagued the vintage. Happily, Burgundy-loving civilians, who are naturally more concerned with the price and availability of their favorite wines than with the challenges of producing them, will derive great pleasure from the precise, perfumed, suavely tannic 2016s from the outset. One caveat: following a small crop of very ripe, large-scaled wines in 2015 that are quickly disappearing from retail shelves around the world, if they made it that far in the first place, the more classic '16s won't be easy to find either. (Relief is on the horizon, though, as the Côte d'Or miraculously dodged frost in April of 2017 and has finally produced a full crop of wines.)

The 2016 Growing Season and Harvest

Following an extremely mild December-through-February period and a cool March, warmer temperatures at the end of that month led to a normal budburst. But hopes for a generous crop after a series of short vintages were soon to be shattered. Conditions on the evening of April 26 and the following morning provided a perfect storm for the most damaging frost on the Côte d'Or since 1981. The evening of the 26th was humid, with some light rainfall. The skies then cleared and temperatures plunged during the night, with dawn

breaking clear in penetrating sunlight. The unforgiving sun burned the young buds and green shoots that were covered with frozen water droplets – think of the effect of rays through a magnifying glass. Damage was frequently greatest at high altitude, as this is where the rising sun strikes the vines first. (Frédéric Lafarge in Volnay told me that he has never experienced frost damage that climbed as high into the premier crus as in 2016.) Lower spots were often protected by early-morning mist and thus escaped the worst effects of the sun. Conditions were calm; there was little or no wind to dissipate the heavy frost.

Burgundy's numerous *combes*, little east-west valleys that cut through the limestone escarpment of the Côte d'Or – and which are frequently the source of cooling breezes during the heat of summer – were conduits for calamity in late April, allowing a massive pool of frigid air to flow in. Damage was sustained over a huge area stretching from Chassagne-Montrachet in the south to Marsannay in the north. The slightest differences in temperature on the morning of the 27th could make all the difference. Every additional negative degree Celsius hurt, as some vines could survive -1 degree C. but not -2 or -3 – to say nothing of the -5 and -6 degrees C. that some growers reported in their coldest sites.

Obviously, topography was critical here, and even man-made walls offered some protection to adjacent vines. I reported last summer in some detail on frost damage suffered in the posh white wine villages of the Côte de Beaune (as well as on the Pernand side of the Corton hill and in much of Savigny-lès-Beaune). But the Côte de Nuits was also hit hard. Prémieux suffered significant frost losses, but vineyards on the north side of the town of Nuits-Saint-Georges were largely spared. While much of Vosne-Romanée proper was relatively unscathed, Echézeaux and Grands-Echézeaux were devastated by frigid air coming in through the Combe d'Orveau, as was much of the higher portion of Clos Vougeot and the higher-altitude vineyards in the southwest part of Chambolle-Musigny, including Musigny itself. In fact, Chambolle-Musigny (along with the southern half of Marsannay), was the hardest-hit village on the Côte de Nuits, with very cold air also entering through the Combe d'Ambin at the top of the village. Yet Morey-Saint-Denis was barely touched by frost, with yields here generally normal – and in some cases the highest they had been since 1999!

In Gevrey-Chambertin, higher-altitude vineyards close to the Combe de

Lavaux (such as Les Verailles, Poissenots, Lavaux Saint-Jacques and even Clos Saint-Jacques) suffered significant crop losses. On the southern side of the village, Chambertin was pummeled (Eric Rousseau lost two-thirds of his production of this grand cru in 2016), as was part of Latricières-Chambertin. As if the widespread frost wasn't enough for growers to deal with, the Côte d'Or also suffered from the strongest mildew pressures encountered in many years, owing to the brutally wet, consistently humid spring and the high number of vines weakened by frost. Constant spraying was critical from early May through early July, with little margin for error: some estates did as many as 15 separate treatments. Until the soils began to dry out in July, workers donned space suits and backpacks to do this work manually, especially in lower, flatter sites, as the vineyards were too muddy to allow the use of heavy machinery. Some organic producers, desperate to prevent further crop losses following a succession of commercially difficult vintages, decided to give up their certifications and use commercial sprays in order to prevent their vines from deteriorating. Even so, damage to the foliage could affect the ripening process and result in further crop losses, especially in lower spots where the mildew was more widespread and more complicated to treat.

