

## Food

# Burgundy wineries try to weather the storms: Hail, frost, rain — and Brexit



By **Dave McIntyre** Columnist, Food September 3

Frédéric Drouhin was in a quandary. Seven days before I visited him in his family winery's offices in Beaune, the center of Burgundy, the voters of Great Britain had decided to pull out of the European Union. Brexit meant Burgundy's most important export market would lose its free-trade status and revert to the old, uncomfortable regime of tariffs and other trade restrictions. To add insult to indignity, Drouhin's chief of hospitality and winery chef were both British citizens, about to lose their right to freely live and work in France.

"I guess we'll have to figure out how to apply for visas again," he said.

Maison Joseph Drouhin, founded in 1880 and headquartered in the ancient Roman sector of Beaune, is one of Burgundy's oldest and most august producers. The cellars at Maison Drouhin are perhaps the most fascinating I've ever visited, steeped in history from the Roman era to the dukes of Burgundy and the French Resistance during World War II. And, of course, in wine.

Frédéric is one of four siblings in the fourth generation running the firm. His brother Philippe manages the vineyards, approximately 200 acres in the Côtes de Beaune and Chablis, with a few farther south in the Mâcon. His sister, Véronique, handles the winemaking in Burgundy and on their sister property, Domaine Drouhin Oregon, founded in 1987 in Oregon's Willamette Valley. Another brother, Laurent, manages the U.S. and Canadian markets out of New York City.

The rise in anti-free-trade sentiment wasn't the only thing affecting Frédéric Drouhin's mood the day I visited. Mother Nature wasn't helping, either. Burgundy has been slammed by bad weather the past few vintages, with wicked hailstorms ripping fruit and leaves from the vines. The 2016 vintage was hard hit from the start with a devastating frost in April. A rainy spring and early summer hampered fruit set and increased disease pressure.

Drouhin drove me to the Clos des Mouches, a premier cru vineyard on Beaune's outskirts named for the honeybees (mouches de miel, or "honey flies") that once populated the property. Drouhin owns the prime mid-slope sectors of the vineyard, half in chardonnay, half in pinot noir. But production has been little to nil during the past few years because of the hail and this year's frost. He knelt and showed me leaves and vine shoots withered by the cold, and the remaining grape clusters struggling to grow.

“All these vines were killed, so what you see is the second fruiting,” he said. “We are tending the vineyards for the 2017 vintage. It’s been a rough few years, but this year is the toughest.”

That sentiment was echoed by other Burgundy producers I visited.

“I’ve never seen this much mildew pressure,” said Benjamin Leroux, an independent small producer with a cult following. This year’s weather was making Leroux question his commitment to organic viticulture. The organic treatment for mildew is to spray the vines with copper, a heavy metal that can be toxic to humans in high concentration, before rain is expected; the more often it rains, the more often you spray. Conventional chemicals are more powerful and effective.

“Do I use 12 kilograms of copper throughout the season, or, sadly, do I do two conventional sprays?” Leroux said. “I’m not willing to sacrifice my crop [to remain organic]. If I sacrifice my crop, I sacrifice myself.”

David Croix, winemaker at Maison Camille Giroud for the past 15 vintages, put it this way: “It’s been bad four of the last five years, and this is by far the worst. Other years we’ve had hail, this year frost. Some vineyards don’t have any fruit at all, but we still have to mow, and we still have to trellis the vines.”

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As I tasted his phenomenal 2015s from barrel, Croix drove home the point that bad weather doesn’t mean bad wine: It means less and more expensive wine. (After my visit, Croix announced he would leave Camille Giroud after this vintage to concentrate on his own label, Domaine des Croix, and to work at Domaine Roulot in Meursault.)

Back at Maison Drouhin, I toured the ancient cellars with Jacquie Morrison, the soon-to-be-undocumented hospitality director. She showed me walls of stone laid in herringbone patterns by the Romans in the 4th century and described how the cellars, and the city above them, were built upon layers of history. Another room was part of the duke of Burgundy’s cellar. (The duke’s winery above is now a wine museum.)

“The new part of the cellar dates from the 15th century,” Morrison said. Maison Drouhin recently opened the cellars to the public, and Morrison leads up to three tours daily by appointment for groups of up to eight people. I highly recommend it for visitors to Beaune.

The tour also included the door through which Frédéric Drouhin’s grandfather, Maurice, who was active in the French Resistance, escaped the Gestapo in the last months of World War II. To me, the door symbolized the defiance of a region that has survived centuries of foreign occupation and political turmoil. No way will a string of bad weather and some market turbulence keep Burgundy down.

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Dave McIntyre writes about wine weekly. He also blogs at [dmwineline.com](http://dmwineline.com).

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