

Blatch on 2007 - the wines

28 Jan 2008 by Bill Blatch

2007 dry whites

These were picked in perfect conditions. With a permanently good forecast, everyone took their time, and could afford to wait until the optimum day for each parcel's and each variety's total ripeness (see ? Blatch's harvest calendar). Such a long stop- start harvest meant that the style is very pure, and the nature of the wines is of fresh, fine, tangy fruit, with pronounced acidities, not at all like the big wines of the hot years '00, '03 and '05, and totally in the style of the cooler years '01, '02, '04. They seem to have the aromatics and the acidity of the '01s but not the same weight (August had been hot in '01); They have something of the tensile nature of '02 (but the '02 summer had been cooler and the wines were harder); They seem to have less of the softness of '04 and a greater vibrancy in the fruit. The 2007s will surely be a bit of all of these vintages. But maybe the most important signal to their quality is that the people who made them really like them...

2007 red wines

Amongst the chaos of disparity, the hallmark of the vintage seems to be in the frankness of the fruit rather than in the structure of the wine. After all, at 12°5 – 13°5 for the Merlots and 11°5 – 13° for the Cabs, the alcohol levels are well below modern norms. For many, this will be a welcome change from the increasing concentration that we have seen in recent years, and will represent what some would say is a return to the true value of claret. Indian summer vintages (like '78, '02 and '07) are rarely strong anyway, since the vine in September puts more of its photosynthesis-generated energy into reserve for the winter than it does into the bunches.

The Merlots are very variable. They seem very successful on the warmer parts of the right bank. Here, as an early flowerer, they escaped the coulure of June and the subsequent spun- out véraison. Then the end of August rainstorms were much weaker here so that the grapes went into the September fine weather in good shape. The fact that they are generally planted on clay soils that provided better run- off in August also helped. The Merlots of the right bank will surely turn out stronger than those of the left bank, which will certainly turn out lighter.

The Cabernets are generally very successful, both Franc on the right bank, not tremendously powerful but fresh and silky- textured, and Sauvignon on the left, well- defined and smoothly tannic. They clearly show the added effect of having been harvested further away from the August problems as well as benefiting, as Cabernet needs to more than the Merlot, from more autumn sunshine. Without the underlying power of the Merlots, the left bank Cabernet Sauvignons will have to fend for themselves this year to assert their position in the cuvées.

So it should turn into an interesting contest between right bank Merlot and left bank Cabernet, and, since Cabernet tends to take longer to show its potential than Merlot, this contest may go on for some time.

Overall, the wines are of similar weight to the '06s, but with a totally different constitution. Whilst the '06s currently have more middle- weight (after all, they had the benefit of a hot Jun - Jul) and a tighter finish (the harvest was more hurried because of the rain), the '07s will certainly have a smoother texture that will make them not necessarily better than their predecessors but certainly more approachable. And the vinifications were conducted extremely carefully in order to preserve just that element of smoothness.

2007 sweet whites

Quite clearly Sauternes has had the best of the vintage. That is no surprise: Comeback vintages are not unusual in Sauternes, where the Autumn is by far the most important season of the year. Remember '97? And anyone still around who remembers '83? [Yes – JR]

It will come as no surprise that '07 has nothing to do with the regularly hot, dry years that produce the really rich, heavy Sauternes when the botrytis comes in a rush on already very concentrated grapes as in '05, '03, '90, '47, '21. It is rather in the family of long harvests, spun out over many pickings as the botrytis arrives throughout a dry autumn, producing the finer more nervous style of wines like '88, '89 and '01, themselves legends too but in a different, more refined style.

How far 2007 will become a legend is difficult to predict at this early stage. Certainly the summer was much the same for Sauternes as elsewhere: dull and drizzly in June and July, and rainy in August, with one important difference: on "Black Wednesday", the final downpour of 28th Aug, only a few drops fell on Sauternes. The bunches were consequently in better shape to recover and the grapes to accelerate their ripening when the weather turned fine the following day. As a result, many properties could start a first picking right from 10th Sep of mostly shrivelled rather than botrytised grapes, producing a few hectolitres of beautifully fine- flavoured brightly fresh musts of 19-22°.

