

October 30th, 2019

2019 Harvest report

In 2019 the own genius of the climates of Burgundy erased the negative impact of excessive heat and adapted itself to extreme conditions to offer elegant wines with an extraordinary freshness.

For vignerons each vintage remains a mystery until the wine is run off into barrels where it will age. It is somewhat like waiting for a child to be born without being able to predict its future. More than any other, this 2019 vintage was born without providing clues to make comparisons with previous vintages.

This year indeed the grapes were born and grew accompanied by the sun, heat and drought. Winter was not very rainy. The beautiful weather set in at the beginning of spring and lasted thanks to the continuous North wind. The usual works - pruning, debudding and ploughing - were carried out easily, but sometimes also at a speedy pace, when for instance right in the middle of debudding, the vegetation started to develop with incredible energy. The vigneron, then, has no alternative than to give in.

Treatments could be reduced to a historical minimum. The same was true for the infrequent ploughing that was performed according to the old saying « a good hoeing is worth two waterings ».

As of May, it was hot and we, like vines, were already lacking water. The vines however were apparently not suffering since they kept on developing with the same exceptional vigour. Flowering began early, at the very beginning of June, but was difficult and spread out over more than 15 days. This caused significant coulure (flower abortion) and a lot of millerandage (small undeveloped berries) which is always the sign that vines are fighting against stressful conditions. Leaves were green yet.

From flowering we were expecting the harvest around September 20th, but this was without reckoning that the North wind and the beautiful weather were to leave no room to the Western wind and humidity that normally balance hot periods. So, the door stayed open to the heat that was getting unusual in the afternoons. Fortunately, the nights remained cool, except during two heatwaves, one at the end of June (24-30) and the other that lasted one week also, at the end of July, when veraison began.

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At that moment, we were really surprised by the capacity of the vines to resist. While we were suffering night and day, inside and outside, leaves remained green and grapes were reaching a maturity that we wouldn't have dared to hope for in such extreme conditions.

Heat had two effects on vines: during the spring until the first heatwave, vegetation developed at a crazy pace and, as mentioned before, with a vigour that took us by surprise. Then, from the end of June, especially during the second heatwave in late July, its evolution was often blocked. Too intense heat made vines withdraw onto themselves, abandon their grapes in the Sun and adopt a survival regime until temperatures were getting back to normal again. As a result there were some burnt berries (that were removed at harvest time) and a few « blockages » in the development of vines from flowering to veraison.

The extraordinary resistance of our vineyards was remarkable. It puts back in the place of unfounded conjectures the warnings predicting ceaselessly that the heat cycle we are experiencing nowadays can only bring the worst. This 2019 vintage proves that vines are clever and have the instinct of life, i.e. they have their own intelligence and try to adapt whenever they are faced with extreme conditions. Remember that it was often the case in the past. Our role is to help them by choosing good vegetal material and appropriate ways of cultivation.

According to the figures we have, the addition of temperatures, i.e the amount of heat, this year, was superior to 2003, which is the contemporary reference year. But in 2003 the vineyards really suffered (apart from very rare exceptions like Romanée-Conti whose resistance was amazing) and we were close to surmaturity (which fortunately did not happen) i.e. a maturity that isn't reached by the effect of photosynthesis, but by the concentration of the grape elements.

That was not the case this year either. Vineyards remained green until the end, overcoming the heatwave more easily than we, humans, did and in late season, they knew how to ripen, nourish and bring their grapes to complete maturity with a perfect balance between sugar, acid and phenolic components.

The facility with which the vineyards went through those very difficult conditions was of course reinforced by biodynamics, by the high average age of vines that are deeply rooted and by resulting low yields, since they fight better when they have fewer grapes to bear.

However, on the eve of harvest, in mid-September, we had not the slightest idea of what the wines would be like: would the remarkable resistance of the vines be found in grapes and wines?

The harvest

The maturity of sugars rose very fast in August with a potential of 11° on the 26th, 12°5 one week later, on September 2nd and even 13° in the younger vineyards. Then, maturity stagnated during the following week to start up again with renewed vigour and reach 13°5/14° and even more in Chardonnay. We would have liked to wait so that the phenolic maturity of skins, stalks and pips could balance even better with the high sugar contents of berries, but the latter rising quickly, on September 14th, we decided to harvest the plants, i.e. the younger vines of La Tâche first, then of Romanée-St-Vivant where we had already a potential of 14°. Grapes were wonderful, even if there was not much juice, the heat and the sun having partly dried the berries.

On the 15th, it was the turn of Montrachet. The hydric regime of the Chassagne-Montrachet area was more favorable in June and thanks to a few beneficial rains, the vineyards could accumulate water reserves, which hastened both flowering and ripeness. There too, we brought back into the winery a wonderful crop, with small « millerands » grapes and rather low yields if we compare to the 2018 vintage that was exceptionally abundant.

