

## France Report (April 1-26, 2005)

Last Thursday I returned from my tenth tour of France since 1995 and I'm struck in awe by how tasting something like 1000 different wines in just under four weeks having driven 5000 kilometres gets better every time. Even though I have covered the roads and cellars many times before, familiarity by no means breeds contempt; the new vintage is always exciting, the new wine with another story to tell in all its complex detail.

This trip was certainly one of the more interesting in that one of the most extraordinary vintages of Europe took place during the heatwave and drought of 2003. This vintage has been well documented, and I know how hot it was from personal experience; 42° without a breath of wind, all the way from Avignon in the south where you might expect a fair bit of heat, to Alsace and beyond in to Germany where no records of such a year exist.

The bare facts of 2003 were the unusual and constant extreme heat, drought, and uniquely entire regions which were harvested three to four weeks earlier than normal. Yields were reduced by 40%-60%, (which was exacerbated in Burgundy by April frost). Due to the low quantities every grower has increased the price from between 5% to a whopping 50%.

So those wonderfully elegant, complex and neatly structured wines of eastern France are all fruity, fat and blousy. Wrong. The last thing I want to do is sound like a wine merchant flogging his wares (this doesn't work in 2003 because there was so little wine produced). The problem will be getting enough 2003, even though these wines won't be rushed as the 02s were, I'm sure that when people taste the 2003s anytime after April 2005 they will change their initial views and reviews and the demand will surge.

Certainly my pre-conception of the 2003s was along the lines of cooked fruit, low acidity and wine lacking freshness. This is certainly how many of the international press have branded the vintage, particularly in Burgundy where such luminaries as Clive Coates declared "and [I] will not be buying one drop of 2003". Of all the Burgundy I tasted only a small percentage showed cooked or raisoned flavours, the rest delivered amazing freshness considering the conditions.

I put this down to two things; **1/** I was tasting the wines after they had been in bottle long enough for Burgundy's minerality to return, and **2/** All of the growers who I represent are first rate producers and know what they are doing.

The high's and the low's are pretty fairly summed up as this – there are some delightfully weighty Bourgogne and Haut Cote de Nuit/Beaune wines, just about everything on the hill of Corton did better than anywhere else in Burgundy due to the vines roots being able to tap some moisture from the water table, and appellation Beaune, which is always juxta-positioned for maximum ripeness got a little raisony and cooked.

At the expense of the ultimate Burgundy freshness and complexity the 03s are loaded with juicy powerful dense ripe fruit and super-ripe natural tannin which is absolutely chewable. The regional and Villages wines you can drink from now (and they are certainly the pick of the vintage making consideration of the grower name and the price). The top Village and Premier Crus are a 4-6 year proposition and there are some very good wines; my take on the Grand Crus is they will need a couple of years then will drink nicely for ten years and I wouldn't hesitate keeping the more structured Grand Cru's longer but they aren't wines showing typicity. Buy more 2002 Grand Cru's if you can.

Many of the Rhone 03s have made it through to the market-place and the wines are generous and powerful to say the least, with big slippery mouth-feel and high alcohol levels, this is a welcome return after the difficult 2002 (just quietly the 2004 Rhone's are breathtaking, particularly in the south).

The bush grown goblet vines of Beaujolais are stunning; Sancerre was forward and fruity but the wines are finished due to the short crop and most should be consumed very quickly. 2004 Sancerre is classical, contemporary and very much in the mould of the lovely flinty 02s.

Chablis was another surprise in 2003 with generous ripe round fruit but still with that lovely Chablis cut which, once again, is derived from the minerality which is just starting to show in the wines even though this is a low acid vintage and for relatively early consumption.

Alsace was a mixed bag, although I didn't taste widely in Alsace due to time constraints, it appears that Riesling has done well, the Pinot Gris is beautiful and the Gewurztraminers seem to lack any sort of finesse and are clumsy, too oily and over the top.

In the coming weeks I will publish grower profiles and tasting notes on all the wines tasted, including an exciting new Burgundy Domaine.

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