The first period of drier, warmer weather arrived at the end of June, and conditions were mostly superb through July, August and September. Most sections of the Côte d'Or received an inch or two or much-needed precipitation between August 18 and 20 to revive the vines. Before the weather changed in early summer, many growers had anticipated doing virtually two harvests, one for the sites that had largely escaped the frost or were carrying tiny yields, and the other for vineyards that had been stunned by frost and featured mostly grapes from the second set of buds (the *contra-bourgeois*), which typically appeared two to three weeks later. But the ripening process picked up speed during the second half of the summer, dramatically reducing differences between remaining first-generation fruit and the second set of buds. (It should be noted that secondary buds are routinely less fruitful than primary buds, rarely producing more than one or two clusters.) While some growers used this fruit to supplement their tiny quantities and to add some pungency to their wines, others had no interest in using the second-generation grapes, as they often bring underripe tannins as well as more malic acidity, which of course can result in flatter wines after the malolactic fermentations occur. Despite the very warm days in July and August, nighttime temperatures remained moderate, allowing the grapes to retain healthy levels of malic acidity.

Well-timed rainy spells in September helped to goose the maturing process, generally without causing dilution or a significant drop in acidity: modest rain fell on September 4 and 5 and then again during an on-and-off rainy period between September 15 and 18. Virtually no one began harvesting Pinot Noir before September 19, with a majority of producers on the Côte de Beaune beginning between September 19 and 24. Some Côte de Nuits growers started that same week but many waited until the following Monday, the 26th, and finished up in early October. A few of the traditionally latest harvesters waited until the first week of October to begin. The last third of September provided a relatively wide window for harvesting under near-ideal conditions: dry, sunny days with afternoon temperatures ranging between the upper 60s and upper 70s. There was modest rainfall on the night of September 30 into October 1, (which the later pickers insisted had very little effect on the balance of the fruit,) then beautifully dry, cool, more autumnal weather during the first third of October.

Luckily, the grape skins remained healthy until the end, and, for the second consecutive year, rot was not an issue. In fact, very little sorting of the fruit was necessary at harvest time, generally only to eliminate underripe clusters and berries. The harvest went fairly quickly, in large part because there was relatively little fruit to pick, with many smaller estates picking virtually all of their crops in five or six days. As a general rule, growers began harvesting with their frosted vineyards, as the tiny quantities of grapes were often high in sugar; others waited for better phenolic ripeness, even at the risk of losing acidity.

The Vinification and the Wines

Owing to reduced quantities of fruit, many growers had to vinify in smaller tanks than usual, in some cases purchasing them just for this purpose. A natural temptation with these tiny lots was to vinify with some whole clusters, which added much-needed volume to the tanks and could also draw out the fermentations. But numerous winemakers who were concerned that their stems were not fully ripe did *more* destemming than they usually do. Many made a point of extracting gently for fear of introducing bitter tannins into their wines, cutting back on their total number of *pigeages* (punchdowns of the caps to immerse them in the juice) and in some cases replacing them with *remontages* (pumpovers to keep the cap wet). Some producers I visited this fall also reduced their percentage of new oak for similar reasons; of course, many of them had already cut back dramatically on their orders for

new barrels earlier in the season, as they anticipated lower quantities of fruit.

Are the differences between frosted and non-frosted wines immediately apparent? Most growers say not necessarily, and that is my opinion as well. Yes, frosted wines made from tiny yields tend to convey a strong impression of density. These wines were typically made from smaller berries and a higher percentage of *millerandage*, as the vines, weakened by the frost, struggled through the flowering. But that's not to say that these wines are out of whack. If Chardonnay is much more forgiving of high yields than Pinot Noir is, Pinot has a greater capacity to mask extreme weather events – and the resulting tiny yields – of a growing season. Chardonnay from small yields is commonly characterized by one sort of imbalance or another – typically a strong phenolic, or even tannic, impression, excessive alcohol or very low acidity – but that's not necessarily the case with Pinot Noir.

