

Don't Rain on My Parade: Mâconnais 2019/2020

You could feel the volatility in the air. On 21 June, the summer equinox, I spent the morning touring Mâconnais, examining multitudinous vineyards, refreshing myself with its diverse array of terroirs, and absorbing the picture postcard landscape. The air was humid and sticky, hot in the tropical sense of the word. We stopped for a quick lunch in the village of Fuissé. By then, the sky was ominously overcast. Something was brewing. The heavens opened just as I arrived at Domaine de Beauregard. Since 2007, proprietor Frédéric Burrier has been instrumental in the campaign to promote Pouilly-Fuissé's most propitious vineyards to Premier Cru status. On the first floor, I began tasting the wines. I was broaching the third, maybe fourth, when the sound outside changed pitch. Walking over to a large first-floor window, I could barely see more than 10-meters away. Without exaggeration, a hailstorm of biblical proportions was lacerating the vines outside. Silent and stoic, Burrier stood at my side, knowing only too well the damage being wrought. "I can come back another time," I told him, struggling to find the right consolatory words. "You must have a lot to do." "There's nothing I can do. What's done is done," he replied, astoundingly sanguine, before advising that we should finish the tasting.

When I departed an hour later, the courtyard was inch-thick in melting bullets of ice. I asked Burrier about the extent of the damage in early October. "The global average yield on our Pouilly-Fuissé and Saint-Véran vineyards is about 25 hl/ha, our smallest production since 1981. The worst, as we anticipated, was the hill of Fuissé, including 1ers Crus Vignes Blanches & Ménétrières, with 7-hl/ha, a bit better in Pouilly with 15-hl/ha in Les Reisses and Château du Clos. In Milly and Viré-Clessé, it was better than expected, with 40-hl/ha." The hailstorm was one more episode in an already tumultuous growing season. Because 2020 marks the first vintage that the region has its own Premier Crus, and just as Mâconnais growers are producing better wines than ever and they should be celebrating long overdue recognition, this misfortune is compounded by wretched timing.

After years of wading through French bureaucracy and negotiations with the coteries of producers and co-operatives, each with something to lose or gain, 2020 marks the inaugural vintage when the appellation of Pouilly-Fuissé can boast 22 *climats* designated Premier Cru, equivalent to 194-hectares or 24% of vineyard area. Speaking to growers, of course they are pleased, jubilant even, that the most prized appellation in Mâconnais is finally recognised. They did make compromises to the INAO; however, for example, their stipulation is that no *climat* can be above 350m in altitude, which was derived from the fact that this governed the Premier Crus in the Côte d'Or. "There are many wrong things said about the criteria of altitude," Burrier told me. "It cannot be considered alone - it is linked to exposure and gradient of slope. Limit of altitude for a 1er Cru was 350m, but if there is very favourable exposure towards the southeast, south and southwest (from 150° SSE to 210° SSO) and a gradient of slope superior to 15%, the limit can be brought to 400m."

No doubt there will be contentious issues that will rumble on. Nevertheless, given this new chapter in Mâconnais' long history, I wanted to visit some growers and review some wines before the year was over. I managed to ring the doorbells of Bret Brothers, Olivier Merlin, Domaine Ferret, Saumaize-Michelin, Domaine de la Bongran and spend a Saturday morning with Jean-Marie Guffens, amassing some 180 notes studded with some quite exceptional wines from the 2019 and 2020 vintages. I do not consider this a full report since I had to split my week in the region with Beaujolais, but I will be back for a deep dive next year. Readers should note that I included several wines from Beaujolais that did not go into my August report, but that are definitely worth your attention.

Bret Brothers & La Soufrandière

Bret Brothers have long been one of my go-to producers in the Mâconnais. Usually, I meet with the more outgoing Jean-Philippe Bret, but as he was away, I had a very useful morning with his brother Jean-Guillaume who kindly spent an hour reacquainting me with the appellation and its terroirs. They debuted Domaine La Soufrandière in 2000 and established their négociant operation, Bret Brothers, the following year. Their philosophy has been organic since the outset and gradually they converted all their vineyards to biodynamic.



I asked him about the 2019 vintage since my tasting in their cellar focused on this growing season. "It took three weeks to harvest the 2019s. We had a severe frost on 5 April and lost an average of 30-40% of the crop, so it was even smaller than in 2003. For the region, it was the smallest since 1981." As anticipated, Bret Brothers & La Soufrandière are a prime source of top-grade Mâconnais. Check out their wonderful 2019 Saint-Véran Climat La Bonnode – Ovoïde that is matured in concrete eggs. The wine palpably contains more energy vis-à-vis the cuvée from the same vineyard raised in regular oak barrels. The 2019 Pouilly-Vinzelles Climat Les Quarts Cuvée Millerandée has long been one of my favourites, comes from a vineyard that, as the name implies, tends to suffer *millerandage* during the growing season.