Andrew Jefford

'Chablis' beauty is that of the ice queen – and who wants a porky ice queen?'

THE HEAT IS still on. Last year was the hottest in France since records began. In 2011, the average temperature was 13.6°C, about 1.5°C above the long-term figure (based on the period between 1971 and 2000). That made it even hotter than 2003, whose average temperature was 1.3°C above that same long-term figure. The news raised eyebrows, especially on the faces of those who took their holidays in July 2011 (the coldest July for 30 years). What made the difference, though, was astonishingly warm spring and autumn weather. Indeed every month except July was warmer than the long-term average.

What, I wondered as I sat on the slow train which ambles north through Burgundy on its journey from Lyon to Paris Bercy, does this mean for Chablis? If you're making Pauillac or Pomerol, you will welcome the warmth: historically speaking, great vintages in classic red-wine areas have been warmer-than-average ones. Chablis, though, is different. Its beauty is that of the ice queen: high cheekbones, sculpted contours, mouthwatering acidity, oystery freshness, the clatter of stones. Won't all those extra calories put weight on her? Who wants a porky ice queen? Why would anyone want to drink Chablis if it all tasted like Meursault? Is Chablis, in sum, the fabled canary in the cage, ready to tumble off its perch at a whiff of atmospheric troubles to come?

There have certainly been climatic changes in the region. In the 1960s, a giant reservoir was created over 15 hectares in the village of Beines, containing 450,000 cubic metres of water. Why? Because spring frosts cut a swathe through the vineyards every other year, and the most effective means of combating them was to coat the buds with water, which quickly froze to ice (aspersion). The reservoir furnished the water. Nowadays, the Lac de Beines is more useful to coarse fisherman than to winegrowers. 'I remember it was always tense at home in April and May,' recalls Didier Defaix of Domaine Bernard Defaix. 'Not any more. The last bit of frost we had was in 2003. The last big frost was in 1997.' Hail is now more of a problem than frost in Chablis.

Another major change has been in the harvest date. 'When I was little,' Defaix continues, 'harvest was always a month after the children returned to school – at the end of September or early October. Now it happens at the same time, in early September.' Jean-Marie Raveneau of Domaine Raveneau remembers: 'We used to chase sugar. Now we have to look after our acidities.' Benoît Droin has supervised 13 harvests since taking over from his father Jean-Paul at the family domaine. Only one has been in October. Most have been in early September, and two (2003, 2011) were in August.

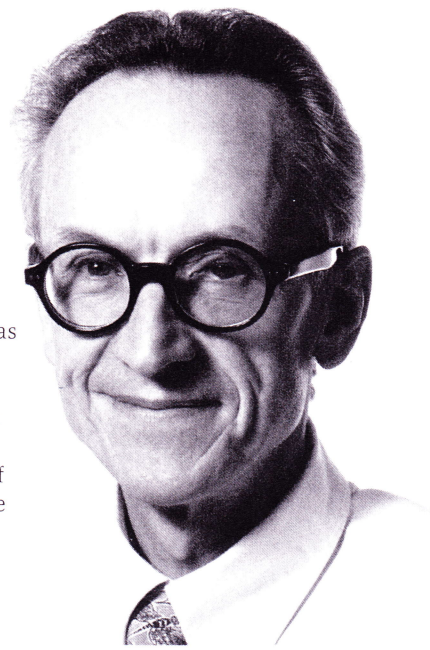
Given all of this, how is the canary looking? Oddly enough, quite chirpy.

The end of frost as a major check on production in Chablis is, more than anything else, the factor that has permitted the region's vast increase in vineyard plantings, from 500ha in 1948 to about 5,000ha now. François Servin of Domaine Servin recalls his father being offered 5ha of grand cru land in the 1960s – and turning it down, because it was so frost-prone as to be economically unviable. Global warming, therefore, has brought many new viticultural livelihoods to Chablis. Quality is rising because the new vineyards are now getting older – and because they have been planted at high densities using the single guyot pruning system. That means each vine produces about half what Chablis vines used to produce.

Chablis is also drinkable sooner. 'No one ever used to drink a Chablis before it was five years old, and 10 was often better,' remembers Servin. Young Chablis is now delicious, supposing it's been well made in the first place. There is much less chaptalisation than in the past. Grass-sward vineyards are now common and, though still tricky, organic cultivation is now possible. A warmer climate has ensured wine from the region's least-favoured vineyards – those used for Petit Chablis – is much more palatable than it used to be. Some Petit Chablis from 2003 is still superb.

Most growers admit there's been a change in style in premier cru and grand cru Chablis. 'We've lost freshness in recent years, that's for sure,' says Droin. 'But there are benefits, too. Even the best wines were very light in the past; the worst were like water. There's a huge difference of volume in the mouth now.' Defaix adds: 'Maybe there's been a change of style, but it's still Chablis. And I feel that the wines have gained in depth and purity.' The freshly bottled 2010s tasted superb at the end of last year, but even the much riper 2009s still looked like Chablis and not Meursault. A 2003 Les Clos from Droin was unforgettable: tingling with minerals, despite its structured constitution.

None of this is to say that the canary won't eventually snuff it, nor that the sylph-like Chardonnay we've all worshipped at one time or another won't turn tubby. But at this stage of the warming process, Chablis seems to have gained more than it has lost. D



What I've been drinking this month

A clutch of new-generation Australian Pinot Noirs has given me a lot of drinking pleasure over the past month or so. The **2010 Cobaw Ridge Pinot** from the Macedon Ranges in Victoria (organic fruit and zero additions bar a little sulphur) was subtly fruited, intense, fresh and vivacious, with superb, structuring tannins: an outstanding effort. (This vineyard, sadly, lost its entire 2011 harvest to the rains of La Niña; fingers crossed for better luck this year.) **BK Wines' 2010 Rosetta Pinot** from the Adelaide Hills, by contrast, was more sweetly fruited, yet with some stemmy density offsetting the sweetness, lending this mouthfilling wine plenty of sinewy, food-friendly depths.

Andrew Jefford is the 2011 Louis Roederer International Wine Feature Writer of the Year