

THE ANSONIA NOTEBOOK

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Notes from Harpswell, No. 15

Regular readers of these notes will recall that we jumped into oyster farming back in 2016, when we learned that Maine is willing to license 400 square feet of water to anyone willing to cope with a lengthy application involving reports on eel grass, eagle nests, tides and topography. It's supposed to take three years for oysters to reach eating size in the chilly waters of the Gulf of Maine, but we opened a few from the "2016 vintage" at the end of year two. As the 2016 vintage entered its third year this spring, we were primed for some serious oyster eating.

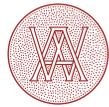
Until the Department of Marine Resources closed the entire fishery. There's a natural phenomenon up here called red tide. In Maine it's neither red nor a tide, but every year a particular phytoplankton blooms as the waters warm from winter temps (thirties) to summer ones (sixties). As that happens these plankton generate a neurotoxin that can make your face tingle or your breathing stop, depending on how much you ingest. Unsurprisingly, the latter effect got the attention of health authorities many years ago, and for decades the DMR has monitored toxin levels throughout the summer, closing whole fisheries whenever the risks exceed the miniscule.

Filter feeders like oysters, clams, scallops and mussels process seawater prodigiously -- about 50 gallons a day for an oyster. This improves water quality and allows us sea farmers to feel virtuous; but when the toxins are there some filter feeders concentrate them. This they do at different rates. Mussels get toxic quite quickly, but just as quickly flush the toxins out when the bloom recedes; clams are slower on both the uptake and the outflow. Scallops hold the toxins in their viscera for years, but never have even a touch in the muscle that is all we eat in the US. This year for the first time, some American oysters tested at levels enough to trigger a precautionary closure. So just when we were really beginning to get going on our own stocks, we had to call a halt.

Three weeks and two clean samples later, the DMR has freed our oysters. Nothing makes you want an oyster so much as being told you can't eat it, and we have begun feeding again with energy and enthusiasm. We're experimenting with various new recipes, but so far nothing beats a freshly shucked oyster on the half shell, with just a dash of something to add a complementary flavor.

As for favorite wine pairings, we're having a hard time getting below three. For a beverage that matches it's hard to beat Cru Muscadet, with its own salinity and its clean, melony fruit. Chablis, the classic, provides a bit more contrast -- the pure lemony fruit adds something like a squeeze of lemon. The match is lovely whether it's a Petit Chablis, a Vaillons Premier Cru, or something in between. And if you're looking for refinement to match just a few oysters, consider a Crémant from Picamelot or a Champagne from Bardoux. Really, though, finding a wine that goes well with oysters isn't all that difficult. We favor unoaked wines, but anything in the category is worth a try -- say, a Sauvignon or dry Chenin from the upper Loire.

– MW



2019 BURGUNDY UPDATE

As you might have heard it has been a hot summer in Burgundy. Two serious heatwaves have hit, one in late June and another in late July. In Burgundy it's "only" reached 104° F, (compared with 113° F in the South of France), but Pinot Noir and Gamay don't handle heat as well as southern varietals. Chardonnay survives better in warm weather (see California, South Africa *etc.*), but the results are sometimes less than Burgundian.

Winemakers these days often practice *effeuillage*, or the removal of some leaves on the vines. This helps aerate the grapes and avoid mold, and also promotes ripe and deeply colored skins from increased sun exposure. But grape bunches with less leaf cover are more prone to sunburn, and this summer's heatwaves have caused some damage in Burgundy. Even when warm temperatures raise sugar levels faster, phenolic ripeness (in the skins) proceeds at the same rate; most estimates still put this year's harvest date as mid-September. This Spring's frosts and uneven flowering suggest yields will be down from the 2018 vintage. But, provided some rain falls in August to help with *veraison* (change from green to purple skins), the quality points to, as one writer put it, "*une nouvelle grande année.*"



AUGUST: WAREHOUSE TASTING NOTES

Tasting notes from Saturday tastings at the Newton Warehouse

Sanzay Rosé 2018: "pleasant and refreshing... was expecting a fruity strawberry glass of wine but this was more balanced and restrained" – IW [↗](#)

Bonnefond Syrah 2017 "Loads of blackberry, raspberry...very enjoyable and drinkable" – IW [↗](#)

Martin-Luneau Clisson 2010: "proof that Muscadet can age; extraordinary nose of seashells, dried apple skins, brioche; acidity still present but sophisticated and calm; remarkable." – TW [↗](#)

UPDATES

- An exciting crop of new wines from new producers has just arrived with the May Futures delivery. Joncuas’s rich reds may not be well suited to summer weather, but the bottles we’ve opened have been magnificent; come fall we’re certain they’ll make friends. Boursot’s new Chambolles are as delicious as we found them in Burgundy back in April, and Thomas Morey’s Chassagnes are somehow even better.
- We’re in the process of adding more “evergreen” content to the website: lists and guides our readers can refer to in the future. We’ve posted our first four guides, available for download in the “PDF Guides” section of the site. Feedback (and additional ideas) are welcome.
- We’re hard at work (so to speak) on September Futures, which will include reader favorites such as Ravaut, Maillet, Saint Clair, Bonfond, Bardoux, and more. Release date is 9/1, stay tuned!

–TW



AUGUST: RECOMMENDATIONS

RECIPE: *Chicken Caesar Salad* [↗](#)

Here’s a cold, healthy dish for a muggy evening. Homemade Caesar dressing isn’t that hard, and it’s light years better than anything bought; don’t skip the eggs or anchovies. Pair with Auxerrois.

PODCAST: *I’ll Drink to That #467: Benjamin Leroux* [↗](#)

Benjamin Leroux is one of Burgundy’s superstar micronegociants: he owns no vines, but is a masterful winemaker. Levi Dalton’s recent 2-hour interview with him is extensive, exhaustive, and, for a Burgundy nerd, extremely interesting. They cover a wide range of Burgundian topics, including climate change, organic farming, reduction, destemming, and more.