

BREAKING: Burgundy En Primeur 2011 Tasting Reviews: Institute of Masters of Wine

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Burgundy En Primeur 2011 Tasting Reviews: Institute of Masters of Wine Burgundy Seminar

Written by Harpers Editorial team
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To help you keep on top of the large number of Burgundy tastings this month for the 2011 en primeur campaign Harpers is publishing reviews direct from key tastings and related Burgundy events from members of the trade. Here **Anne Krebiehl** reports from the Institute of Masters of Wines seminar and debate on Burgundy held this week.

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Institute of Masters of Wine, Burgundy Seminar, Tuesday January 8, 2013, Tinity House, London

Yesterday's Burgundy Seminar, held by the Institute of Master s of Wine at Trinity House, was a geek fest for lovers of what is still considered to be the world's top expressions of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. The theme could not have been more ambitious: "How to Make the Best Burgundy?"

Scheduled to co-incide with the annual en-primeur-Burgundy circus that brightens dreary London January days, Jasper Morris MW of Berry Bros. & Rudd, Burgundy supremo and author of the definite work on the region, chaired an illustrious panel: Dominique Lafon of Domained Comtes de Lafon in Meursault, Etienne de Montille of Domaine de Montille of Volnay, Benjamin Leroux of Domaine du Comte Armand in Pommard and Bernard Herve of Domaine Faiveley of Nuits-Saint-Georges.

To answer such an ambitious question in the tight space of three hours, Jasper Morris worked methodically and effectively and for the sake of brevity decided that vinification rather than viticulture was to be discussed, from the point of arrival of the fruit in the cellar.

Chardonnay came first: do the... asked Jasper Morris, and do t... but they delved soon into the intricacies and idiosyncrasies of Burgundy and illustrated that each action has an effect much further down the line in the finished wine.

Lafon said: "I think it's a matter of style, you get more sediment when you crush. If you don't crush the juice is more clear.. You can arrive at a very good result both ways, you get a more elegant wine if you don't crush." The length of the pressing cycle, the length of settling the juice, the turbidity of the juice before fermentation, the use of cultured or indigenous yeasts, the fermentation temperature, the length of fermentation, the timing of malo-lactic fermentation - the myriad decisions a winemaker takes and how delicately each decision has a particular effect in an ever-changing set of circumstances: each vintage of each little vineyard plot is different.

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Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun
			3	4	5	6
			10	11	12	13
			17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31			

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Morris also asked about chaptalisation - the practice of enriching grape must with sugar to increase the alcoholic volume of the finished wine - an interesting question after the challenging vintages of 2011 and 2012. While all four men agreed that chaptalisation was nowhere near as common as 40 years ago - partly thanks to climate change, partly due to immense viticultural improvements - they all agreed that if they felt they had to, they did.

De Montille explained: "Everything that reaches 12.5% potential alcohol is acceptable. Chaptalisation is fairly exceptional now and if we have to do it, we do." Leroux explained "with white wines it is always a pain: we never exceed 0.5% alcohol [for chaptalisation]. I used to chaptalise before fermentation but now I do it at the end once I've checked the alcohol."

Lafon added: "It does not happen often nowadays. If I have to do it, I do it on the juice before it goes into barrel. The game of late chaptalisation is very interesting for red [wines] to get longer fermentations, but if I chaptalise, it's for 0.5% [potential alcohol]." Hervet felt "the problem is more with acidity rather than with chaptalisation," which swung the discussion onto the necessity for tartaric acid adjustments. Again, Lafon stressed the possibility of working less by the analytic figures and more by taste: "If you acidify at the beginning you have to use 200-300g of tartaric acid per barrel, but if you do it at the end, you need maybe 50-70g per barrel." When asked about batonnage, the practice of lees stirring, Lafon said "80% of white fermentations have no stirring, sometimes it helps if you want to finish a fermentation, or if you have oxidation, most of the time is use it to avoid reduction in the barrels". Today the fatness imparted by repeated batonnage is no longer en vogue. Lafon thus made a good point about style and "fashion".

A key point of this very frank and above all articulate panel discussion was that the word "terroir" was barely used. These are highly talented winemakers with both experience and a deep scientific and yet limited understanding of cause and effect of every decision made by them in their winemaking process. They have no need to resort to obfuscating talk to explain the taste of their wines, they frankly engage with their wines and each other and continue to experiment.

Inevitably it did not take long until the recurring and still unsolved problem of premature oxidation of white Burgundies raised its head. This prompted opinions on the timing of sulphur-dioxide additions, the number of rackings, the role of lees, the amount of dissolved oxygen before bottling, the importance of carbon dioxide during bottling and of course the right closure.

Leroux said that while he was a Burgundian traditionalist and loved its history, he would not hang on to cork only for the pleasure of using a cork-screw: "For me it's not acceptable with all the work we do" to have spoiled bottled due to faulty cork." Hervet countered: "I am going to resist looking for alternatives to cork."

The discussion of red winemaking soon focussed on the practices of de-stemming versus whole-cluster fermentation. De Montille said "we love stems - we to rationalise the proportion of stems for every vintage, every vat from 0% to 100%. I believe that stems bring floral and spice character with age." Lafon responded: "Every time I've tried it, the wine was not as good when I de-stemmed." Leroux added that "it is definitely a matter of style, we all try to make a wine we love. Personally I am de-stemming a lot, especially because I work in Pommard, but in Volnay I love whole cluster." He also added that the new generation of de-stemmers gave them whole berries which despite de-stemming permitted a degree of intra-cellular fermentation. Hervet, the most philosophical panellist cited historic monastic writings and the ideal proportion of 25% whole clusters they mentioned.

Fermentation vessels were discussed as well as cold maceration, fermentation temperatures and extraction methods but time pressure meant that eight wines, two from each Domaine, all from the great 2010 were poured.

Lafon's Meursault Clos de la Barre, Domaine des Comtes de Lafon 2010

illustrated that good Meursault no longer means buttery diacetyl: hazelnut aromas dominated the sleek and supple body of this concentrated wine with its acidic backbone and its long, chalky finish. Other whites shown were **Chassagne-Montrachet Premier Cru Les Embazées, Benjamin Leroux 2010, Puligny Montrachet Premier Cru Folatières Château de Puligny-Montrachet 2010** and the reds were a supremely aromatic and silky **Volnay Premier Cru Taillepieds, Domaine de Montille 2010** with the pure and ethereal expression of wild raspberries and an exquisite, touching purity, made from 100% whole cluster fermentation.

Other reds shown were a more full-bodied and profound **Volnay Premier Cru Santenots-du-Milieu, Comtes Lafon, 2010**, a spicy, resonant and grippy **Pommard Premier Cru Clos des Epeneaux, Comte Armand 2010** and finally a **Mazis-Chambertin Domaine Faiveley 2010** - a very structural, almost architectural wine with ripe red fruit beckoning through the imagined stone-mullioned windows of its soaring, gothic structure.

Somewhere in the middle of this frank, open and above all honest discussion, Morris said "it is pleasing to hear that people are reacting to circumstances - we are not hearing people being dogmatic but people who try and make better wine". The relative silence that fell as the wines were tasted attested to the fact that these four Domaines - along with so many others -- are amongst those who continually strive to do justice to their outstanding and historic vineyard sites. Morris provided us with privileged access and insight in choosing four excellently articulate, talented and open-minded panellists.

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