



## France, Chablis: 2015 & 2016 - Battered But Not Broken as reviewed by Neal Martin

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*Last time I visited Samuel Billaud he had just moved into his new winery in the heart of the village of Chablis, the erstwhile winery of Moreau-Naudet, located just down from Domaine Droin. The place back then was ostensibly a work site strewn with detritus and hammering/sawing workmen. Now it looks as if nearly everything is complete and finally, after many years and the upheaval of an acrimonious division of the original domain, he is equipped with a modern winery with all the advances that entails. "I have a new press with a table de tri," he told me upon entering his three-quarters-built tasting room (the electrics were being put in). "Now the grapes go directly into the press and then into the winery for a debourbage at around 10° Celsius. We also work completely by gravity—I wanted to get rid of the pumps."*

*Through his contacts, there is also an expansion of his portfolio so that from the 2015 vintage he now has a full complement of six grand crus to his name. I asked Samuel about the 2016 vintage. "The average yield was between 15 and 30 hectoliters per hectare, around half the normal production. For example, the vineyard in Les Pargues that goes into the Chablis Village was completely wiped out [just like at Domaine Servin]. I bought in grapes to make the Bourgogne Chardonnay due to the shortfall and I will continue to buy grapes in this area. There is no Petit Chablis in 2016. In 2016 I started to harvest on 27 September but after waiting so long it was quick—everything was harvested within a week. We found the bunches had good maturity with plenty of tension and acidity. What I like in the 2016s is the freshness and acidity compared to the 2015s." I inquired further about the 2015s as I tasted through the portfolio. "We had hail on the night of 1 September that particularly affected Montée de Tonnerre and Les Clos," he said, "so I called all the team and started picking the following day."*

*At the generic and village cru level Samuel raises his wines in stainless steel. With respect to the grand crus, they spend 12 months in barrel, where they go through malolactic fermentation. They are then racked in September and aged on the lees for a further six months in stainless steel vats. This was a fantastic set of wines from Billaud that mostly triumphed over the numerous obstacles Mother Nature threw in the way. One can speculate whether he would have been able to achieve such quality had he still vinified the wines in the temporary facility he occupied beforehand—I think not. That should take nothing away from a skilled and experienced winemaker whose approach I think is spot on, in particular his assiduous use of used barrels that do not impede upon the terroir expression and a judicious use of reduction that lends complexity without dictating the taste. The 2015s and 2016s might have been born under trying circumstances, but with the new winery up and running, who knows what brilliant wines lie around the corner.*

### **2016 Chablis 1er Cru Sechet**

The 2016 Chablis 1er Cru Sechet comes from 65-year-old vines and, like the other crus, was only matured in tank. It has a steely bouquet with cold wet limestone and light sea spray scents that are very well defined. The palate is precise and focused, quite elegant and feminine with orange zest, mango and hints of dried pineapple toward the saline finish. On the aftertaste there is a touch of stem ginger that lingers long in the mouth. Superb—one of the best Séchets that I have tasted from barrel. **(92-94 points)**

### **2016 Chablis 1er Cru Vaillons Vieilles Vignes**

The 2016 Chablis 1er Cru Vaillons Vieilles Vignes comes from 70-year-old vines raised only in stainless steel. I like the aromatics here...this has a sense of purpose with vivid scents of orange zest and a touch of lychee. The palate is tensile right from the start thanks to that killer line of acidity. There is great depth here and the harmonious finish feels assured and elegant. Great potential and for me this is a serious step up from the Chablis Village and certainly worth the few extra dollars. **(91-93 points)**

### **2016 Chablis 1er Cru Mont de Milieu**

The 2016 Chablis 1er Cru Mont de Milieu comes from three different types of vineyards at different altitudes and vine age that are blended together in the vineyard. It has a slightly austere bouquet with fine delineation: granite and flint scents. The palate is well balanced with crisp acidity and is very precise and harmonious, with hints of quince and apricot toward the pretty finish. This is another very elegant wine from Samuel Billaud. **(91-93 points)**

### **2016 Chablis 1er Cru Montee de Tonnerre**

The 2016 Chablis 1er Cru Montee de Tonnerre comes from two parcels, one in the titular vineyard and the other in Chapelot, not far from Raveneau. It has quite a stern, focused, flinty

bouquet that needs coaxing from the glass. The palate is (again) well balanced with a fine line of acidity. There are subtle notes of white peach and orange zest in situ, although perhaps not quite exuding the persistence of the Mont de Milieu on the finish. Still, this will merit three or four years in bottle. **(90-93 points)**