As 2016 was a year with relatively full phenolic ripeness and moderate grape sugars, with its better wines characterized by wonderfully smooth tannins, many, many wines from crop levels of 15 hectoliters per hectare or less show a beautiful balance of fresh fruit, lively acidity and ripe tannins. Of course, while some of these wines are particularly concentrated, rich and potentially long-lived, others are less harmonious, even clenched, and I suspect that many of these latter wines were made primarily from the second set of buds – or from fruit that was picked on the green side of full phenolic ripeness. Christophe Roumier noted that “some frost-affected vines gave too much structure” and Ghislaine Barthod, his colleague down the street in Chambolle-Musigny, pointed out that “the balance of a tiny crop is always a question mark.” (In this vintage she had the lowest yields of her winemaking career.)

As for the wines made from more normal crop levels: numerous winemakers I visited in November used the same word to describe their most successful wines from vines that escaped the frost: they said the wines were more *relaxed*. And at the level of the producers I visit each year, relatively few wines made from full crop levels struck me as lacking in concentration, but there were a few. So . . . some of the vintage's best wines are from full crops *and* from tiny frost-shortened yields – and the same can be said of the least successful '16s! Vintage assessments are rarely straightforward, least of all in Burgundy, and 2016 is a prime case in point.

Chambolle-Musigny Les Amoureuses

Interestingly, when I think of more classic vintages with complex treble notes to go with their ripe fruit elements, I think more of fresh red fruits than black. And indeed many '16s are characterized by raspberry, strawberry and red cherry, and sometimes even cranberry and pomegranate. But in some cellars the '16s are clearly blacker in character – black cherry, blackberry, blueberry and cassis, sometimes with licorice, violet, menthol and dark chocolate nuances.

And very few '16s show any signs of *surmaturité*. Grape sugars in 2016s were normally healthy but rarely excessive – typically ranging from the low 12s to 13% – and generally lower than in 2015. But some vineyards yielded fruit at 13.5% or even higher, often from frosted vines that carried very low crop levels. Many top *cuvées* – and in some cases, entire cellars – were not chaptalized but winemakers often added small amounts of sugar simply to extend the fermentations for an extra day or two or to bring their wines up to the octane level that they consider appropriate for premier and grand crus. Virtually no one I visited admitted to acidifying his or her musts in 2016. Most described natural acidity levels as adequate and pHs as healthy. Because the 2016s began with more malic acidity but less of the more stable tartaric acidity than the '15s had, they changed more during their malolactic fermentations, but a sizable minority of growers still reported that post-malo pHs were slightly lower than those of corresponding 2015s.

Below, in the final section of this introduction, I'll briefly summarize my impressions about the 2015s in bottle; but I have to get a bit ahead of myself here and invoke the '15s by comparison in order to characterize the '16s. If there's one generalization I *would* make about the very complicated 2016 vintage, it's that the majority of wines from Burgundy's most capable grape-growers and winemakers are more transparent to *terroir* than the 2015s are, often stunningly so. They are generally more classic and less weighty, and their intense fruit and fresh, high-pitched aromatic qualities should give them more early appeal than the '15s, even in cases where they have the stuffing and balance to age well. (And my further tastings in Burgundy in January suggest that many of the '16s are gaining in weight and structure during their final months of *élevage* without losing their verve.)

The earlier crop of wines, which generally feature a higher level of total polyphenols (there's no shortage of tannins in 2016, though), also frequently show somewhat less refined tannins than the '16s, especially where the vines

suffered from hydric stress. I should note that a number of growers I visited expressed the opinion that their '15s have plusher tannins, not to mention more buffering mid-palate material. But I'd counter that in many 2015s, some of the glorious floral and mineral high notes of the wines have been shaved off by the heat and drought of the growing season. While the '16s generally convey site differences with notable clarity, the 2015s are much more dominated by their hot, sunny vintage character in the early going.

