

Chablis availability and pricing

2016 was a traumatic year for Chablis vineyards. In spring the vines were firstly hit hard on April 28th by the most severe frost in Burgundy since 1981, followed closely on 27th May by a violent hailstorm (see photo below) with some hailstones the size of eggs. Many vine shoots were either killed off by frost (see photos) or snapped off by hail, with over 400 hectares of vineyards in Chablis badly affected.

Domaines situated in the southern vineyards of Courgis (and Prehy) where Domaine Pattes Loup is based were especially hard hit, and I'm very sad to have to report that Thomas Pico at Pattes Loup made only 9hh in 2016, down 78% from 40hh in 2015. Chablis domaines in the north weren't spared either – Domaine Garnier's 5 hectares of Petit Chablis produced only 3hh, such a tiny quantity that Garnier sold it all off in bulk to the negoce. So no Petit Chablis at all until (hopefully!) May 2018 when the 2017 might be available.

Globally there is a shortfall of over 50% in the region and availability of Chablis and Chablis Premier Cru from the co-operative and negoce to the top growers will be restricted until spring 2018 at earliest. This unprecedented situation has forced all our Chablis producers to have to make some very tough decisions regarding pricing and how/when they will sell both the 2016s (which thankfully are of pretty good quality) and reservations of 2015s that haven't left their cellars. All of our growers placed restrictions on the amounts of 2015s that we could buy in the autumn or delayed their release until 2017(or later!) and to a man they have increased prices on their 2015s from January 1st.



Here's the situation domaine by domaine:

Daniel Dampt

When we visited in December, Daniel also reported that as well as the earlier frost/hail there had been a problem with excessive heat in late August! Dampt produced 50% of their normal crop in 2016. As regards 2015 Daniel thinks that the year reminds him of 2009, whose wines whilst showing initial plumpness and weight of ripe fruit that slightly covers up the acidity, started to show really well after a couple of years of bottle age. He also slightly amended his vinification in 2015 to retain more CO2 to help keep the wines a touch fresher. Dampt's Vaillons, Lechet and especially Lys, a cuvee made from old 55-60yo vines and exposed to the north, were especially successful in 2015. He has held back 60% of all his 2015 wines to sell during 2017, and has increased his prices on the 2015s by 15% from January 1st. His pricing of the 2016s will be the same as his new prices for the 2015s.



Domaine Garnier

Garnier have around five hectares of Petit Chablis and 15 hectares of Chablis vineyards, and all their premier and grand cru wines are from grapes that they buy from colleague vigneron working in a similar way to them. As mentioned, in 2016 they only produced 3hh of Petit Chablis, which Jerome sold off to the negoce, and so no 2016 Petit Chablis will be available. Their Chablis production like Dampt's was down by 50%, which they will be keeping all for bottling themselves (they normally sell 25% of their production to the negoce) and their Chablis 1er Cru purchases were down by 41% - yields in some sites were ok, and others like Mont de Milieu were non-existent! The market price for sales of premier and grand cru grapes has exploded given the shortage of crop, and also the fact that like Garnier, growers who have been in the habit of selling off part of their production decided to keep all of their crop for themselves in 2016. Garnier have held back three quarters of their production (easier to do as they bottle later in the year than Dampt, and haven't even started to sell any 2015 premier or grand crus yet).

Garnier have increased their Petit Chablis and Chablis 2015 prices by 22% from January 1st, and the same prices will apply to the 2016s. 2014 premier and grand cru prices that they have already fixed will not be changed. Prices on their purchases of 2016 premier cru and grand cru grapes varied according to nature and the individual decision of the growers with whom they work, but with 2016 availability down by 41%, on average they have increased the 2015 premier crus we buy by 33% over the 2014 prices from January 1st. No prices have yet been fixed on the Vaudesir Grand Cru 2015.



Domaine Oudin

Here the loss was a pretty catastrophic average of 75% production from their eight hectares of vineyards, and in some of their parcels they lost 100%. Due to a northern wind the temperature on April 27th exceptionally dropped to -8c. Nathalie Oudin explained that they are accustomed to losing a little of their crop due to spring frosts, usually on lower slopes where cold air accumulates in the bottom of the valley. On April 27th it was more like a winter frost which reached all of their vines higher up the slopes – and most of the frost protection devices concentrated on vines on the lower slopes! The temperature was too much for some vines which were killed off completely, and the buds and counter buds were shrivelled and killed by the frost. Hail on 13th May then had an impact, but the extreme hailstorm of May 27th finished them off. As reported by Dampit, 5 days in August reached temperatures above 40c, which finished up grilling many of the grapes still left on the vine! Looking at things from a positive angle Nathalie reports that at least they did not suffer from oidium!!

The net result from this catalogue of unremitting meteorological torments was that they lost 75% of their village Chablis, will probably not produce a 2016 version of their top Chablis lieu-dit cuvee les Serres, and lost 50% of their small holdings of Chablis Premier Crus. There is at least a little good news on the pricing front here as we still have some stocks of their excellent 2014 Chablis, 2012 and 2013 Chablis les Serres, and 2014 Chablis 1er Cru Vaucoupins at old prices (bar any Brexit influence!), but future ex-cellar prices for subsequent vintages of all these wines will be increasing by 20%.

Domaine Pattes-Loup

Like Domaine Oudin, Pattes-Loup's 2016 production was ravaged by the appalling season, and Thomas Pico reports losing 78% by comparison to 2015, with yields averaging just 9hh (Thomas's normal average of 40hh is 20hh below the commercial norm). Thomas reports losing 50% on five hectares of his crop to the April frost, between 25 to 100% to the 27 May hail on fifteen hectares, with the grapes then being attacked by mildew which had been precipitated by 290mm of rain in May followed by a very wet June! His father had 45 years of experience as a vigneron and had never known such a series of meteorological afflictions during one year.

As he has now taken over his father's estate Domaine du Bois d'Yver which has 15 hectares plus the five hectares of Pattes Loup, Thomas was faced with a desperate financial situation – what to do when you employ 9.5 employees full-time, and haven't produced anything like enough wine to pay their wages, and face a massive loss? One partial solution might have been to abandon his organic principles, as a handful of other organically certified vignerons in the area did when faced with such losses, and use a systemic spray in the June battle against oidium and mildew. However Thomas resisted the temptation to do an about turn when faced with these difficulties explaining that he was firmly committed to carrying on working organically due to a deep personal conviction that it was the right way to work in the best interests of his wines, his customers and the health of his staff.

But Thomas still had to find solutions to pay his staff and keep the domaine going. He has thus decided to split the sale of his Chablis 2015 village wine over two years releasing half this April and half a year later in spring 2018, release the 2015 premier crus a year later than normal in spring 2018, and given the low volumes that he will be selling over the next 2 years, he has also purchased, and worked the harvest and supervised the pressing of high altitude (400-500m) organically certified chardonnay from the limestone hillsides of Limoux (from two friends Etienne Fort and Domaine Delmas). This has been aged in his cave in Chablis and will be bottled and released by Thomas as a Vin de France in April this year.

Thomas has also been constrained to sharply increase the price of his wines – the Chablis 2015 will be up by over 40% when partially released this spring (the same price will be maintained when the second tranche is released in April 2018). There are no prices yet for the 2015 Premier Crus that will be released in spring 2018, and the second tranche of 2014 Premier Crus that we have just taken delivery, is up by 25%.