



Bichot is Back

By Michael Apstein
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If I needed any convincing—and I did not—that Bichot, the venerable Beaune-based Burgundy négociant, is back, it was after tasting a line-up of their 2018s. That vintage was precarious for winegrowers because the weather provided the potential for both fabulous wines or over-ripe ones with high alcohol levels depending on harvest date, location of the vineyards, and viticulture practices. Bichot avoided the potential pitfalls and hit the bullseye with both their reds and whites in 2018.

Matthieu Mangenot, formerly the estate manager at Bichot's Chablis property, Domaine Long-Depaquit, and recently promoted to Assistant Technical Director to Alain Serveau, Bichot's Technical Director, summed up the growing season succinctly, in four words: wet, drought, hot and sunny. The winter was wet with twice as much water as usual, which turned out to be beneficial because it kept the vines from stress during the drought that occurred from April through September. The summer was hot and sunny, with the thermometer breaking 100° some days in September. The overall result was the potential for alcoholic wines with low acidity. Mangenot echoed what I had heard from many other growers, namely, that the key to success was an early harvest. Bichot started theirs about two weeks earlier than usual, at the end of August. In the cellar, Bichot opted on shorter aging with less time in barrel to preserve the vibrant fruitiness of the wines. Like many other growers to whom I spoke, they were anxious about the wines at harvest, but thrilled with how they turned out by the time of bottling.

Although I have tasted at Bichot many times over the years, I did not have the time to taste their wines during my annual trip to Burgundy in November, and due to COVID-19, the usual spring press tastings are not occurring. That did not stop the Bichot team from showing me their 2018s. They put together an inventive tasting by pouring small, two-ounce, samples of finished, ready-to-be bottled wines—not barrel samples—into small screw-top jars and then rapidly distributed them to tasters (and, indeed, right on schedule they appeared on my porch). We could taste them simultaneously, via Zoom, with the Bichot team in France, who had assembled in the cellar of their famous Nuits-St. Georges-based property, Domaine du Clos Frantin. In addition to Mangenot, Christophe Chauvel, who is in charge of viticulture for all their domaines, and Albéric Bichot, who runs the family-owned business, guided us through the wines.

Before getting to the wines, some background about Albert Bichot is helpful. Albert Bichot, the grandson of Bernard Bichot, who founded the company in Monthélie in 1831, expanded it and moved its headquarters to Beaune, where it remains, in 1912. Since 1996, Albéric Bichot, representing the 6th generation of the family, has been running the company and has been responsible for its meteoric rise in joining the other top-tier Burgundy négociants. Under his direction, Bichot has expanded, adding domaines to their portfolio.

The most critical change that Albéric instituted was a conversion from a “quantity” to a “quality” mentality. A major part of that change occurred in the vineyard. Enter Chauvel, a revered viticulturist. (I've heard so much praise from many respected sources about Chauvel that I think “revered” is appropriate.) Chauvel joined Bichot in 1999 after working for seven years with Pierre Morey, one of Burgundy's top winemakers, who currently makes wine at his eponymous domaine and was winemaker at Domaine Leflaive for years. Chauvel told me during a visit in 2008 that his toughest decision was when he and the Bichot team decided to decrease yields by 10 to 15 percent. He noted it was far more important for the reds than the whites because Chardonnay can handle a higher yield better than Pinot Noir. But the major hurdle was a mental one. As a farmer, decreasing yields voluntarily—without a guarantee that the price will increase—is a big challenge and an even bigger risk.

Like the other well-regarded négociants, Bichot is an important grower, owning six individual domaines, comprising about 250 acres of vines, from Chablis in the north to Beaujolais in the south. Unlike other négociants who own vineyards, and therefore are growers as well, the Bichot properties, Domaine Long-Depaquit in Chablis, Domaine du Clos Frantin and Château-Gris, both in Nuits St. Georges, Domaine du Pavillon in Pommard, Domaine Adélie in Mercurey, and Domaine de Rochebrès in Moulin-a-Vent, each have their own winery and dedicated team, all, of course, under the supervision of Chauvel and Serveau. The advantage of this organization, according to Albéric, is that the grapes have only a short distance to travel from vineyard to winery and there is a certain amount of friendly—one hopes—competition among the domaines each year.