With the cool, fine north- easterly breezes continuing on through the rest of September, this first *trie* could continue at leisure, quickly phasing into a second *trie* of similar character right into October. This was mostly passerillé (raised grapes); it was too dry and the nights were too cool for botrytis (noble rot). So far, so good, but only a small quantity had been harvested and most of it without botrytis. The depressionary damp and showery conditions of late September/ early October, combined with a rise in night- time temperatures during the first 10 days of October, were to change all this, bringing a flush of excellent botrytis. Sauternes escaped the big shower of 5 Oct and a 3rd and sometimes a 4th *trie* could now be harvested – very selectively since only part of it reached a truly concentrated state. Most of it remained stubbornly at "*pourri plein*" (fully rotten) or "*chocolat*" stage, not quite concentrated enough to qualify for "*rôti*" (roasted), the stuff of great Sauternes. The forecast was bad for 10th, and, with the botrytis now on the grapes for more than 10 days, many lesser estates picked a big *trie* and some crus classés a small one now. This produced lovely botrytised wines but they were not very rich. There was still a lot left on the vines and now the showers were giving way to morning fog – the traditional harbinger of great botrytis in dry years but the last thing the Sauternais wanted right now. They already had the botrytis: what was needed was bright drying sunshine to concentrate it into *rôti*, not damp foggy mornings to weaken it. If this continued, they would make a '78 or '85, both admittedly lovely vintages but without the magic touch of really roasted botrytis. For once they cursed the Ciron, the local river.

But they were forgetting that this is a turnaround vintage, and on 11Oct, they had a second turnaround: the high- pressure system brought its dry easterly breezes and perfectly clear skies, arriving just too late for the main part of the red wine harvest, but just in time for the main part of the Sauternes harvest. It would provide 24 successive days of perfect conditions, with very cool nights (from 19th – 31st between 1° and 5° every night) keeping any bad, grey rot at bay, and slowing down the development of any new botrytis, thus giving pickers the time to harvest the already heavily botrytised grapes which now concentrated very fast. The week of 15 Oct accounted for the major part of the crop in most estates: Large quantities of beautiful, fat and luxuriantly sweet musts with fine acidities, still retaining all that fresh pure character of the earlier pickings. One couldn't help thinking of that similarly magic week of 12th Oct 2001 that accounted for ¼ of that exceptional vintage.

Most estates continued with small final 5th, 6th and even 7th *tries* right up to 12 Nov. These produced richer musts still, which were sometimes deliberately under- fermented in order to compensate for earlier pickings, especially the lighter botrytis ones of early October. The final small pickings were very rich but not necessarily the best.

The assemblage will be made progressively over the next 18 months, as is usual in Sauternes, so currently all the lots are unassembled, but it is becoming clear from all this jumble of lots, sometimes 50 or 60 per château, that there are four basic types:

- 1) A small amount of ultra fresh, sometimes even menthol- tasting wines from the "*passerillage*" (shriveled) of the 1st and 2nd *tries* that resemble a less acid version of '02 or a richer version of '00
- 2) A variable amount of fully- botrytised but not so concentrated wines from the 3rd *trie* in early Oct
- 3) A big quantity of the 15 Oct week's picking: rich yet pure and fresh, maybe not with the total vibrancy of '01 but with something of '88 about them. This part will be the mainstay of the vintage
- 4) Small quantities from the heavier last pickings, which will often be used to flesh out the earlier pickings.

The overall impression is of finesse in the richness, of purity and style. This impression will be enhanced, for the second year running, by the lower alcohol than the '03s and '05s, often 13°5 rather than 14°5, whilst the sweetness will be relatively high, often 130 – 140 g/l, with a good refreshing acidity, often between 3.7 and 4.2 g/l. But as always, each estate plays a game of balance not of figures. The other night we drank an exquisite '34 that was no more than 100 g/l, and an equally exquisite '03 that was a whopping 170 g/l.....

Conclusion

So ended a remarkable vintage. Nobody is claiming these are the wines of the century. This was a recovery vintage, a vintage that was on the ropes and then managed to pull one final punch. It was often mentioned that, without modern methods of vineyard management, 2007 would have been a write- off. But it was clear that, even with them, a continuation of the end- of- Aug weather would have written it off anyway. There would have been nothing more to be done than to pick in a hurry before it spoiled irrevocably. It was an amazing volte- face. In spite of everything, maybe somebody up there still likes us.

How does '07 stack up against other vintages? '78, '83, '02 and '04 all shared an off summer and a September recovery. In '78, this recovery came much later, and the bunches, with little green harvesting in those days, were very irregularly ripened, giving a sharper tone to the young wines that '07 will surely avoid. '83 had a more opulent summer and the wines were probably fuller. '02 is meteorologically the closest year to '07, but it had a cooler summer and a later turnaround than '07, resulting in harder- styled fruit and greater acidity. '04 with its big crop and very late harvest is probably stricter in style. '07 will be certainly smoother than all these, maybe what '79 would have been if it had been made 30 years later.