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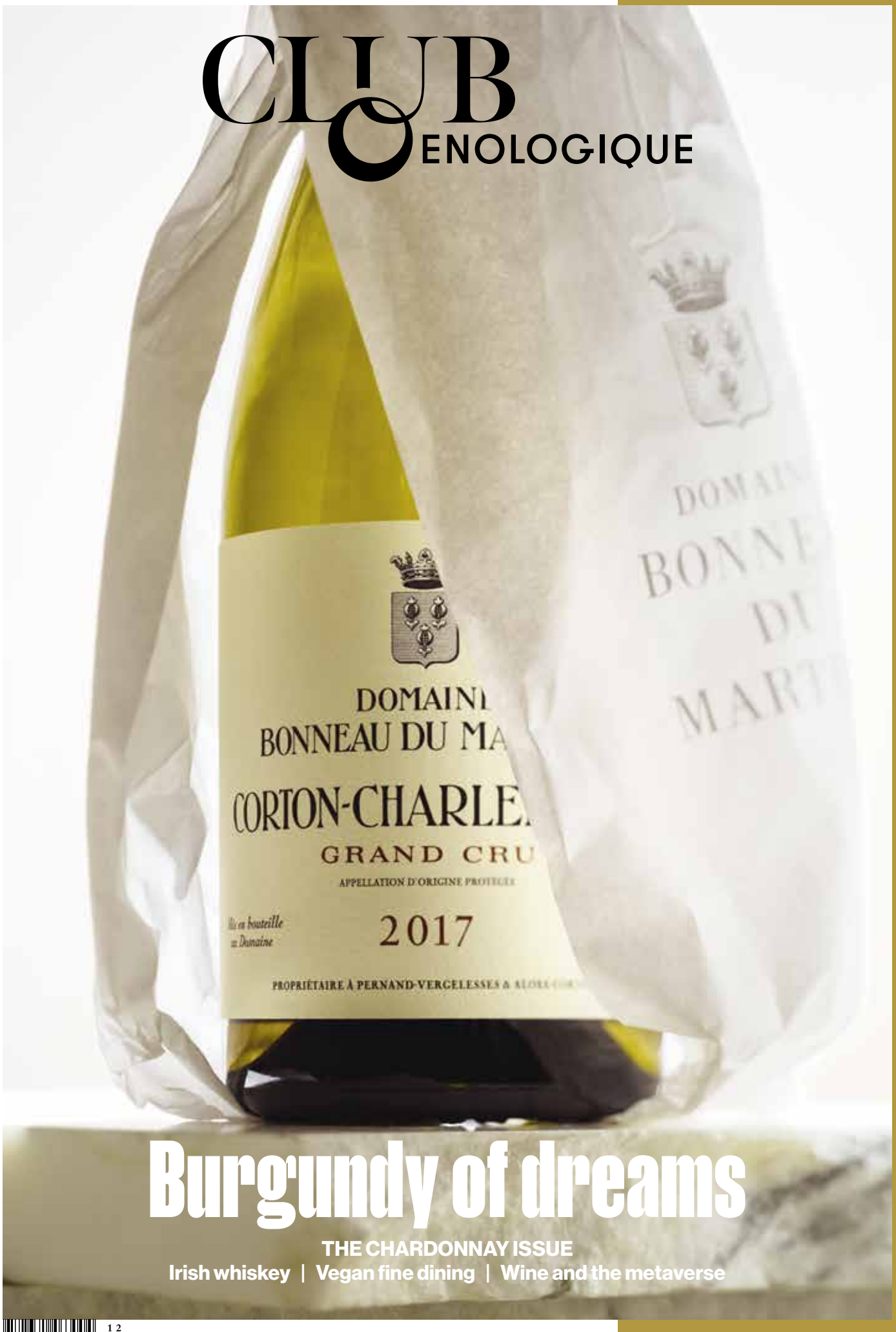

Burgundy of dreams

THE CHARDONNAY ISSUE

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WINE | SPIRITS | LIFESTYLE | ISSUE 12 | AUTUMN 2022 | £14

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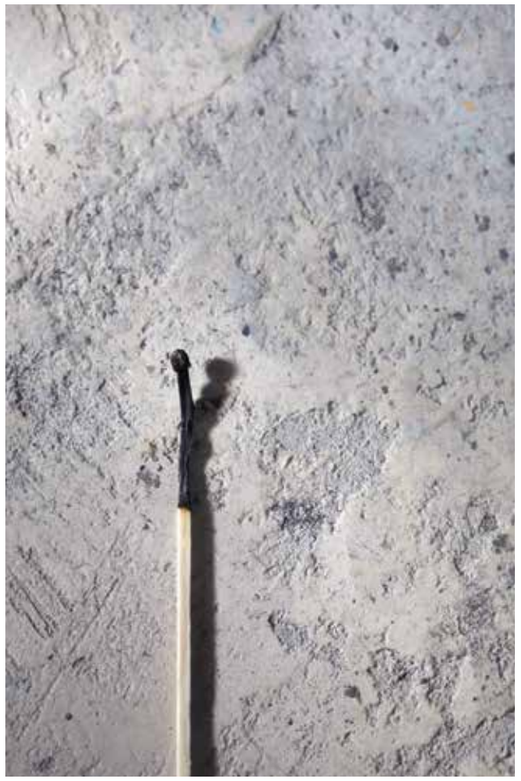
50 shades of Chardonnay

