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**Samuel Billaud**

by **Stephen Tanzer**

Samuel Billaud moved his growing operation into a new winery in the center of Chablis in time to vinify the 2015s. (He actually purchased and renovated the winery of Stéphane Moreau-Naudet, who left to build a larger facility for his late-bottled wines.) In the new facility, Billaud only needs to pump his wines once, to prepare them for bottling; everything else is done by gravity.

Billaud's production has grown, now that he has regained control of four hectares of his vines following the purchase of Domaine Billaud-Simon by Faiveley in 2014. He produced about 90,000 bottles of Chablis in 2014 and will be at around 110,000 in vintage 2015, including his new purchases of fruit from the grand crus Blanchots, Valmur and Bougros.

Billaud describes 2015 as “a very aromatic vintage, less minerally but more fruity than 2014.” The freshness, he explained, was due to the early harvest; while he admitted that the analytic acidity is not high (between 3.8 and 4.2 grams per liter, with pHs ranging widely, from 3.1 to as high as 3.6), he pointed out that the “taste of acidity” comes from the concentration of the wines. He had to deal with hail in Les Pargues, the bottom of Chapelot, Montée de Tonnerre, Les Clos and Blanchots and was forced to pick about five days earlier than he had originally planned, beginning on September 2. Still, he maintained, the ripeness was almost complete when the hail struck. But the rainiest areas that did not suffer from hail tended to make softer wines, he added. The yields in his premier cru vineyards averaged around 45 hectoliters per hectare, according to Billaud.

The 2015s were still on their lees, unracked, when I tasted with Billaud in early June, and most of the grand crus—the wines Billaud ages in barrels—were still in the middle of their secondary fermentations, as the temperature of his barrel cellar went down to about 50 this winter as he had not yet finished his thermo-regulation system in the floor. I will have to report on these wines next year. Incidentally, when I brought up the subject of bitterness on the finishes of some 2015s I had tasted in a few Chablis cellars, Billaud was not convinced that it was a constructive sign for the wines. “Bitterness can come from too-early picking in the hailed vineyards or from the addition of tartaric acidity,” he said.

Billaud describes 2014 as “a great, classic, mineral vintage with very good acidity and real tension. The wines are balanced for long aging.” He bottled the premier crus just before leaving his old cellar in La Chapelle Vaupelteigne but finished the grand crus in the new facility.

### **2015 Petit Chablis**

Pale, green-tinged color. Bright aromas of lemon and lime zest hint at a candied character. Juicy citrus flavors are joined by an exotic banana note. In a rather soft style, but finishes surprisingly firm and salty. The pH here is a relatively high 3.5. **(87 points)**

### **2015 Chablis Villages**

(a blend of three components: 75-year-old vines in Les Quarts, on white clay and *calcaire* soil in front of Vaillons; 25-year-old vines in Bas de Chapelot, harvested on September 2 and 3 because of hail; and vines in Les Pargues, which was slightly less affected by hail in 2015 but completely destroyed this spring; done entirely in stainless steel): Pale yellow. Very ripe peach and apricot aromas dominate the nose. Ripe and dense, showing good intensity and salty extract. Interestingly, this approximation of the final blend comes across as less exotic than one or two of its components, and more saline and smooth on the finish. **(88-90 points)**

### **2015 Chablis 1er Cru “Vaillons” Vieilles Vignes**

Bright, pale yellow. Pure, fruit-driven aromas and flavors of pineapple, lemon and crushed stone. Rich and pliant on the palate, with a complicating hint of lichee and a touch of salinity. Nicely dense and persistent. **(88-90 points)**

### **2015 Chablis 1er Cru “Mont de Milieu”**

(made from three plots, at the bottom, middle and top of the cru, with vine age of 70, 25 and 75 years, respectively): Pale, green-tinged yellow. Vibrant aromas of crushed lime zest, spearmint and licorice. A step up in energy and minerality from the Vaillons, showing excellent inner-mouth tension and cut to its citrus, mint and fresh herb flavors. Seriously dry, upright Chablis with noteworthy length and salinity. Fifteen percent of this wine was still doing its malo in barrel at the time of my visit, so my projected scoring range must be viewed as provisional. **(88-91 points)**

