



## France, Burgundy: Chablis 2016 and 2017

featuring Samuel Billaud

reviewed by William Kelley

August 2018

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*Steely and tensile, great Chablis is Burgundy's most incisive and mineral white, and this report is dedicated to seeking out its best exemplars. Chablis is a large region, accounting for some 20% of Burgundy's production and an even larger share of its exports; and its best sites, classified as premier cru and grand cru, account for a mere 10% of Chablis production. So, this article focuses on the best producers and most exciting new talents, several of which are reviewed for the first time. With only two or three exceptions, I visited all these producers during two weeks of intensive tastings in late May and early June. These tastings emphasized the 2016 and 2017 vintages, though readers will find that I've also included several notes on older vintages, above all from the region's two reference points for classical, artisanal winemaking: Raveneau and Dauvissat.*

### **2016: The Vintage and The Wines**

*The 2016 Chablis vintage was decidedly challenging. Frost struck on April 27, followed by two hailstorms: one, on May 13, struck the north of the appellation; another, on May 27, struck Préhy, Chichée and Courgis to the south. Virulent mildew was an issue at the beginning of the season, as it was in the Côte d'Or. Some relief followed in the form of a sunny, warm July and August. Rain on September 15 followed by showers over the following days relieved hydric stress, but it encouraged botrytis. Harvest took place around September 20-25. In many cases, second- and third-generation grapes were harvested along with surviving first-generation fruit. While yields varied significantly across the region, the crop was overall some 50% below average in volume.*

*The 2016 wines are below average in acidity but lack the super ripe, sun-kissed quality of the 2015 vintage that preceded them. From barrel, that made them seem ostensibly more classically Chablisien in character, but from bottle, it is clear that neither vintage could accurately be described as "typical" in the sense that the 2014 vintage was typical. Low yields and, in some cases, the influence of botrytis marks many of the wines, lending them musky, exotic qualities and a textural, gourmand profile. While tasting the wines, several producers joked that "we could be in Alsace." I strongly suspect that those qualities will become more marked with bottle age. While the vintage is by some margin superior to the atrocious 2013s, it's clearly a challenging and heterogenous year—and one in which to carefully seek out the best producers. Readers might like to think of it as a hypothetical blend of the 2012 and 2013 vintages, with the proportions depending on the success of the grower. Looking further back, 1997 presents several points of comparison. And I'm optimistic that the best wines may evolve along the lines of the 1992s.*

### **2017: The Vintage and The Wines**

*While the 2017 vintage was also marked by frost, which struck with ferocity between April 18-27, this is a much more homogeneous and classical vintage than 2016. The season was sunny and dry, with comparatively little disease pressure, concluding with an early harvest in late August. Musts were lower in acidity than more steely, incisive vintages, such as 2014 and 2008, and comparatively high in sugar. At this early stage, the wines display a generous, sun-kissed quality without attaining the extremes of ripeness, concentration and extract found in 2015. Readers may wish to think of them as a somewhat fresher, brighter version of the 2009 vintage, and the best wines evoke a hypothetical blend of that year with the cooler, tangier 2010 vintage.*

*With more and more producers maturing the wines on the lees for two winters, it's worth adding that many of these young 2017s were still youthfully unformed when I tasted them: I'm planning to make a further visit to Chablis after the harvest and will endeavor to update readers on the vintage's evolution in my report on the 2017s from the Côte d'Or.*

### **Trends and Observations**

*While this report focuses on the best producers and features many warmly recommended wines, and while I am an admitted devotee of Chablis and its wines, with a great many in my cellar, it would be obtuse to ignore some of the region's problems. Chablis's bright acids and striking tension are shown to greatest effect when they are combined with depth and concentration. All too often—and remember that the wines reviewed in this article represent merely the tip of a 35-million-bottle iceberg—the region's wines can be brittle, dilute and anonymous. The recipe for homogeneity is simple: chemical farming, elevated yields, machine harvesting, enzymatic clarification, fermentation with selected yeasts in stainless steel below 20 degrees Celsius and*