It's the ubiquitous grape, loved and loathed in equal measure – and nowhere does it reach greater profundity than in Burgundy. Jasper Morris MW looks at how perception and public opinion have shifted in recent times

Photography by Deborah Wastie



After the premature oxidation issue of the 1990s, the 2010s were all about a reductive character in Burgundian whites

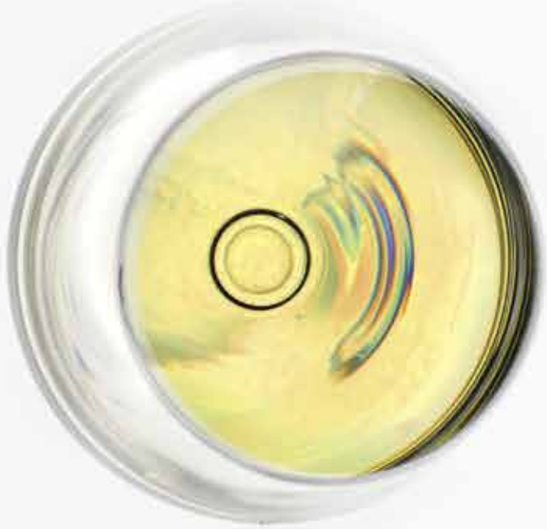
Perceptions of Chardonnay in Burgundy have changed a great deal in the 40-plus years during which I have been documenting the region's white wines. It is worth noting that books written prior to that period did not even mention that Chardonnay *was* the white grape of Burgundy – it was merely taken for granted. In his wonderful *Stay Me with Flagons* (1940), Maurice Healy does not reference the grape once when covering white Burgundy. He does, however, offer some wonderful, sometimes allegorical descriptions of the wines – of which more later...

Chardonnay may well be a recent arrival in Burgundy, despite the existence of a village of the same name in the Mâconnais since Roman times (there is almost certainly no connection between the two). Thanks to DNA testing, we know the parentage of Chardonnay (Pinot Noir x Gouais Blanc) but not where or when it emerged on the viticultural scene. In 1763, Abbé Tainturier specified Chardenet (sic) or Pinot Blanc as the grape for white Burgundy, using the two names as synonyms, as was still the case for Dr Lavalle in 1855. They are, of course, quite separate grapes. It was not until 1896 that the current spelling was formally agreed. Even so, the habit of referring to the grape as Pinot Chardonnay was hard to kill –the appellation Pinot-Chardonnay Mâcon was not officially abolished until September 2005.

What is the origin of the name? A *chardon* is a thistle in French, so I have rather cheekily been developing the theory that Chardonnay grows like a thistle anywhere it wants to – unlike the more sensitive Pinot Noir. A discussion over lunch with the Rollet family of Domaine de la Chapelle in Pouilly-Fuissé took this further: vine roots need help to dig deep, and one theory is that they have taken advantage of the deep root systems of thistles to accompany them down through the mother rock. This particular thistle has certainly spread its spores everywhere in the viticultural world.

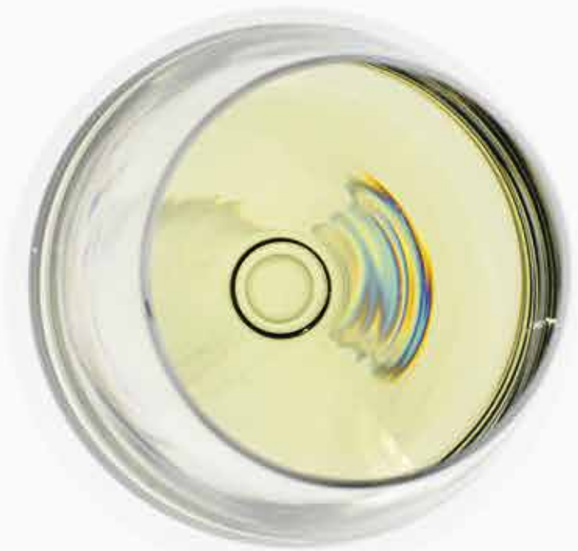
Only quite recently did I discover that, as late as the 1960s and early 1970s, it was actually very hard to sell white Burgundy. By the time I came on to the scene, the region's white wines were faring better than the reds, which had gone through a weak period due to the chemical scourges of fertilisation and herbicides. The whites benefited from bumper crops in years such as 1973 and 1979, enjoying a return to international favour.