### **2015 Chablis 1er Cru “Montée de Tonnerre”**

(a blend of very old vines in Montée de Tonnerre and 35-year-old vines in Chapelot): Brisk, slightly high-toned aromas of white peach and white flowers. Concentrated and tactile, with surprising sweetness of fruit more than buffered by slightly bitter minerality. Finishes tight and vibrant, with crushed stone, menthol and saline nuances. Aging on the lees is bringing reduction but also a better extraction of minerality, says Billaud, adding that 2015 is a vintage "with sun and concentration, like 2013, 2011 and 2009." **(89-91 points)**

### **2014 Chablis Villages**

Very pale yellow-green. Slightly high-toned apricot aroma. A rather creamy village wine for its vintage, conveying enticing sweetness to its orange and peach flavors. A spicy element accentuates the wine's high-toned character. The old vines of Les Quarts were the source of the exotic fruit character here, noted Billaud. **(88 points)**

### **2014 Chablis 1er Cru “Mont de Milieu”**

Pale lemon-yellow. Deeply pitched apricot and smoky flint aromas. Fat and silky on entry but classically dry, with surprising acidity giving firmness and a slightly aggressive quality to the wine's back half. Generous in the middle, then more austere and savory on the back, finishing with solid youthful minerality. This is tighter now than it appeared to be from tank last year. The acidity here is the highest of these 2014s at 4.7 grams per liter. In fact, these vines have always produced high-acid wines, back to the Billaud-Simon days. Billaud doesn't really know why but figures that there must be less potassium in the soil. **(90 points)**

### **2014 Chablis 1er Cru “Montée de Tonnerre”**

Pale yellow. Reticent aromas of stone, quinine and lime, plus a whiff of brown spices. Wonderfully concentrated, thick wine with a texture of liquid stone. Quite full for Chablis premier cru but utterly seamless and classically dry. This impeccably balanced wine boasts thick, rising finishing flavors of crushed citrus peel and wet stone, plus an

exhilarating suggestion of bitter minerality. And yet there's a captivating element of sweetness as well. Billaud believes that this bone-dry wine will be at its best in ten years. **(92 points)**

### **2014 Chablis 1er Cru “Séchet”**

Pale yellow. Pure, slightly high-toned aromas of pineapple, stone fruits and crushed-stone minerality, lifted by lemon and orange zest. Pristine, adamantly mineral wine with terrific intensity and framing acidity to its yellow peach and apricot flavors. A real fruit bomb in the context of the vintage but with brisk, firm-edged minerality giving terrific chewy grip to the sexy lingering orange and apricot flavors. I suspect that a few years in bottle will bring greater harmony to the wine's pungent fruit and mineral elements. **(91+ points)**

### **2014 Chablis Grand Cru “Vaudésir”**

(Billaud has plots in the "cold, minerally, fresh southwest side" of the appellation and in the southeastern portion, which ripens earlier; like the Preuses, this went through its alcoholic and malolactic fermentations entirely in oak and was then racked into tank in April of 2015 for 12 additional months of aging on its lees): Pale yellow. Ripe peach and crushed stone along with some obvious vanillin oak on the highly aromatic nose. Very rich, saline and backward, with pure minerality contributing to its youthfully austere character. Boasts excellent density and energy but comes across as much more angular and unevolved in the early going than the Séchet. A touch of finishing bitterness will require patience. Billaud noted that part of this *cuvée* was aged in a new 400-liter Chassin barrel. This was the first vintage to include some estate fruit. **(92+ points)**

### **2014 Chablis Grand Cru “Les Preuses”**

(Billaud has purchased this fruit from 50-year-old vines since 2012; like the Vaudésir and Clos, this was vinified in used barrels and aged on its lees in stainless steel): Bright, pale yellow. Laid-back aromas of grapefruit, white flowers and crushed rock, complemented by spicy oak. Big, broad, horizontal wine with terrific floral lift and minerality giving it outstanding inner-mouth tension and definition. This taut, highly concentrated wine (the crop level was 35 hectoliters per hectare, the same as Les Clos in 2014) finishes tactile very dry and extremely long, with vibrant notes of wet stone and flowers. The oak element barely registers on the aftertaste. Billaud finds this wine more delicate than the Clos, which he marginally prefers for its "straight line" and greater complexity. **(94 points)**

## **2014 Chablis Grand Cru “Les Clos”**

Restrained aromas and flavors of underripe pineapple, fresh peach and crushed rock already suggest the complexity to come. Classic fine-grained Clos: wonderfully full, chewy and primary, conveying an impression of saline liquid minerality. The most primary of these 2014s and also the brightest and longest, finishing with resounding notes of menthol and crushed stone. Boasts remarkable density for its modest 12.8% alcohol. **(94+ points)**



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