The 2015s in Bottle

Some Burgundy purists are already claiming that the '15s are too ripe for their tastes, but I wonder if these drinkers are responding more to what they've heard about this very warm, very dry growing season than to the wines themselves. In any event, they will be missing a lot of great bottles if they avoid 2015. This is a very rich and rather tannic vintage from mostly thick-skinned grapes and consistently low yields, and it has produced many outstanding, mostly large-scaled wines and some that are downright massive. Although the summer was hot and dry and the harvest very early, relatively few wines made by top producers show signs of cooked fruit. Rain in August came mostly in the nick of time for vines that had begun to suffer from hydric stress. Still, as I say, owing to the dry conditions, the vintage's tannins, although ripe, are sometimes tougher and less refined than those of the '16s.

For all its ripeness, fleshiness and *solaire* character, the 2015 vintage also yielded many surprisingly *red* wines, albeit occasionally with obviously elevated or even liqueur-like ripeness. Routinely, after tasting through a producer's 2016s from barrel or tank, when I turned my attention to the bottled 2015s, the first wine struck me as much more ripe, sometimes exotic and occasionally a bit roasted. But by the next sip, or the next wine, I was able to acclimate to the earlier vintage and appreciate the density, intensity, *sucrosité* and structure of the '15s without having the feeling that I had left Burgundy for the New World.

Acidity levels range from lower than average to quite sound; malic acidity levels were generally very low but the tartaric component of total acidity was typically quite healthy in the 2015s. While only the best wines show the serious mineral/acid tension of vintages like 2014 or 2010 (many more producers compared their '16s to those earlier mineral-driven vintages), the '15s are richer, riper wines with terrific depth of fruit. They are less extreme than previous hot years like 2009 and especially 2003, and their tannins are

generally sweeter than those of 2005, a vintage to which a number of Burgundy growers compare the young '15s. And they are generally deeper than the young '16s, which is why it's entirely possible that the best '15s will outlast their 2016 counterparts. Many '15s appear to be shutting down already and are tough going today, with their savory soil tones and tannins often dominating their fruit at this early stage. Only a clairvoyant can possibly know for sure whether the '15s that are going into a shell today will stay that way for 3 years or 13 (or 23). But there are also many '15s that seduce now for their thickness, sweetness and mouthfilling fruit, and these wines can give great pleasure, particularly with a bit of aeration. The vintage's less-successful examples, though, may not have enough acidity for long life in bottle or enough true ripeness to retain their fruit until their tannins begin to resolve. A year ago, the majority of growers maintained that their 2015s would be drinkable early on and be unlikely ever to go through an extended dumb period. That's no longer the case. Many '15s are already beginning to shut down in bottle, showing their tannic side. There's simply too much phenolic material here for the wines to evolve along smooth, steady aging curves. Today, many growers say they'll be happy to forget about drinking their '15s for at least seven or eight years, while enjoying their more aromatic and approachable '16s in the meantime. But the '16s have the balance and depth to age gracefully, and the better '15s have the tannic mass to be even longer-lived.

Domaine de la Pousse d'Or

Patrick Landanger told me he had very small yields in 2016 but relatively little frost. In his holdings on the Côte de Nuits, for example, he suffered some frost losses in his Chambolle-Musigny village vines and in Clos de la Roche “but not much elsewhere.” Even in Volnay, yields were between 30 and 35 hectoliters per hectare. Mildew was a challenge, though. Landanger noted that his vineyard manager asked him to switch from organic to chemical sprays to more effectively address the problem, but Landanger refused.

Landanger started harvesting on September 26 and picked into October. Although he had done a bit of experimentation with whole clusters in 2015, Landanger destemmed entirely in '16. Following a seven-day cold maceration, Landanger typically carries out two *pigeages* per day at the beginning of the fermentation, then up to five a day during the peak. He allows the cap of the wine to fall slowly, which can bring about seven or eight days of post-fermentation maceration. As is typically the case here, the '16s had been moved to tanks just after the 2017 harvest—or about a month before my November visit. The wines, says Landanger, feature very clean fruit, and he believes that although they will last a long time, they will also taste good early. Incidentally, Landanger has increased his use of 1,600-liter amphoras fabricated by an Italian company called Terranova. He made special *cuvées* of his Volnays Caillerets, Clos de la Bousse d'Or and Clos des 60 Ouvrées; two of the three amphoras of each were reserved for separate bottlings, while the third went into the estate's “normal” release.