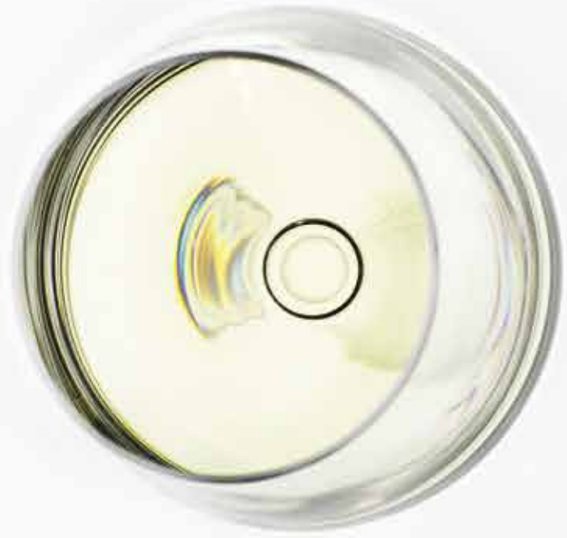
Chardonnay is an easy grape to grow. Its lack of a distinctive aroma leaves space for other influences



The white Burgundies of the late 1970s were succulent wines of a pale golden hue, though often with a streak of green. The bouquets, too, might have a vegetal greenness to them – what would now be called a phenolic edge – brought about largely through the methods of processing. Those were the days of metal hydraulic presses – Vaslin was the principal brand – that used to chew up the skins while pressing the grapes. This gave the wines more flavour but a rougher texture and less immediate appeal, especially when combined with the heavy doses of sulphur that were practised in those days. But that did not really matter, because neither critics nor consumers tasted the wines in their youth at that period. Importers might have done so, but they were looking for future potential rather than immediate gratification. This effect of including an element of the skins with the juice resulted in multilayered wines capable of ageing extremely well, reinforced by the higher levels of protective sulphur. Then, as now, it would be difficult to ascribe a particular set of flavours to white Burgundy as a whole, though each of the main appellations would (or should) have had its own descriptors. The most classic, uttered almost by rote by French sommeliers, was *beurre et noisettes* (butter and hazelnuts) for Meursault. That effect is no longer possible: it required golden grapes that had not become overripe; the wines then would be at 12–12.5% abv, often with a bit of help from the sugar merchant. In the current climate, luscious golden grapes will be much too high in sugar and too low in acidity. (Incidentally, Maurice Healy's take, back in 1940, was this: 'The white wines of Puligny and Chassagne are lean and slender, but without any lack of strength; in Meursault we find a rich, golden wine, quite as dry as other white Burgundies, but with a delightful lazy oiliness about it that suggests Brutus rather than Cassius.')

The 1980s saw some good to very good white Burgundy vintages. Perhaps the pick of them were 1982, 1985 and 1989, but there were interesting offerings in 1986 and 1988, while 1981, 1984 and maybe 1987 worked better in Chardonnay than Pinot Noir. However, it was during this period that we began to take our eye off the ball, and more so in the 1990s as the golden





age of red Burgundy began to dawn. All the conversation was about how to make an ethereal red wine, while questions on production of the whites tended to be limited to 'How much new oak do you use?' We all messed up – importers and critics, as well as the producers themselves – through complacency, and were ignorant of the dangers on the horizon.

For a while, Chardonnay ruled supreme, though one could also sense the backlash, encapsulated by the 'Anything but Chardonnay' (ABC) brigade. White Burgundy was often omitted from the ABC club because the wines continued to be known by their appellations rather than their grape. In his 1998 book *The Wine Avenger*, extrovert and iconoclastic New York wine expert Willie Gluckstern revealed himself to be not so much of a fan of Chardonnay, regardless of its source. He described it as 'the world's most overrated grape [with] only fair acidity, negligible sweetness and little flavor or aroma of its own. As a wine, the only things Chardonnay has a lot of – too much of – are alcohol and new oak. The product is rich, viscous and heady, with aromas of fresh-baked bread, vanilla, butterscotch and canned fruit cocktail – all the result of being revved up by fermentation and extended contact with new oak barrels.'

