

# 2008 and 2007 Red Burgundies

By [Stephen Tanzer](#)

Two thousand eight, like 2007 before it, produced a crop of red wines that utterly resist generalization. Neither vintage can be described as better than very good overall, but both produced a host of outstanding wines. There's a purity of pinot fruit and a fleshy succulence to the best 2007s that are mesmerizing. And the most successful 2008s are sharply delineated, classic Burgundies with the complex fruit, mineral, floral and soil perfume and the inner-palate energy that other pinot-producing regions can only dream about—if the wines were made with intelligence from sufficiently ripe and clean raw materials. Clearly, both vintages must be bought carefully, especially at today's prices, which are often out of whack with the reality of worldwide deflation. On the other hand, many of these wines will end up being dumped in the marketplace at steep discounts in the months ahead, so there will be ample buying opportunities for Burgundy lovers who can still afford to buy the expensive stuff.

It is critical to note that my comments on both 2008 and 2007 are based on the producers I routinely visit and taste. It's probably safe to say that virtually every member of this group ranks within the top 25% of Burgundy's quality hierarchy, and most number among the top 10%. If you buy Burgundy from lesser growers, or from mediocre négociants, your odds of getting your money's worth from either 2007 or 2008 will plummet. But then that's why you're reading this publication.

**The 2008 growing season.** Yet again, the north wind of September saved the 2008 harvest, as it had done in previous years like 2007, 2004, 2002 and 2001. But 2008 may have been the biggest miracle of all, as the vintage looked like a disaster as late as September 13.

A more or less normal winter was followed by a wet and fairly miserable April. The weather then turned very warm in early May, and the flowering began early, in the middle of the month, but was extended by a return to cooler, overcast weather. Widespread *millerandage* (uneven berry size and development within the same cluster) set the stage for a reduced crop, although some growers noted that the further north you went, the less stretched out and irregular the flowering was.

The summer was then a mostly glum affair for the grapes, with little in the way of sustained warm, dry weather and a lot of rain, especially in August. Outbreaks of oidium and mildew required vigilance on the part of growers. The ripening proceeded at a glacial pace and although the *veraison* began in mid-August, in some vineyards the pinot noir grapes were still green at the beginning of September, with sugar levels often a pitiful 8% or 9%. Rot pressures were building.

The rainy spells continued with heavy downpours on September 12 and 13. But after that the weather changed dramatically, and the drying north wind blew pretty much constantly for the next three weeks. The weather remained cool and there was little rain until the first week of October. I was lucky enough to have arrived in Alsace on Monday morning, the 15th, and I enjoyed spectacular weather through my ten days of tasting there (two years earlier, the identical period had been humid, rainy and fairly miserable).

Grape sugars began to climb after the 13th, and many growers reported that, in any event, phenolic ripeness was ahead of sugar ripeness in '08. Many admitted that their ultimately sound levels of potential alcohol were more an effect of dehydration of the grapes (loss of water due to the drying wind) than a function of true ripening, as the period of clement weather leading up to the harvest was generally just two or three weeks. But well-placed vines carrying low crop levels could ripen well.

As the best farmers had dropped a portion of their fruit to focus the vines' limited energy on ripening the rest, and had pulled leaves as late as early September to aerate their clusters, forestall rot and open them up to the sun, some eventually got healthy grape sugars—in some instances higher than those of the previous year—but due to the irregular flowering there was also a good deal of fruit that never ripened properly. Particularly if growers had not done a “pre-harvest” in early September to eliminate green or rot-affected berries, the quality of the sorting during the *vendange* was critical in 2008. The best growers eliminated rotten grapes at harvest time, in the vines or on their sorting tables, but most said it was even more important to leave behind the pink, underripe grapes, which would have introduced a harsh greenness and unpleasant acidity to the wines.

Most estates started harvesting during the last week of September but some waited until the beginning of October. The later one started, the riper the fruit was, but normally at the expense of a higher incidence of rotten grapes, which had to be carefully eliminated. In the end, sugar levels were average by recent standards (typically between 11.8% and 12.6% at the level of the producers I visit, but with atypically wide ranges at some estates), and most *vignerons* chaptalized moderately. Acidity levels were generally high, but because a good portion of this acidity was malic, the wines softened somewhat during the secondary fermentations, and pHs in the finished wines are generally in the moderate, healthy range.

**The vinification of the 2008s, and an early look at the wines.** The fermentations typically took a while to get started because the grapes were harvested during chilly weather, with morning temperatures dipping down to the 40s through much of the harvest period. As a result, many cuvées got the equivalent of an extended pre-fermentation cold soak (in some instances as long as eight to ten days), which is partly responsible for the generally healthy, deep red colors to these wines. But most winemakers then extracted gently during the fermentation, for fear of making green,

hard wines from underripe skin and seed tannins. Some punched down the cap infrequently, if at all, especially during the second half of the vinification, when the presence of alcohol in the musts could extract tougher tannins. (And the fruit was often rich in tannins, because the drying wind of September thickened the grape skins.)