#### **2015 Chablis Grand Cru les Clos**

The 2015 Chablis Grand Cru les Clos, from a plot close to Faiveley towards the top of the vineyard, was reduced to two barrels this vintage. It seems to shrug off the hail damage on the nose: well defined with crisp citrus fruit, quince and apricot blossom. The palate is well balanced with fine acidity and a slight marine note towards the finish, with hints of crustacea and a pinch of white pepper. This is a mercurial les Clos that seems to constantly change in the glass. Sophistication and class—that is all. **(93 points)**

#### **2015 Chablis Grand Cru Vaudesir**

The 2015 Chablis Grand Cru Vaudesir comes from two parcels and is matured in three-year-old barrels. It has a very elegant bouquet and is beautifully poised with great precision—there are hints of praline and marzipan in the background but they let the mineralité do all the talking. The palate is very well balanced with a crisp line of acidity and a touch of bitter lemon and quince towards the poised and persistent finish. Top class. **(93 points)**

#### **2015 Chablis Grand Cru Bougros**

The 2015 Chablis Grand Cru Bougros has a splendid bouquet with a very subtle reductive note. There is real delineation and poise here, with walnut and smoke emerging with time and struck flint emerging later. The palate is well defined with a fine bead of acidity (although the acidity level is lower than in Blanchot). Touches of blackcurrant leaf and quince dovetail into a very energetic finish that lingers for over a minute. Superb. **(93 points)**

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

The 2015 Chablis 1er Cru Mont de Milieu was matured in 20% barrel and 80% stainless steel for 18 months. It has a clean and precise bouquet that needs more coaxing than the more forward Les Fourneaux, with touches of hazelnut and smoke emerging with time. The palate is well balanced with an attacking entry, malic in the mouth and with a very saline finish. This is a straight-down-the-line classic Chablis that is perhaps more 2014 in style than 2015. This is nothing short of excellent. **(92 points)**

#### **2015 Chablis 1er Cru Montee de Tonnerre**

The 2015 Chablis 1er Cru Montee de Tonnerre underwent the same vinification as the Mont de Milieu. It has a complex bouquet with sea spray/flint aromas at first, a touch of Golden Delicious apple and smoked walnut. The palate is very balanced and poised with a crisp line of

acidity and a generous finish that embraces tropical fruit (guava and passion fruit) but does not allow them to dominate proceedings. This is another impressive 2015 from Samuel Billaud. **(92 points)**

### **2015 Chablis Grand Cru Valmur**

The 2015 Chablis Grand Cru Valmur, matured in used three-and four-year-old barrels, exhibits a slight reduction on the nose that initially detracts from the precision, but it soon gains clarity and offers lovely scents of white peach and clementine. The palate is very well balanced with fine delineation and is quite spicy with that reduction resurfacing towards the finish. I hope it disappears with bottle age because there is some very attractive tropical-tinged fruit tucked in just underneath. **(91+ points)**

### **2015 Chablis Grand Cru Blanchot**

The 2015 Chablis Grand Cru Blanchot was reduced to just three barrels in this vintage due to hail on 31 August that stripped the vines of leaves. It was Samuel's first vinification of this vineyard within his own company. Matured in five-year-old barrels, it is more austere on the nose than the Bougros and demands more coaxing from the glass—it remains stern and steely. The palate is saline on the entry, well balanced with a crisp line of acidity, fresh and vibrant but just needing a little more body on the finish. **(91 points)**

### **2015 Chablis 1er Cru Fourneaux**

The 2015 Chablis 1er Cru Fourneaux was described as “gourmand” by Samuel Billaud. It comes from south to southeast-facing vines planted in 1971. It has a potent, slate-like scent that is clean and precise. I admire the precision here. The palate is well balanced with a citrus peel and fresh lime opening. It is quite harmonious in the mouth with a tang of stem ginger that perks up the finish. It just misses that persistence on the finish but otherwise it captures that fiery edge that makes it thoroughly enjoyable. **(91 points)**

### **2015 Chablis 1er Cru Sechet**

The 2015 Chablis 1er Cru Sechet, which sees no wood contact, shows just a touch of reduction on the nose, although it is simpatico with the fruit. There are subtle notes of white chocolate, walnut, a hint of dried quince and dandelion. The palate is well balanced with a fine bead of acidity, touches of clementine and dried apricot leading to an understated but focused, precise finish. Perhaps this is one of Billaud's more approachable 2015s? **(90 points)**