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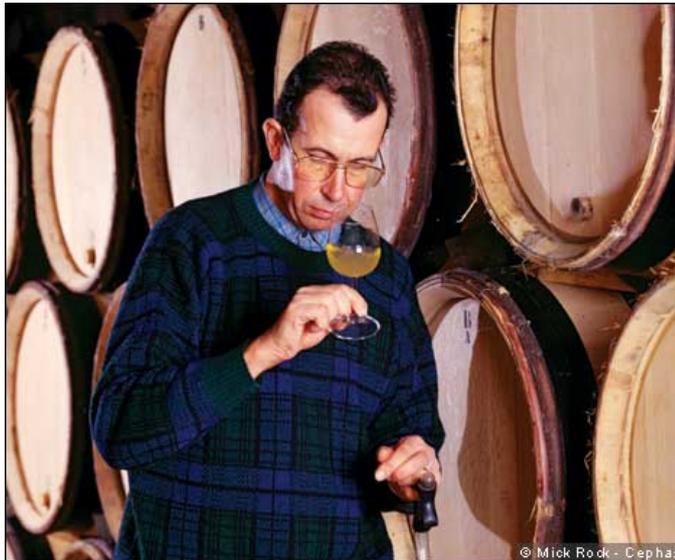
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White elephants

By Jancis Robinson
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Jean-François Coche-Dury, one of the few who made exceptionally good 2009 whites in wine auctions it is usually advisable to be wary of cases containing 10 or 11 bottles instead of the full complement of a dozen. The previous owner has almost certainly tried a bottle or two and been disappointed. But for the past decade it has been positively crazy to bid on such a lot if the bottles contain white burgundy.

During that time it has become apparent that fine **white burgundy**, the sort of wine that costs hundreds and sometimes thousands of pounds a dozen, has a serious problem. Along with en primeur merchants such as **1855.com** who have had problems fulfilling orders, white burgundy's disappointing track record has been the single most common complaint on my website's forum.

The issue is that an intolerably high proportion of white burgundy – between 9 per cent and 23 per cent according to Los Angeles lawyer Don Cornwell's analysis (<http://oxidised-burgs.wikispaces.com>) oxidises, turns brown and loses its fruit, before it is 10 years old. Because fine white burgundy is supposed to be aged for many years before blossoming into a liquid complex enough to warrant its high price, the problem only came to light in 2003 with the first widespread disappointments among bottles of the 1995s. Every year at about this time, Cornwell holds a series of tastings of several dozen top-quality white burgundies from the vintage picked seven-and-a-half years previously. They have all been stored in ideal conditions and are tasted by knowledgeable burgundy lovers.

Cornwell's site (no ads, no sponsorship) is also continuously fed tasting notes, from laudatory to anguished, as fellow burgundy collectors open bottles from their own collections. Over the years Cornwell has divided the significant producers into five categories, from those with a high incidence of this premature oxidation, so-called "premoxy", to those such as Coche-Dury, Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, Leflaive, Leroy/d'Auvenay and Raveneau whose wines seem to be unaffected by this mysterious pox. Each producer's winemaking methods are noted in the hope that a correlation can be discerned although, so far, no single cause has been identified for this recent and worrying phenomenon – which seems to strike random bottles rather than whole lots.



Great swathes of wine-related cyberspace have been devoted to theories involving, variously, decreased cork quality, reduced levels of the antioxidant sulphur dioxide, increased levels of lees stirring, changes in pressing techniques and growing cover crops in the vineyard. In my experience frustrated consumers seem more obsessed by this problem than the producers themselves, which is hardly surprising since, although demand for fine white burgundy has definitely softened, it is produced in such small quantities that it is relatively easy to sell.

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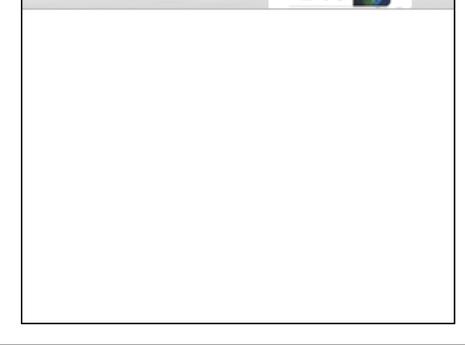
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Certainly the 2009 Meursaults (and 2009 Mâcons from the related Les Héritiers du Comte Lafon) that I tasted at Domaine des Comtes Lafon last October were the most impressive set of young wines I have ever sampled in these capacious cellars, and Roulot's were above reproach too – not that anyone is suggesting that it is possible to detect potential premo

problems when tasting the wines this early. There are other producers whose 2009 whites stood out and I have listed them here.

The wine academics of Beaune and Dijon have not so far come up with any satisfying cure, but at least two of the most admired white burgundy producers, Dominique Lafon and Jean-Marc Roulot of Meursault, are taking the problem seriously. From the 2009 vintage that was showcased at [tastings in London earlier this month](#), these two colleagues have started to eliminate that portion of the must they believe contains the greatest concentration of premo precursors. They oxidise the last 10 per cent of must left in the press, settle it overnight and throw out the cloudiest bottom third of what results.

The white wines of [Jean-François Coche-Dury](#) have long represented a pinnacle to which young Côte d'Or producers of white wine aspire. He is the most single-minded and least worldly vigneron I have ever met, caring meticulously for every vine and barrel. It is always a pleasure to taste young wine in his cellar. But his 2009 whites tasted at the end of last October seemed to reach a new high, both of concentration and vivacity. Even Coche-Dury, who had not tasted them himself for two months, was surprised by how well they were showing ("more muscular than in August"), adding that he'd found the 2009s denser than any vintage for ages.

But if Lafon and Coche made exceptionally good 2009s, there were disappointments – although when I tasted the 2009s at that other landmark (and premo-free) address Domaine Leflaive, the wines were obviously even more youthful than at the two great Meursault addresses cited above. They may also turn into something very special. In Chassagne Pierre-Yves Colin-Morey, son of Marc Colin, maintained the high standard that has won him such plaudits over his first eight years on his own, picking in early September 2009 after some water stress in the vineyards and moving the wine to new barrels and aerating it four times rather than the usual once. These were some of the most unevolved 2009s I tried. As a matter of policy in his fight against premo, he uses untreated corks and then protects against oxidation by applying a wax capsule.

But the relatively low acidities in 2009, especially low malic acid levels that accelerated the malolactic fermentations, mean that many white 2009s are soft and rich. Ripe grapes meant no added sugar to boost alcohol levels but yields were relatively high. This suggests they will make satisfying early drinking but should probably be consumed long before the more structured 2008s. This applies particularly in Chablis to the north of the Côte d'Or.

So, in sum, most 2009s should probably be drunk long before the threat of premature oxidation is realised – although it is worth noting that some burgundy merchants are willing to replace or refund disappointing bottles, and are generally advising their customers to drink modern white burgundy earlier than used to be the norm.

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 Château de Puligny-Montrachet
 Roulot
 Jean-Marie Fourier is better known for his reds but this basic white burgundy (£51 for six bottles in bond from Howard Ripley) is delightful, and could probably be drunk any time over the next five years. For offers see [wine-searcher.com](#) and see also 1,500 tasting notes on 2009 burgundies on Purple pages of [www.jancisrobinson.com](#)

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