*bottling after fining and filtration within a year of the vintage. One wine made this way tastes very much like another.*

*Fortunately, a number of producers work differently. Chablis's chemically farmed moonscape is punctuated by islands of living soils, which are worked by conscientious producers. Many of the best growers pick by hand, and others at least take the trouble to calibrate their mechanical harvesters to achieve consistently good results. In the cellar, producers that eschew enological processing in favor of more artisanal practices are producing complex, characterful wines. Many are prolonging élevage to permit natural settling and clarification of the young wines. These trends are evident at larger houses, such as Laroche and Fèvre, as much as in the cellars of smaller producers. And as prices around the world demonstrate, the market is willing to pay a considerable premium for these more characterful and classical expressions of Chablis's magical terroirs. Unfortunately, the list of new and emerging domaines working this way is all too short. But rest assured that I am ardently seeking them out and that any producers willing to take the risk of emulating the practices of Chablis's best estates will find warm support in the pages of this publication.*

### **Ten Premiers Crus Worth a Special Effort to Seek Out**

**#1: 2016 Samuel Billaud Chablis 1er Cru Séchet**

#### **Samuel Billaud**

*After parting ways with Domaine Billaud Simon after some 20 years, Samuel Billaud has established his own state-of-the-art winery in central Chablis, where he is ably vinifying the fruit of some four hectares of estate vineyards, supplemented by purchased grapes. Manual harvesting of ripe but bright fruit is the rule here, followed by fermentation at 16 to 20 degrees Celsius in tank and inconspicuous wood and maturation for 15 to 18 months on the lees for the premiers crus. These are bright, nervy expressions of Chablis with plenty of concentration and length. In a sense, Billaud's evolution as a free agent has followed a similar trajectory to that of Billaud Simon under its new management. Producing classy wines of crystalline purity, this address already belongs on any list of Chablis's best.*

#### **2017 Chablis 1er Cru Fourneaux**

The 2017 Chablis 1er Cru Fourneaux offers up notions of fresh peach, honeycomb and lemons. On the palate, it's medium to full-bodied, with a textural, gourmand attack that segues into a tense, saline mid-palate and finish. **(90-92 points)**

#### **2017 Chablis 1er Cru Mont de Milieu**

The 2017 Chablis 1er Cru Mont de Milieu is very promising, wafting from the glass with notes of citrus blossom and pastry cream. On the palate, it's medium to full-bodied, with a blocky, tight-

knit core and tangy balancing acids. It's one of the more structurally reserved wines in the range, and I suspect it will need some time in bottle too. **(91-93 points)**

#### **2017 Chablis 1er Cru Montmains**

The 2017 Chablis 1er Cru Montmains offers up a classic bouquet of lemon, green apple, white flowers and oystershell. On the palate, it's medium-bodied, delicate and tangy, with a good core of fruit and bright balancing acids. **(89-91 points)**

#### **2017 Chablis 1er Cru Montée de Tonnerre**

The 2017 Chablis 1er Cru Montée de Tonnerre is excellent, offering up an already complex bouquet of lemon oil, confit citrus, dried white flowers, honeycomb and fresh croissant. On the palate, it's medium to full-bodied, powerful and satiny, with lovely depth at the core and an impressive sense of completeness. It promises to be one of the highlights of Samuel Billaud's 2017 collection. **(91-93+ points)**

#### **2017 Chablis 1er Cru Séchet**

The 2017 Chablis 1er Cru Séchet is potentially the finest of these premiers crus from Samuel Billaud, and I'm looking forward to tasting it from bottle after its full 18 months of sur lie élevage. Unfurling in the glass with aromas of lemon oil, oystershell and dried white flowers, it's medium to full-bodied, deep and complete, with an electric line of acidity underlying its considerable concentration and power. It's tight-knit and will need time, but it's a superb rendition of this top lieu-dit and a wine that will delight Chablis purists. **(92-94 points)**