2016 Bonnes-Mares Grand Cru

Dark ruby-red. Classic Bonnes-Mares aromas of blackberry, blueberry, licorice and herbs. Silky on entry, then firm and youthfully imploded in the middle palate, displaying outstanding energy to its blueberry, licorice, underbrush and violet flavors. Subtle brown spices carry from the nose through the aftertaste, adding another element of complexity. This wine has a serious tannic spine to support extended aging. Patrick Landanger described his holding in Bonnes-Mares as “shaped like a potato within the de Vogüé portion” (last year, he called it “a little crescent”), noting that his vines are planted along a north-south axis. **(92-95 points)**

2016 Clos de la Roche Grand Cru

By the time it was filtered, there were a mere 20 liters of this elixir. Pear and quince preserves are mingled with caramel and overlain with haunting scents of white truffle, stale white bread and white raisin, each a distinctive reflection of dominant botrytis. The confitured concentration of a glossy, expansive palate is enhanced by honey-like richness but also leavened by an unexpected influx of fresh pineapple and pink grapefruit that lends animation and a modicum of sheer refreshment to a superbly sustained finish. **(91-94 points)**

2016 Chambolle-Musigny Les Amoureuses 1er Cru

Bright ruby-red. Complex but restrained soil-driven perfume of dark raspberry, mocha, flowers and menthol. Tightly wound and high-pitched in the mouth, with its penetrating flavors of raspberry, spices, licorice and herbs intensified by mineral energy. Youthfully tight, but the subtle, long, rising finish offers excellent grip. **(91-93 points)**

2016 Corton Clos du Roi Grand Cru

(13.3% alcohol): Full ruby-red. Darker and more reticent on the nose than the Bressandes, conveying a stronger element of stony minerality and a note of licorice. Then vivacious and sharply delineated in the mouth but much more closed than the Bressandes owing to its mineral energy. Finishes with suave, fine-grained tannins and excellent grip. Very classy juice! **(91-93 points)**

2016 Volnay Clos de la Bousse d'Or Vinifié et Elevé en Amphore 1er Cru

Impressively deep, dark ruby-red color. Black cherry, dark chocolate and violet on the nose, complicated by subtle hints of menthol and pepper. Distinctly sweeter and fruitier than the *classique*, with an altogether thicker and more generous texture to its black cherry and saline mineral flavors. This subtly palate-staining wine shows finer tannins than the regular bottling. **(91-93 points)**

2016 Volnay Clos des 60 Ouvrées 1er Cru

Bright ruby-red. Expressive, scented nose combines blackberry, spices, violet and lavender pastille. At once supple and vibrant on the palate, conveying serious density of texture and juicy flavors of black fruits and spices. This wine stands out for its intensity and inner-mouth perfume. Finishes ripe and chewy, with excellent length. A very strong performance for a cool spot in a warm year. **(91-93 points)**

2016 Corton Bressandes Grand Cru

(these vines were harvested at the beginning of October): Good dark red-ruby. More red berries to go with the aromas of black cherry, pepper and spices, plus a sexy hint of blood peach. Captivating, gentle, broad wine with dark berry and cherry flavors accented by spices, noble herbs and tangy verbena. Rich, subtle, penetrating Bressandes with fine tannins and noteworthy breadth and verve. Really distinctive soil complexity here. **(90-93 points)**

2016 Chambolle-Musigny Les Groseilles 1er Cru

Dark red-ruby. Riper and more expressive on the nose than the Feusselottes but still with a medicinal aspect to its aromas of black cherry and licorice. Denser and finer-grained on the palate, showing a note of redcurrant and an element of mineral lift. The medicinal quality repeats on the back end, but the tannins are rich and smooth. This wine is fatter than the Feusselottes; it's usually the other way around at this early stage. **(90-92 points)**

2016 Volnay en Caillerets Vinifié et Elevé en Amphore 1er Cru

Good dark red-ruby. Expressive aromas of purple fruits and dark chocolate show little of the medicinal aspect of the *cuvée normale*. Still, this juicy wine is in a rather cool

style, showing a more apparent spicy character. A bit more tannic than the *classique* but not hard. This fruit-driven wine will need time in bottle to harmonize. **(90-92 points)**

