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PHOTO: JEREMY BALL



Supreme Balance

BURGUNDY'S 2019
VINTAGE IS NOT TO
BE MISSED

by Steven Spurrier

One of the five medieval bastions
in the city of Beaune serves as a
cellar for Domaine Chanson.

PHOTO COURTESY OF DOMAINE CHANSON

PHOTO COURTESY OF CATHERINE PETRIE



Catherine Petrie, MW, is
a buyer for London-based
importer Lay & Wheeler.

The U.K.

is the biggest export market for estate-grown Burgundies, and in normal years, January is Burgundy Month in London. The dozen or so specialist merchants that host events during that time all visit the region the previous autumn to order samples they collect right after Christmas, ensuring they're as fresh as possible for the tastings. Often, as many as 100 wines are presented from dozens of domaines across Burgundy, from Chablis down to the Mâconnais, so the retailers and buyers for restaurants (now all sadly closed certainly until Easter) have a very wide choice. For the observant wine writer, these tastings are the best of the year, and show the remarkable quality of Burgundy today.

Not only were this year's tastings canceled, but I am on lockdown in west Dorset. So for a vintage report, I have turned to Catherine Petrie, MW, a buyer for specialist importer Lay & Wheeler who has allowed me to quote her verbatim.

A Vintage of "High-Stakes Drama"

"This is the first and, I expect, only time in my career where I have had the pleasure of tasting and buying a vintage that I was also present for during its entire production. From January until December, I lived [at the prestigious Comte Armand estate in Pommard, experiencing] every bitter, frosty spring dawn and every sweltering minute of high summer:

[So] I am intimately familiar with the throes of the growing season and its many moments of high-stakes drama, [but] even so I have been stopped in my tracks by the calibre of the wines. . . . Between their supreme balance and their graceful power, they are far greater than the sum of their parts. That goes for both colours. I've been trying to think back to the last Burgundy vintage when both red and white were genuine five-star quality: 2010 perhaps?

But this vintage is tinged with disappointment for many growers: Yields are down by up to 30–50%. This is due to a combination of spring frost, cold weather at flowering, and the summer drought."



Domaine Chanson owns 43 hectares of Premier and Grand Cru vineyards in the Beaune appellation.

The Whites: Powerful Yet Graceful

"Charles Ballot of Domaine Ballot-Millot hit the nail on the head when he summed up the 2019 whites in three words: *'matière, densité, fraîcheur'*, [or] 'substance, density, freshness.' There is something genuinely seductive about their power and volume, [which are] made irresistible thanks to their freshness."

The Reds: Ripe but Refined

"The past decade has not been short of great red Burgundy vintages. Like 2015 and 2018, 2019 is certainly borne of a warm, ripe year; but its bright freshness means that the wines are not weighty or overly rich. What really marks the vintage out as top quality, however, is the character of the tannins: They are so graceful and elegant, ripe but refined, setting the wines apart from the more muscular, structured 2018s and dense, rich 2015s. This, combined with the red-fruited freshness [contributed by] decent acidity, means that the style of the reds is what we might call 'classical.' That is to say, the acidity is given equal billing to alcohol and tannin, making for wines of perfect balance. This is a special vintage, so purchases at the top end [and] an exploration of the successes of the lesser communes are equally advised."

Notes from the Author on Domaine Chanson's 2019 Releases

The wines from Domaine Chanson are probably my most preferred Burgundies—not the grandest by any means but perhaps the most expressive of each appellation, all grouped around Beaune, where the estate owns 43 hectares of exclusively Premier and Grand Cru vineyards.

The wines rest in barrel in one of the five medieval bastions that defended the city of Beaune, conceived under Louis XI and completed under Francis I; the four-story structure with 8-metre-thick walls is exceptional at maintaining a constant level of temperature and humidity.

The Bollinger family took ownership of Chanson in 1999, and marked improvements in quality and recognition have resulted from their investments over the past two decades. In lieu of the London tasting, I was sent ten half-bottles: four whites and six reds. Here are my notes.

WHITE

Savigny-Les-Beaune Hauts-Marconnets Premier Cru

White wines are very rare in Savigny, yet the marl, chalk, and limestone soil on this elevated site encouraged the planting of 2.18 southeast-facing hectares close to the hills of the Beaune Premier Crus. Both supple and fresh with the vintage's depth of fruit, this will show brilliantly; the 2012 in my cellar is at its peak.

Pernand-Vergelesses Les Caradeux

Premier Cru This vineyard of 1.9 hectares is ideally located on a mid-slope close to the hill of Corton-Charlemagne; it shares with the renowned Grand Cru not only its soil structure and elevation but also its pronounced, long-lived mineral characteristics. Cellar for the medium to long term.

Chassagne-Montrachet Les Chevottes

Premier Cru Chanson's 2 hectares here are located next door to the Grand Cru Le Mon-

trachet, which makes this a "must buy." It's one of the best expressions of Chardonnay grown on clay and limestone soil—supple yet firm, rich, and long.

Beaune Clos des Mouches Premier

Cru Of its 4.5 hectares in what is perhaps Beaune's best-known Premier Cru, Chanson has planted 2 to Chardonnay on an upper slope facing Pommard to the south. Lots of structure here for the future.

RED

Savigny-lès-Beaune La Dominode

Premier Cru Formally owned by the Lord of Savigny, this vineyard, set on chalk-based soils on a northeast-facing midslope, produces wines with high-toned aromas and great vibrancy.

Pernand-Vergelesses Les Vergelesses

Premier Cru Chanson owns 5.4 hectares in this appellation's best vineyard, enough to ensure a selection of only the best barrels for the final bottling of the Premier Cru. A wine of controlled firmness, with depth, length, and vigour yet elegance.

Beaune Clos des Marconnets Premier

Cru Firmness and refinement are the characteristics of this site located at the northern end of the Beaune AOC. Opening up at five years, the wines it yields are better at ten or more.

Beaune Les Grèves Premier Cru Perhaps my preferred Premier Cru due to the supple, seductive richness derived from its sandy, gravelly soil. Opens early, but benefits from seven to ten years in bottle.

Beaune Clos des Mouches Premier Cru

Ideally located on the Clos des Mouches hill looking south toward Pommard, where the proportion of clay in the limestone soil brings vigour, richness, and great depth of fruit.

Beaune Clos des Fèves Premier Cru

All 3.8 hectares of this walled-in monopole are owned by Domaine Chanson in the very heart of the Beaune Premier Crus. It is recognised that, were the vineyards to be reclassified, Clos des Fèves would become a Grand Cru. Total class.

The magic of Burgundy lies in its fascinating vineyards. Chardonnay and Pinot Noir are planted to express the site, not the varietal; nowhere else can this complexity of terroir be found. The 2019 vintage conveys it to perfection. *sj*