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The Wines

Domaine Long-Depaquit, Chablis Grand Cru “Les Clos” 2018: With holdings totalling 150 acres of vines, almost half of which are located in Premier or Grand Cru vineyards, Long-Depaquit is one of the most notable estates in Chablis. They own roughly ten percent of all Grand Cru acreage in Chablis, including the entirety of La Moutonne, an anomalous site of almost 6-acres spanning two Grand Cru vineyards, Vaudésir and Preuses. In Les Clos alone, Long-Depaquit owns two parcels totaling almost 4 acres, which they blend together for this wine. The full-bodied and mineraly 2018 is forward and easy to appreciate now, but should develop beautifully over the next several years because of its impeccable balance. The long and graceful finish makes it particularly attractive. **93**

Domaine Adélie, Mercurey “Les Champs-Michaux” 2018: Albéric purchased this almost 20-acre estate in Mercurey in 2003, the year of his first daughter’s birth. Hence the name of the domaine. Mercurey is known for its red wines, but with more whites like this one, the reputation of its whites might well outdistance the reds. Chauvel explains that the soil at Les Champs-Michaux is better suited for Chardonnay than Pinot Noir and believes that the clay in the soil imparts roundness to the wine. Punching far above its weight, this exceptional village Mercurey is sensational. Floral, with hints of ripe stone fruits, it has extraordinary elegance for a white Mercurey. Delicious now. **92**

Domaine du Pavillon, Meursault 2018: This village Meursault, a blend of five plots from the northern end of the appellation, is vinified at the Domaine du Pavillon, just down the road in Pommard. One taste shows the dramatic textural difference between this white from the Côte d’Or and the Les Champs-Michaux from the Côte Chalonnaise. Creamy, as opposed to stoney, this Meursault has good weight on the palate. Fine acidity keeps it lively. **89**

Domaine du Pavillon, Corton-Charlemagne 2018: Bichot owns about three acres in the Les Languettes lieu-dit, a sunny southeast facing part of the Corton-Charlemagne vineyard. From it, they have made a glorious wine in 2018, showing nuances of spiced pineapple offset by a crispy edginess. Its stature is not in overall weight or power, rather in its layered complexity and elegance. Very tight at this stage, it starts to show its stature with air. A Grand Cru white that will need years to show itself. **94**

Domaine de Rochegrès, Moulin-a-Vent 2018: Bichot purchased this 12.5-acre estate in the heart of Moulin-a-Vent, arguably the top Beaujolais cru, in 2014. The grapes come from three lieux-dits within Moulin-a-Vent, La Rochelle, Au Mont, and the young vines from Rochegrès itself. It is ripe, spicy and suave, combining richness, minerality and bright acidity. A triumph. **93**

Domaine du Pavillon, Pommard “Clos des Ursulines” 2018: Unlike Bordeaux, most Burgundy vineyards are divided among multiple owners, which explains why the consumer can see multiple bottlings of Pommard Epenots, for example. By contrast, Clos des Ursulines, a nearly 10-acre vineyard located in the southeast part of the village, is owned entirely by the Domaine du Pavillon. It’s what the Burgundians call a monopole. The 2018 is muscular with remarkable suaveness for a wine from Pommard, which gives real elegance to its burly frame. An excellent village wine—and bargain-priced for what it is. **90**

Château Gris, Nuits-St. Georges 1er Cru “Château Gris” 2018: The 1er cru vineyard, Château Gris, takes its name from the 19th century castle the Earl of Lupé-Cholet built on the site after phylloxera destroyed the vines. Instead of the usual multi-colored tiles of Burgundian roofs, it had only slate tiles, giving rise to the nickname of Gris (grey). This monopole, owned by Bichot since 1978, covers 8.5 acres and is planted with both Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, but only the red wine from the site is classified as 1er cru. The 2018 is positively stunning. Far more elegant than you’d expect from Nuits-St. Georges, it still conveys a touch of wildness for which the appellation is known. Long and finesse-filled, it dances on the palate. Chauvel believes that the terraced rows at different elevations in the vineyard allows for varying levels of ripeness of the grapes, imparting freshness to the wine. That likely explains its bright finish, which amplifies the wine’s charms. **95**

Domaine du Clos Frantin, Echézeaux 2018: Bichot’s Domaine du Clos Frantin owns two and a third acres in the lieu-dit of Champs Traversin from which they make a consistently spectacular Echézeaux. The 2018 is no exception. It is explosive, yet not weighty. It delivers a touch of spice along with a plethora of subtle fruit flavors. Its understated power and suaveness are captivating. It’s my definition of Burgundy—flavor without weight. **96**

In summary, Bichot’s 2018 whites reflect their sites. The Meursault is creamy, while, in contrast, the Mercurey is stoney. Those who criticize négociants by claiming a “house style” obliterates site specificity are just plain wrong, at least in this case. The whites are charming and forward with surprisingly good acidity. While most of them, the Corton-Charlemagne aside, lack the verve for long aging, like the 2010 or 2014 whites, they are beautifully proportioned and, most importantly, delicious.

The reds, like the whites, speak of their origins. They are all wonderfully balanced, showing no signs of the over-ripeness that one might have expected given the growing conditions. They are stylish, balanced, and should evolve beautifully over the decade with proper cellaring. These wines convey the charm of Burgundy, no easy feat with such heat during the growing season. Clearly, careful and thoughtful minds were at work here, all the better for us who will drink and admire these fine wines in the years to come.