Most growers reported that phenolic ripeness in the end was good if not exceptional, and this is one of the keys to the success of the better 2008s. They pointed out that even though the summer weather had been mediocre, the fruit had remained on the vine ten or more days longer than the classic 100 days between flowering and harvest, and that the longer “hang time” made a big difference. In fact, those *vignerons* who normally vinify with stems generally took the same approach in 2008, although some cut back somewhat on the percentage of whole clusters that went into the tanks.

A number of conditions conspired to delay the onset of the malolactic fermentations: the late harvest; the high levels of malic acidity in the grapes; the fact that the summer rains had washed off much of the yeasts on the grape skins; and an unusually cold late fall and winter that brought down cellar temperatures dramatically. In some cellars, risk-averse enologists concerned about vinifications that might have included less-than-perfect grape skins advised their clients to add large doses of SO<sub>2</sub>, and this could kill off the bacteria that are necessary to start the secondary fermentations. The result was that at most addresses, the malos didn’t start until late spring—if then. Quite frequently, the malos only finished in mid to late summer, and in many cases not until after the harvest of 2009. In fact, in a few of the cellars I visited in November, some wines had still not finished.

I’ve been tasting the new crop of red Burgundies 14 months after the harvest for the past 22 years, and this was one of the toughest sets of wines I’ve yet tasted at this stage, as the wines were generally extremely unevolved. Some were full of gas, as they had not yet been racked after the recent end to the malos; others had been racked and sulfited just a week or two prior to my visit. And of course, some still had malic acidity. For most of these latter wines I have not even attempted to publish early tasting notes.

Quality in 2008, as you might imagine, ranges dramatically. The best wines of the vintage are pure, racy, perfumed midweights that accurately showcase their *terroir*—in all its fruity, spicy, floral, mineral glory—and deliver classic Burgundy intensity without weight. While very few wines are truly full-bodied, many are densely packed and rich in extract. I suspect that the best of them will surprise with their longevity, and most of my favorite wines really call for patience (typically 2 to 4 years for village wines, 4 to 8 for premier crus, and 6 to 12 for the most successful grand crus). The \$64 question (or should I say \$164 or \$264?) appears to be: will the sufficiently ripe 2008s gain in flesh during their final months of *élevage* and eventually earn ratings at the high end of my projected ranges?

But there are also way too many skinny, undernourished 2008s that do not have the mid-palate stuffing—or phenolic ripeness—to support their tannins and slightly sour acids. Wines made from such meager raw materials, especially if they were overextracted, have simply turned out to be shrill, dry or harsh, if not unclean. Others betray strong herbal or peppery notes. There's also a citrus quality to many wines that can add piquancy in small doses but can be sharp and unpleasant when prominent. And it's clear that a soft bottling will be necessary to prevent the "cool" side of the vintage from becoming more dominant.

I crave wines with life-giving acidity, and the better 2008s I tasted from the top of the Burgundy pyramid normally showed sappy, bright acidity that enlivens and extends the fruit, rather than overwhelming it. But if your idea of a satisfying bottle shades more toward 15+° wines from very warm climates, you may well place a lower value on the 2008 red Burgundies. Two thousand eight is a more variable vintage for red Burgundy than 2007, but potentially more exciting for purists who enjoy classically structured wines. Put another way, 2007 is a safer bet for the person buying Burgundy blind. But then, buying Burgundy blind is always a fool's errand.

Many of the 2008s remind me a bit of the 1996s in the early going. In fact, many growers I visited in November described the acidity levels of their 2008s as the highest since 1996, although most hastened to add that the fruit was riper in 2008. The '96s are often still young today, but this is normally a vintage that gives more intellectual than hedonistic pleasure, as relatively few wines have truly blossomed texturally in the bottle—at least to this point. You will rarely see adjectives like "fleshy," "opulent" and "full-bodied" in my notes on the 2008s, but you *will* see a lot of "succulent," "tactile," "precise," "intense" and "perfumed."

Two thousand eight is another vintage that favors the Côte de Nuits over the Côte de Beaune, in spite of the fact that ripeness generally arrives a bit later the farther north one goes. I was struck by the number of floral, scented, red-fruity wines I tasted from Nuits-Saint-Georges and Gevrey-Chambertin (numerous very good examples from Charmes-Chambertin, to name just one vineyard, caught my attention). These wines seem to be unusually refined. Generally speaking, the 2008s are accurate reflections of their *terroirs*, which means that the vintage was least successful in lesser sites that struggle to ripen their fruit in marginal years, and at its best at the premier and, especially, grand cru level.

