

(vinifera)

ALIGOTÉ'S RETURN

Burgundy's other white grape variety is no longer planted in grand cru sites. But as Alice Feiring suggests, it may be at least as clear a transmitter of terroir as Chardonnay, and it merits more attention for other reasons as well—not least the stunning quality and value of the best wines

There are two faces of the Aligoté grape: straight or round; aromatic or lemon,” Pierre de Benoist of the Bouzeron estate A&P de Villaine had said to me. But alone in the Beaune lab of the Bureau Interprofessionnel des Vins de Bourgogne (BIVB), blind-tasting my way through 65 examples of the 2010 vintage, I wanted to text him, “Pierre! You forgot ‘awful’ and ‘more awful.’”

The truth is, I love Aligoté, the much-maligned other white grape of Burgundy, which a few brave and romantic vigneron slaves to elevate to greatness. I already had a short list of favorite producers. But that tasting was a reminder of just how bad the category could be. Descriptors included dirt, yeast, ick, vile, vomit, and “I have no idea what this is.”

Given that even the BIVB slams Aligoté—splash it with cassis, it advises—it's not so surprising. But nearly a quarter of the wines I sampled were drinkable; and of those, eight wines were stunning. The bigger questions for me were: How did a grape as sensitive to soil as a poet is to words fall from grace? And why do some vigneron still champion it?

Ampelologist José Vouillamoz (who worked with Jancis Robinson MW on her forthcoming book *Grapes*) confirmed that Aligoté, the second most-planted white grape in Burgundy (with about 1,700ha [4,200 acres] under vine), also grows in Eastern Europe. Like Chardonnay, it's the offspring of the Burgundian Pinot and Gouais Blanc. Historically, it was viewed as difficult but not inferior, and it was equally planted with Chardonnay, on the same fine terroirs, most notably in Corton. Although Bouzeron in the Côte Chalonnaise claims Aligoté as its native grape, dating it back to the 12th century, Dr Vouillamoz says he couldn't unearth any mention earlier than 1780. By the early 1800s, there were already suggestions that the vine be grubbed up, because it was (and is) a pain to grow. To produce beautiful wines, the vines must be at least 15 years old. They are prone to *millerandage* (abnormal fruit-set). Ultra-low yields are essential. And though it is oft cited as an early ripener, almost all of the 16 producers I visited reported picking it between two and three weeks later than Chardonnay, putting it at risk of a rainy harvest. Alice De Moor, a fine producer in Courgis, told me, “It is a small grape that needs a lot of work.” Compared to the fast and easy Chardonnay, it's an economic disaster.

After phylloxera devastated the vines in the late 1800s, many vigneron insisted on replanting the grape. But where Aligoté survived phylloxera, it was nearly sunk by the wine law. In 1937, the AOC Bourgogne Aligoté was created—

a dubious honor, more like a curse. No longer admitted in grand cru sites, Aligoté was banished from expensive real estate and planted in cheaper, flatter vineyards on the wrong side of Burgundy's main artery, the RN74 (now renamed the D974). Machine-harvesting was allowed. Recast as a wine for cheap drinking, its ruination began.

Belief in the underdog

Against all the odds, however, some growers have retained their belief in this underdog. The best producers bring it in at 35–50hl/ha, while the appellation allows 72. The best pick by hand and grow their vines with minimal chemical intervention. Some ferment in enamel-lined cement vats rather than stainless-steel tanks, and the best ageworthy wines are raised in at least a little old oak for a time.

Two terroirs are exempt from the Bourgogne Aligoté AOC. The more famous exception is Domaine Ponsot's monopole Clos des Monts Luisants in Morey-St-Denis. Above Clos de la Roche, it's planted with century-old Aligoté vines, and the wine is labeled as a Morey-St-Denis premier cru.

The other great exception is Bouzeron. Aubert and Pamela de Villaine (co-owners of Domaine de la Romanée-Conti) arrived there in 1971 and were determined to grow Aligoté as it deserved to be. In 1997, due largely to their efforts, the village earned the give its Aligoté the name Bouzeron Bourgogne Blanc, omitting the grape variety (though it was permitted on labels until 2003), and here the maximum yield is 55hl/ha. Most of the finest growers told me that their grandfather or great-grandfather had taken their cuttings of the superior clone Aligoté Doré from Bouzeron. Now in charge of his uncle's and aunt's domaine, the intense Pierre de Benoist supported my growing conviction that this variety has a fantastic ability to communicate terroir—though even for Bouzeron, no *climat* may be specified on the label. “Aligoté, more than Chardonnay,” he insisted, “keeps the memory of the seabed that we once were,” adding, “Romance in winemaking is dead, but growing Aligoté is all about passion and romance.”