#### **2017 Chablis 1er Cru Vaillons Vieilles Vignes**

The 2017 Chablis 1er Cru Vaillons Vieilles Vignes exhibits pretty aromas of lemon oil, mandarin and fresh croissant, followed by a medium to full-bodied, elegantly textural palate with tangy acids, a glossy attack and a saline, stony finish. **(90-92 points)**

#### **2017 Chablis Villages**

The 2017 Chablis Villages is a success, exhibiting attractive aromas of lemon oil, yellow orchard fruit and pastry cream. On the palate, it's medium-bodied, with good depth and chewy concentration, underpinned by succulent acids. **(88 points)**

#### **2017 Petit Chablis Sur les Clos**

Aromas of green apple, ripe Meyer lemon and white flowers introduce the 2017 Petit Chablis Sur les Clos, a medium-bodied, tangy wine with bright acids and a chalky finish. It's a crisp, tensile Petit Chablis to follow for the next handful of years. **(87 points)**

### **2016 Chablis 1er Cru Fourneaux**

The 2016 Chablis 1er Cru Fourneaux is a success, offering up notes of fresh peach, yellow orchard fruit and honeycomb. On the palate, it's medium to full-bodied, textural and satiny, with nice underlying tension, concluding with chalky grip. It's an impressive achievement to capture so much energy in this sunny site and in this vintage. **(89 points)**

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

The 2016 Chablis 1er Cru Montée de Tonnerre is showing very well, offering up a classy bouquet of lemon oil, iodine and oystershell that's framed by light reduction. On the palate, it's full-bodied, rich and textural—it was cropped at 25 hectoliters per hectare—but remains tense and tangy through the finish. Billaud notes that it was bottled earlier than usual to capture more freshness. **(91 points)**

### **2016 Chablis 1er Cru Séchet**

The 2016 Chablis 1er Cru Séchet is showing very well from bottle, unfurling in the glass with classy aromas of lemon oil, dried white flowers and oatmeal. On the palate, the wine is medium to full-bodied, glossy and deep, with superb concentration and chewy extract, framed by tangy acids. It's taut, pure and very classic in profile, and to my palate it's the finest of Billaud's 2016 premiers crus. **(93 points)**

### **2016 Chablis Grand Cru Blanchot**

The 2016 Chablis Grand Cru Blanchot reveals notes of honeyed peaches, crisp orchard fruit and spices. On the palate, it's full-bodied, textural and gourmand, with a rich, layered mid-palate underpinned by juicy acids, concluding with a promisingly tense, saline finish. This is one of the highlights of Billaud's range in 2016. **(93 points)**

### **2016 Chablis Grand Cru Bougros**

The 2016 Chablis Grand Cru Bougros is also a great success for the vintage, offering up complex aromas of mandarin, lemon oil, crisp peach, green apple and oatmeal. On the palate, it's medium to full-bodied, glossy and textural, with a rich, layered profile but good balancing acids. It's already quite approachable. **(92 points)**

### **2016 Chablis Grand Cru Les Clos**

The 2016 Chablis Grand Cru Les Clos offers up a classy bouquet of preserved lemon, subtle peach, honeycomb, fresh croissants and white flowers. On the palate, it's full-bodied, rich and layered, with considerable power and chewy extract, displaying excellent depth and energy. It's a serious wine, but it will be quite open-knit and accessible by the standards of Les Clos. **(93+ points)**

### **2016 Chablis Chablis Grand Cru Vaudésir**

A reserved bouquet of lemon oil, dried white flowers and beeswax introduces the 2016 Chablis Grand Cru Vaudésir, a dense, full-bodied and concentrated wine that's quite firm and structured on the palate, showing considerable promise. It hails from two parcels at either end of this climat. **(93 points)**