2016 Chambolle-Musigny Les Charmes 1er Cru

Bright ruby-red. Aromas of black raspberry, mint and coffee torrefaction suggest a fairly wide range of ripeness. Juicy and intense but a bit youthfully clenched, showing subtle saline minerality but little in the way of easy sweetness. Finishes with good length but the wine's firm spine of tannins and medicinal reserve suggest that it will need at least a few years of cellaring upon release. **(89-92 points)**

2016 Volnay Clos de la Bousse d'Or 1er Cru

Healthy deep ruby-red. Tighter and more medicinal on the nose than the Caillerets, offering aromas of black cherry and licorice. In a tighter, stonier style, with its black fruit flavors accented by herbs and black pepper. (I would have guessed that this wine had been vinified with a portion of whole clusters, but I would have been wrong.) A distinctly cooler style than the Caillerets even if it displays similar flavor intensity, with the tannins coming across as firmer and dustier. **(89-91 points)**

2016 Pommard Les Jarollières 1er Cru

(this vineyard is contiguous to Volnay and does not feature the red soil typical to Pommard): Bright ruby-red. Very ripe aromas of black fruits, flowers and licorice complicated by a menthol note. Densely packed and concentrated, conveying a medicinal aspect to its flavors of black fruits, menthol and licorice. But not at all a rustic style. Finishes with ripe tannins and very good length. **(89-91 points)**

2015 Volnay Clos des 60 Ouvrées 1er Cru

Dark red with ruby tones. A bit higher-pitched on the nose than the Clos de la Bousse d'Or but with a sexy note of reduction to the very pure aromas of dark cherry, black raspberry, mocha and coffee; an unexpected floral note adds lift. Densely packed, concentrated and bright, with harmonious acidity and an element of medicinal reserve giving this wine a firm spine for aging. A more vertical style than the Clos de la Bousse d'Or, with solid, late-arriving tannins fully buffered by the wine's mid-palate sweetness. This wine struck me as a bit chocolatey from tank in November but boasts plenty of inner-mouth tension in the bottle. **(92+ points)**

2015 Bonnes-Mares Grand Cru

Healthy, dark red-ruby color. Reticent, youthfully medicinal aromas of purple and black berries, licorice and crushed rock. Then densely packed and surprisingly deep, with its moderately sweet dark fruit flavors framed by sound acidity and firm underlying minerality. But this very youthful grand cru also displays a slightly minty greenness that limits its appeal in the early going. Finishes with more sweetness than the Groseilles but also with a serious dusting of tannins that will require extended cellaring. **(91+ points)**

2015 Corton Bressandes Grand Cru

Bright red-ruby. Very ripe, nuanced aromas of black cherry, dark raspberry, licorice and earth. Densely packed and very ripe but again with sound, harmonious acidity giving shape to the dark fruit, spice and licorice flavors. Finishes with a strong spine of

building tannins and pungent violet florality. This extract-rich, very primary wine will require considerable patience and may eventually merit an even higher rating. **(91+ points)**

2015 Volnay Clos de la Bousse d'Or 1er Cru

Dark red with ruby highlights. Very ripe, smoky, soil-driven aromas of redcurrant, cinders, tobacco and underbrush; a bit of a shock following the more classic 2016s at this address. Large-scaled, rich and deep, conveying uncommon breadth to its red berry and earth flavors. Finishes with big, chewy, dusty, palate-coating tannins and excellent length. Like all of these '15s, this one calls for at least several years of cellaring. **(91+ points)**

2016 Riesling Wehlener Sonnenuhr Kabinett

Scents of lime and apricot are not exactly typical for this site, but they are appealing, and they anticipate the juicy profusion that emerges on a polished, buoyant, subtly glycerol-slicked palate. This finishes with impressive cling, consummate refreshment, a fine sense of slate suffusion, and adept integration of what by prevailing Mosel standards has to be counted as exceedingly modest residual sugar. **(90 points)**