And sure enough, throughout my recent visits, this runt-of-the-litter grape variety provoked sweet sentiments. No one would be crazy enough to commit to this bargain-of-Burgundy wine if they weren't intrinsically idealistic. The most emotional delivery came from Sylvain Pataille in Marsannay, who is among the few in the Côte d'Or who still grow Aligoté on the hills, co-planted, as it used to be,



The

The great wall of Corton-Charlemagne, where, in the 19th century, the grapes in St Vincent's hand—and in the grand cru behind him—might well have been Aligoté

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On bended knee: Sylvain Pataille, among several devoted Aligoté growers professing his love for the variety

with Pinot and Chardonnay. “I love Aligoté. I love this grape,” he avowed, as if he were proposing to it.

At the Meursault domaine of Pierre Morey (the former winemaker at Domaine Leflaive), his daughter Anne told me with evident sincerity that she was “grateful” for my visit, adding that this worthy grape needed an advocate. And to show me her real affection for the grape, she had set up an 11-year vertical. In my notes were: touches of licorice, fennel, dust, pear, and lemon peels, and yogurt with stony finishes. “Aligoté eats minerals,” Anne said.

Aligoté’s capacity for complexity and terroir transparency was indeed starting to seem superior to that of Chardonnay. The minerality in Anne’s wines lingered with me over the 30-minute drive to Morey, where I soon stood in the Clos des Monts Luisants with Laurent Ponsot. He praised the variety with a messianic zeal. “In the past, Aligoté was planted at the top of Chambertin! Musigny blanc was half Aligoté! It was half of Corton! After phylloxera, most replanted with easier-to-grow Chardonnay and put Aligoté on the other side

of the road where no one ever planted anything but carrots and potatoes. This was the sad story of ruined Aligoté.”

Happily, that wasn’t Ponsot’s own story. His uncle was rich so wasn’t tempted by the easy money of Chardonnay, replanting the *clos* in 1911 with Aligoté, as before. Over the years, Chardonnay and Pinot Gouge got added to the mix. Laurent separately vinified the three varieties to see how they expressed themselves. “The Chardonnay was a nice wine but had no soul,” he said. So, he replanted the entire vineyard to Aligoté and only recently won a long battle with the AOC authorities, who wanted him to rip out the variety.

When I asked him about the elephant-leaf-shaped vine’s nature, he seemed to want to throttle me. With Burgundian supremacy, he stated, “It’s the place that matters. If you plant on bad soil, you’ll get a bad grape. If the plant finds only acidic elements, it brings only acid to the glass,” he insisted. He might as well have added “you idiot.”

But the variety does matter. With good farming, even on the flat on the wrong side of the road, Domaine Morey,

With vignerons in a spin about soaring alcohol levels, it will be important to reconsider Aligoté's ability to retain acidity and moderate alcohol levels. An Aligoté co-plantation and co-fermentation might be the way to go

Michel Lafarge, and Jean-Marc Roulot all make great Aligotés. True, I had some superior ones from the hills. But on the hills or on the flat, this is a grape that demands low intervention. Farm it poorly or try to tart it up, and the wine becomes discordant. Aromatic yeasting or new wood turns the wine into a cacophony. Yet, with climate change now sending vignerons into a spin about soaring alcohol levels, it will be important to reconsider the grape's ability to retain acidity and moderate alcohol levels. An Aligoté co-plantation and co-fermentation, the way of the past, might be the way to go in future. Take the very ripe vintages of 2009 and the 2003: The 2003 Roulot was extraordinary. And then there was the late-harvest 2009 Réversibilité Aligoté from Alice et Olivier De Moor—the wine that sparked this journey for me.