Hail at the end of April had touched some sections of Volnay, and more hail in late July caused quite a bit of localized damage to premier cru vineyards in the southern half of the village. Philippe Prost, winemaker for Bouchard Père et Fils, who works with fruit from all over the Côte d'Or, noted that the concentration from wind on the Côte de Beaune could sometimes result in a "cooked-fruit expression" and more plummy aromas. On the slightly cooler Côte de Nuits, he said, the wine generally brought a "cool concentration" that was less likely to change the classic fresh fruit expression of

the vintage. And of course as temperatures were slightly higher in the Côte de Beaune during the harvest, he went on, acidity levels may have been lower there, and there may even have been some overripe fruit in the earliest-ripening locations. He was quick to point out that normally cooler locations in the Côte de Beaune, such as Le Corton, Monthélie Les Duresses and Beaune Marconnets, were more likely to retain a fresher, more classic expression, like the Côte de Nuits.

**A look back at 2007.** This was an even crazier vintage, weather-wise, than 2008. Two thousand seven began as a hot year, with a flowering even earlier than the precocious heat-wave season of 2003, and, following a mostly dismal summer, ended with many of the characteristics of a relatively cool year. Producers who had originally thought they might be picking grapes as early as mid-August generally pushed back their harvest dates by a good two weeks. As you might imagine, there is a wide range of quality and style of wine.

When I tasted in the cellars this past November, the 2007s sampled after the 2008s often came off as fleshier but less lively by comparison. (For that reason, a number of growers insisted that I taste their bottled 2007s *before* their 2008s from barrel.) But in other cellars, I preferred the 2007s for the sheer beauty of their fruit. Whether that gorgeous youthful fruit lasts in bottle is another question.

One positive point: in follow-up tastings *chez moi* in January and February, I was struck by how many of the better 2007s offer seamless pinot textures, captivating purity of fresh red fruit flavors, excellent definition of aromas and flavors, perfectly sound acidity, and great early sex appeal. With their mostly moderate levels of alcohol, they can be as delicious and elegant as wine should be. In fact, it's only the rare exception that really needs to be laid down for much more than five or six years. This is generally a vintage that will be at its best over the next 10 or 12 years (and sooner for village-level wines), but there are also plenty of densely packed, mineral, firmly structured wines that will go on for considerably longer. I should note that the young '07s, except for those bottles that were the most vibrant and high-pitched on first pour, were *less* likely to improve and maintain freshness for 24 to 48 hours in the recorked bottle than the 2006s from the Côte de Nuits were a year ago.

Some growers are especially proud of their 2007s; a few are convinced that these wines have better fruit than their 2005s, and a couple said they were higher in acidity. On the other hand, there are some wines that may have been picked too late or extracted too vigorously. Just as vigorous extraction of the 2004s may have turned that modestly ripe vintage's tendency toward pepper and herbal character into something unpleasant, overextraction in 2007 could risk dulling the delicate pinot fruit or even introducing a roasted quality. The best '08s, in contrast, will demand patience and may well be long-lived. But the 2008s made from fruit that was not sufficiently ripe will always remain ugly ducklings.

**Burgundy pricing.** By most accounts, there is currently limited interest in the 2008 red Burgundies other than those from the most collectible domains, especially since prices for these wines appear to be roughly the same in Euros as the '07s had been a year earlier. (And the '07s, and the '06s before them, haven't exactly set the shelves on fire.) With the early buzz over 2009, most consumers will simply give 2008 a pass—at least for now. I do not recommend paying full retail price for 2008s, except for the wines you simply have to have. While many 2008s will likely be discounted by next fall, it's also worth noting that U.S. importers cut back their purchases in the first place or have had their allocations reduced by their clients, so smaller quantities of the most desirable wines are coming to the U.S.—especially at the grand cru level, as the market for these pricey wines has shrunk dramatically.

Growers who refused to cut prices for their 2008 reds even in a stagnant world economy emphasize that their strict selection in 2008 resulted in production levels down by as much as one-third from normal. It remains to be seen if they'll be able to sell them. Many producers are aware that their 2009 vintage, economy willing, is likely to enjoy the strongest demand since the 2005s, and there is already evidence that some estates will be asking their agents to buy '08s in order to get '09s. Incidentally, 2009 was a generally problem-free growing season and near-perfect early harvest, and it's already clear that many opulent, sweet and seductive wines will be made. But it's a little early to be comparing 2009 to 2005. Crop levels were often very high in '09, and grape sugars often zoomed upward during sunny weather during the first half of September. Even when growers rushed to pick, a lot of fruit came in with very high grape sugars (I heard numerous reports of 14%, or even more) and low acidity. In many cellars the malos were already well underway or even finished by the time of my November visit. This is not generally the best formula for a serious vintage with staying power. So it's way too early to bank on the early hype on 2009.