Chardonnay, whether from Burgundy or elsewhere, does not get my vote either if it tastes like that, which of course it need not. Gluckstern does have a point, though. Essentially, Chardonnay is non-aromatic and full-bodied. It is an easy grape to grow and a relatively easy wine to make. Its full-bodied nature offers a generous mouthfeel, and it is the lack of a distinctive aroma of its own that leaves space for other influences. These are the flavours that arise from the relative warmth of the growing season, the climate of the region and the nature of the soil; they reflect the vinification and maturation methods – from cultured yeasts with their own attributes, to the toasty, yeasty vanilla of various types of oak – allowing them to exert their influence on the character and, especially, the bouquet of the wine.

What Chardonnay really does do is provide a textural background on to which the characteristics of a given terroir can emerge – be it the white flowers of Chablis Grand Cru Blanchot, sunshine on the stones of St-Aubin Premier Cru En Remilly, or the electric backbone of Puligny-Montrachet Premier Cru Les Pucelles.

The first half of the 1990s gave no sign of the problems that were about to spring their unwelcome surprise: the scourge of premature oxidation – often shortened to premox or, sometimes, just the pox. 1996 was the first vintage heavily affected, though the results were only seen when the wines reached around five years old, well before the supposed sell-by date for fine white Burgundy. Wines would darken rapidly in the glass – sometimes already in the bottle – with unattractive aromatics of furniture polish and bruised apples. There are many causes behind this, though few explain the rapid falling off a cliff experienced from the 1996 vintage, except perhaps changes in the production and treatment of corks. This is not the place to evaluate all the different technical issues – now for the most part resolved – but one contributing factor may well have been a change in emphasis in what many producers were trying to do with their white wines. The magical success of fine red Burgundy in this period caused winemakers to focus on purity and elegance; but while Pinot may well aspire to ballerina stardom, Chardonnay is a much more muscular grape, more at home on the rugby field. Try to make it too pretty by cleaning up the juice and inhibiting influence

from the skins, and you risk throwing the baby out with the bathwater. The seeming impurities when you do not clean up the juice so much also contribute many of the preservative qualities needed in a wine destined for longer ageing.

If the lush, plush, lubricious golden grape style of white Burgundy has been less appealing of late, what of the other end of the scale? This is all about preserving tension in the wine, viewed as especially important in the aftermath of the premature oxidation issue. Long ago, vignerons used to refer (positively) to a wine as being *nerveux* or having *nervosité*, though not meaning nervous in English – possibly nervy is a little closer, but more towards the racy side of the spectrum. Then came *tendu*, which could mean stretched but was referring more to being tense: *belle tension*, good tension.

Such phrases have some traction but can easily become clichés, and the buzzwords tend to change every couple of years. Next up was 'mineral', which infuriated geologists because they validly maintain that you cannot taste mineral elements in the wine. But that's not really the point; we use the mineral descriptor as a metaphor, and I think the word accurately conveys an image of the style of the wine. For the past two years – so we must be due for a change imminently – 'saline' has been the buzzword for this sort of wine.

If Meursault has changed from Rubens to Modigliani, how has this come about? Picking earlier has been one factor, employed to good effect by some and reviled by others. There has been a bit of a local civil war in the appellation on this subject. It is important to note that the exact day of picking does not really matter – the way a vigneron conducts viticulture and the style he or she is aiming for will dictate the date of harvest.

Another emerging stylistic trend – reaching its apogee in the early years of last decade, though since refined – is a reductive character in white-wine making. Reduction is the opposite of oxidation, thus having useful protective qualities, as well as offering an uninteresting flavour profile, which manifests itself in a bouquet that has been variously described as like gunflint or struck match.

So, where do we go from here? If you like the richer, rounder, softer style of Chardonnay à la bourguignonne, then look for sunshine vintages such as 2019, appellations such as Meursault (even if sommeliers can no longer promise butter and hazelnuts), Pouilly-Fuissé (especially from the commune of Fuissé), Bâtard-Montrachet (if you are wealthy enough), Chassagne-Montrachet Premier Cru from the Morgeot area, or maybe Beaune Clos des Mouches. Then look for producers that prefer not to pick too early.

If, however, you eschew the riper approach, then Chablis, St-Aubin, St-Romain, Pernand-Vergelesses and Montagny might be happier hunting grounds – and look out for the more chiselled approach of those who aim to pick a little earlier. If we were to allow ourselves to creep outside the Chardonnay box, there is another classic Burgundian grape that is rather enjoying the sunshine years. Aligoté is no longer thin and tart but ripening happily at around 12.5% abv. It may well be that this grape will soon be allowed, in small proportions, in the white wine appellations of Burgundy as both a seasoning and a balance to Chardonnay.

Let us finish, though, with the image of some seasoned Burgundian vineyard workers, elbows on the table, sleeves rolled up, sitting in a cafe during a break in the day's work, digging bulbous noses into a glass of well-made Bourgogne blanc. '*Ah, ben oui, ca chardonne…*' There's nothing to touch it when our Burgundian vignerons call it right.

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