From Chablis to Corton

The De Moors live and make wine in the Chablis village of Courgis. They farm organically. One quarter of their production is Aligoté, and they make three cuvées: an old-vine, a late-harvest, and a blend for early drinking bottled with no sulfur dioxide. In nearby St-Bris, they have 0.5ha (1.2 acres) of century-old vines. Their 1996 planting is the source of the Réversibilité, named for the Baudelaire poem. In mid-October of the very early harvest year of 2011, the grapes were still on the vine. "Aligoté is a small wine that requires a lot of work." Then why bother? Olivier said that he always thought the Aligoté of St-Bris had remarkable qualities. He also believes that the notion of hierarchies in Burgundy, whether based on social class or the supposed nobility of grape varieties, is fundamentally flawed. But he laments that Aligoté is such a hard sell; sometimes they find it impossible to convince customers even to taste the wine.

Thanks to the De Moors, I added one more visit. "If you want good Aligoté," they advised, "go visit Claire Naudin." Claire is in Magny-lès-Villers, a tiny village in the Hautes-Côtes, which, in its day, was renowned for Aligoté, and it still has plenty. On a frosty morning, I made my way there through the twisty village of Pernand-Vergelesses, where I was to return later. Claire used to make five Aligotés, but now—like just about everyone except the De Moors—she has reduced her holdings and is down to three versions. Her youngest vines are 45 years old. Her most fascinating wine, made with no sulfur addition and sold as a Vin de France, is called Les Clous. In the 2009 and 2010 vintages, it is shockingly fabulous, complex and deep, with the richness of great Chenin Blanc. Agreeing that, apart from controlling yields, the producer has to get out of the grape's way, Claire said, "The more you do to Aligoté, the more you hurt it."

I was smitten with Claire's earnestness, but I couldn't linger, since I was expected down the road in Pernand by Jean-Charles le Bault de la Morinière of Bonneau du Martray to discuss an entirely different matter: his conversion to biodynamics. A lanky man with impeccable British-accented English, Jean-Charles took over his family's estate in 1994 and owns the largest area of any grand cru vineyard in Burgundy. As we headed to the cellar to taste and talk the moon and 505 preparations, he asked me what brought me to Burgundy. "Interesting," he said thoughtfully. "I should like to read this article." And then, to my absolute delight, within minutes we were awaiting one of his remaining bottles of 1964 Aligoté. I could barely contain my excitement about the serendipity of it all. The gods of Aligoté work in strange and wonderful ways. I had been looking elsewhere for old grand cru Aligoté, and here it appeared at my lips totally unexpectedly. I had tasted a few spectacular older wines—such as the 1995 from A&P de Villaine, the 2005 from the De Moors, the 2002 from Jean-Marc Roulot, and the 1985 from Rapet—but nothing nearly half a century old and from grand cru terroir. The estate pulled its last remaining Aligoté from Corton in 1974, when it was again a victim to Chardonnay.

We plunged our noses into our glasses. There were pretty aromas of spearmint and caramel, with a burn that hinted at the heat of the vintage. It was deep, powerful, salty, and—yes—still fresh, with clean minerality and a delicate touch of honey. The wine was as compelling and profound as an old Corton, because it *was* an old Corton. Ponsot was right, too, in the sense that breeding does matter.

It is sad to think that Chardonnay reigned in Burgundy because it was easier to grow; perhaps one difficult grape, Pinot Noir, was all the region could handle. And it is hard not to be reminded of a line from the Baudelaire poem: "Angel full of gaiety, do you know anguish?"—an excellent metaphor for the grape's history. Maybe now it's time for a comeback. ■

FAVORITE ALIGOTÉ PRODUCERS

Complex and ageworthy

Domaine Goisot (St-Bris); Domaine Lafarge (Volnay); Alice et Olivier De Moor (Chitry); Domaine Pierre Morey (Meursault); Naudin-Ferrand (Hautes-Côtes); Domaine Sylvain Pataille (Marsannay); Thierry Pinquier (Meursault); Domaine Ponsot (Morey-St-Denis); Domaine Jean-Marc Roulot (Meursault); Domaine A&P de Villaine (Bouzeron)

Refreshing

Domaine Demoriquet (Nuits-St-Georges); Dominique Derain (St-Aubin); Didier Montchovet (Nantoux, Hautes-Côtes); Domaine Paul Pernod (Puligny-Montrachet)