In the afternoon of the 15th, we started with the Richebourg and then all the other vineyards, one after the other, under hot weather becoming more intense day by day. The vines that were weakened as they were approaching the end of their growing cycle were visibly affected. Fortunately nights were cool and this weakness had no impact on the grapes that were already ripe and ready to live their new lives out.

Here are the harvest dates and approximate yields:

- 15 & 16 September: Richebourg (around 21hl/ha)
- 16 (afternoon), 17 (morning) & 18: La Tâche (around 23hl/ha)
- 17 (morning): Romanée-Conti (the weather was cloudy and not too warm: 22,5hl/ha)
- 19: Corton (15hl/ha) and Grands-Echezeaux in the afternoon
- 20: end of the Grands-Echezeaux (28hl/ha) and Romanée-St-Vivant in the afternoon
- 21: Romanée-St-Vivant (around 27hl/ha)
- 22: Echezeaux and beginning of Corton-Charlemagne
- 23: end of Echezeaux (23hl/ha)
- 24: La Paulée (festive lunch at the end of the harvest)
- 25: end of Corton-Charlemagne (26hl/ha)

Our team of harvesters, more professional than ever, picked wonderful grapes at a very good pace, under the expert supervision of Nicolas Jacob, our vineyards manager. The grapes were very ripe and had homogeneous maturity, without the slightest trace of botrytis or any other diseases ; only sun-roasted berries were eliminated. Once again the sorting table did a haute couture job, meticulously cutting the tails of the grapes in order to diminish the volume of stalks that were put into vats. Consequently, the traditional vinification with « whole harvest » and long fermentation, that was masterly controlled by Alexandre Bernier and his devoted and efficient team, was even more respectful of the grapes of the year.

2019 marks the first harvest and vinifications of our Corton-Charlemagne vineyards. The plots that are situated on the upper part of the hillside could wait. That is the reason why we let two days pass by after ending our harvest of red grapes and only finished on the 25th. There too, we harvested golden grapes that were very ripe and very healthy. After pressing, the greatest part of must was run off into new high-quality barrels and the smaller part (4 pièces) in a lovely oak vat that was made specially for the occasion. Fermentations are underway. We are waiting with great curiosity for the finished wine.

The wines

At the time of this writing, on October 30th, all the red wines have been put into barrels. They have deep red colours, but above all the fragrances are surprisingly fresh. The vines have answered the question we were asking above: they overcame the ordeal of intense heat and drought by giving us perfectly balanced grapes with beautiful acidities and supple tannins. Even though it is a bit early to have a definite opinion, the wines will have a freshness and a « classical burgundian » style that will be the main characteristic of the vintage.

The fermentations of white wines are not over yet. It is too early to give an opinion.

What is sure is that two extremely hot vintages followed each other, but produced extremely different wines. What makes them apart and different was not due to the heat, but to their hydric regime and the flowering period: in 2018 the flowering was very early. It took place without any problems and was completed in the space of three days. The vineyards were not stressed thanks to the regular rains that we had from spring to July, before heat and drought set in in August and September. In 2019 the flowering was more difficult because of the drought we had in Spring and the lack of water reserves. Fortunately, there were a few rains in the first part of August and although they were not abundant, the freshness they brought to the grapes was kept until the harvest.

Being unable to find a contemporary vintage to compare with what 2019 had in store for us... we looked for... and found in the booklet « De la Vendange » by our ancestor, Jacques-Marie Duvault Blochet that the 1865 vintage - a very great year of the 19th century - had similitudes with 2019: intense heat, harvest around September 20th and extreme sugar concentrations. It was published in 1870 and has become a "cult" treatise to many vigneronns that read it every year before the harvest.

It is interesting also to notice in this same booklet that the year before, 1864, was very similar to 2018: heat and great wines also. If we go even further and examine the harvest dates since the 14th century until today, we discover that there was more than one hot cycle. Ours is not the first. What the future has in store for us? Are those who predict the worst right? We rather think of a progressive adaptation to this hot cycle. While vineyards are getting used to those conditions, we try to adapt as well: selecting types of late-maturing Pinot Noir or Chardonnay or improving the canopy. These changes are already ongoing or tested and will be applied if they prove to be efficient.

The vineyards after the harvest

October 30th. Tomorrow, Autumn will be here. We had some rain yesterday. Today, the sun has come back. The vineyards, relieved of their grapes, look light and transparent since the first leaves have fallen... In the sun, their beauty is amazing and surpasses all the memories of previous vintages. This year, leaves were not attacked by mildew, which is rare, and they are softly and slowly changing colours. Every morning we have the feeling that a painter came overnight to revive the wonderful tints of red, orange and yellow that make the Côte look like a mosaic that changes every day. Sometimes we have the impression that the vineyards, after giving birth to grapes that will produce a great admired wine, want to remind us that it is thanks to this short-lived but brighting beauty that the wine will be beautiful too. Vineyards seem to remind us also that without them, there would be no great wine and that is why we must coddle them so that they can quietly fall asleep and wake up with happiness in next spring... and be ready for the new adventures the sky and the vigneron will hold in store for them...
