

# Burgundy producers' views on climate change

*Matthew Hayes follows up his report on the effects of [climate change on the Côte d'Or](#) with interviews at Domaines de Villaine, J-F Mugnier and Mongeard-Mugneret as well as with new négociant Laurent Ponsot. This portrait of Freddy Mugnier was taken by Steen Öhman of [www.winehog.org](#). Update on frost risk at the bottom of this article.*

For any devotee of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, Burgundy's Côte d'Or is the very heart of the matter. Climate change presents both grape varieties with a very French, very existential problem. The French love to talk about *l'exception française*, but how to preserve that Burgundian exceptionality in a climate which is blurring the lines between old and new? Rising temperatures impose a changing world of earlier harvests, increased ripeness (of both phenolics and sugars), not to mention an inevitable threat to that defining cool-climate acidity.

Climate change may be perceived as an existential threat to what Burgundy is, and has ever been. Discussion of philosophy is no rare thing on the Côte, and that existential question is fair, if apparently simplistic compared with the nuances and intricacies of so many and various philosophical approaches to viticulture.

I asked around to get a few opinions on climate change and its consequences. Here are just a few, garnered before coronavirus-related restrictions put paid to my current movements.

If the resulting conversations were generally optimistic, this is no Panglossian whitewash. This is not 'the best of all possible worlds'; climate change is keenly felt, real and undeniable. In the short term, its effects may appear generally beneficial, at least in economic terms, but the future remains far from clear, and opinions diverse.



### **Domaine A & P de Villaine, Bouzeron, Côte Chalonnaise**

*Biodynamic non-certified; certified organic*

Founded in 1970 and run since 2001 by the nephew of Oncle Bert (pronounced Uncle *Bear*, as in *Aubert* de Villaine, so very much not Uncle Bert), Pierre de Benoist. Bouzeron was very much a low-profile Burgundy outpost in the early seventies and vineyard land was cheap, offering M et Mme de Villaine a sanctuary away from the Domaine de la Romanée-Conti where Aubert was, at the time, a relatively junior figure. De Villaine bought a domaine with just 8 ha (20 acres) of vines, almost entirely planted to Aligoté, which has remained, against fashion, Bouzeron's arcane speciality. The domaine has more recently expanded to a total of 30 ha as far afield as Rully and Santenay, offering a panaché of Aligoté, Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. All AOC regional, village or premier cru appellations.

De Villaine's Bouzeron vineyards are planted to Aligoté, and entirely trained in gobelet (bush) form. Their highest vineyard is l'Hermitage, rising to 310 m (1,020 ft), and their oldest is Les Fias, with vines up to 115 years old. The average vine age is 65 years. What marks the Côte Chalonnaise from the southern Côte d'Or are those common vineyard markers of aspect and elevation. Bouzeron's vineyards, just five kilometres as the crow flies from Chassagne, are at 260–310 m with both south-easterly and north-easterly aspects. Substantially higher and traditionally cooler than Le Montrachet, for example, whose highest point is 265 m.

De Benoist maintains that the current climate crisis is not dissimilar to the seismic event that was phylloxera 130 or so years ago, and Aligoté was a major victim then because it lost its reputation and economic viability, becoming a wine of mass production. At the time, most vineyards were planted to individual bush vines, and the more rationalised Guyot system of trellising, along with plantings of up to 10,000 vines per hectare, were the result. More easily

trained and pruned, Guyot training offered systematic planting and greater production at a time of dire economic need.

Today's climate crisis poses similar challenges for Burgundy. It is not difficult to imagine, he posits, a future in 20 or so years where the Guyot system has been partly or entirely limited to adapted terroirs in favour of gobelet, in a Burgundy with stretched water reserves. Even if the cultivars planted remain Burgundian, the taste and flavour of the wines may well be much more Mediterranean than today.

Post-phylloxera, Aligoté's loss of viability condemned the vine to a poor reputation (even if it had previously grown in the best terroirs of Corton and Montrachet). Aligoté's bracing acidity was too often masked by being grown in the wrong place – the plain – and at too high a yield, so that the result was insipid, low-acid company for the endemic [kir](#).



Ancient bush-trained Aligoté at Domaine A & P de Villaine

Pierre de Benoist suggests this is neither Aligoté's rightful place, nor its future role. As the climate heats up, de Benoist intimates that 'traditional' Burgundian Chardonnay and Pinot Noir will inevitably be challenged. Historically, one of Aligoté's weaknesses was its later ripening, with harvesting beginning up to ten days after its two more famous peers, leaving it susceptible to autumn chill and rot. Climate change is seeing Aligoté maturing earlier, more easily reaching peak ripeness. As Pinot Noir and Chardonnay maturation modifies, with thicker skins for both varieties, deeper colour for Pinot Noir particularly and lower acids for both, slower pressing of grapes is becoming essential (as it has always been for Aligoté) to avoid bitterness from higher alcohol levels. Aligoté, an aromatic variety, also has the advantage of that pronounced natural acidity, bracing not searing. De Benoist sees this as a useful tool against warmer conditions that naturally raise sugars and phenolics and lower acidity as harvest approaches.

It is difficult to disassociate the name de Villaine from ‘the domaine in Vosne’, and I was curious as to why the Bouzeron domaine’s website states their regime as bio-organic and not biodynamic like Oncle Bert’s other concern. All chemical treatments ceased between 1980 and 1985, apparently, and A & P de Villaine has now been untouched by agrochemicals for more than 40 years. De Benoist argues that the problem is that all of these certified regimes, from *lutte raisonnée* to biodynamic, are entirely ‘too formulaic’ with a long list of boxes to tick for official certification, a list of minimum requirements. Tick outside these boxes and you don’t get certification, even if what you actually do is far above the call of duty, so to speak. That is very much the case of Domaine A & P de Villaine.

Pierre de Benoist is an ardent believer in biodynamic agriculture, and states that his domaine is effectively more biodynamic than many with a pretty biodynamic certificate. The domaine is certified organic, but Pierre de Benoist says he prefers to keep his viticultural freedom, not be straitjacketed by a dogma. Still with me? It is about to get very complicated.

The standard principles of Steiner’s early-nineteenth-century philosophy are generally clear and estimable. Who would not want a product produced in as close to natural harmony as possible? Harmony between the elements, between water, rainwater and groundwater, earth, both its surface and below, vine and sky, the moon and the celestial elements is admirable, but much as I admire the principles, I feel a little lost in the details.

And Pierre went into details, the verticality of the vine, its skeleton, the celestial context, the energy of water, the movement, and existence of animal life, human or other, living or dead, in the vineyards and so on.

My lack of profound comprehension is *my* fault, not his explanation’s. Such passion and dedication to a regime which essentially makes *his* work more difficult is an admirable sacrifice, and in any event the proof is in the glass.

De Benoist agreed that the warming climate has made viticulture generally easier, and currently less noxious. Even those still using industrial methods use fewer treatments today, and that has to be a good thing. For de Villaine the good health of their vines gives healthy yields, even from their oldest vines, and that is a happy situation for all. However, he warns, just as Burgundy’s yields have been reduced by an average of 9 hl/ha over the past 20 years, further yield reduction is yet another challenge Burgundy may inevitably have to face. Lower yields mean less wine and, at the end of the chain, less income.

Currently, in contrast, the problem with increasing vineyard area and healthy, robust vineyards is having more wine to sell. And that, despite the internationally recognisable name de Villaine, may itself be a problem. But I’ll save that discussion and the one on oak for another day.