

Burgundy 2008, the growing season

3 Nov 2008 by Alex Gambal

Alex Gambal, American wine producer in Burgundy, provides this fascinating account. See those revealing numbers in his section on September, along with his suggested explanation for why the grapes seemed to ripen so quickly at the end.

See Graham Nutter on 2008 in the Minervois, Languedoc tomorrow.

Many of you have asked me what has been going on this harvest and my replies, at times a bit frantic, are decidedly more optimistic than they were a month ago. To say we dodged a bullet is an understatement. To say we had a challenging growing year is to put it mildly. To say that we got the *Sports Illustrated* jinx when Eric Asimov of the *New York Times* wrote in July that Burgundy has no more bad vintages was a kiss of death. To say that six weeks ago I was seriously thinking of looking for wine in the Rhône so that we might have something to sell in 2010 is true. To say we have brought in some good to very good grapes, albeit in much lower quantities, is the final good news. In brief we received the miracle of the *vent du nord*, the north wind, which saved the vintage.

Last year I gave you a blow by blow in reverse. Let me do something a bit different and pick dates from last winter to today that will give you a feel of the growing season. Too often we think of the harvest and the vinifications as a fixed moment in time that somehow is an independent system. This is of course never the case but in most if not all wine lovers' minds it is the finished bottle we focus on and not the devilish details. Briefly put, did we do well or did we screw up? Let me show you a bit of how hard it is to do well.

7 Feb 2008: We tasted the 2007s and it was not a pleasant experience because the malolactic fermentations had either not finished or in many cases were just beginning. This was the first time we all agreed that it was a waste of time to taste the wines. We wanted to be "rigorous" and "serious" but honestly it was painful; one simply could not see beyond the malic acid. We suspected things would get interesting but looking at my notes the same words repeat; "nose good, wines clean, acid there but killing, good length but not yet expressive, malo starting, wood present, no wood present, malo finished and wine open; super." What does this have to do with Sep 2008? We had a cold spell at the end of the 2007 but the winter/ spring of 2008 was cool, damp and lingering. Thus the cellar temperature rose slowly, making the malolactic fermentations long and often starting later than normal. This is not a bad thing for the wines but meant that spring would be arriving late.

10-14 Mar - Les Grands Jours de Bourgogne: This is the bi-annual promotional week in Burgundy where many/ most winemakers display their wines at scheduled tastings in the various villages throughout the Côte d'Or. In all candour most of the visitors are the same folks, although this year we began to see more Eastern Europeans and visitors from the new Asian economies. It is always interesting to see what people begin to do with their money once they have property rights and are not worried which marauding horde will descend next week to take away one's possessions. (Ah, but capitalism can be as vicious and merciless as the hordes and can destroy even more quickly than the barbarians razing a city.)

The point before my digression above is that the weather continued to be wet and cold. Fabrice and Megan were stuck in a lovely old church in Gilly les Citeaux with other Chambolle producers. The wines were great. The crowds were strong but venue was cold, damp, miserable and bone chilling. The theme of spring continued for the whole month. In comparison, in March 2007 we were having warm, sunny weather and at times were wearing T shirts.

8-19 May - nor'easters: May is my month for travel/ sales. The visits vary but the one constant is the Nantucket Wine Festival aka the Denis Toner show. It is a great food and wine venue and we have many friends and supporters on and off the island who have helped us a great deal over the years.

Another constant about Nantucket and the festival are the nor'easters that seem to blow in every festival weekend. The question always seems to be not if but how much it will rain. One year - it was either 2000 or 2001 - Fabrice and Sophie came over and we had one of the best spots outside under the tent... with a large trash can and a pole to push the water off the tent and into the can and not on us. Well this year the weather was extraordinarily beautiful and as I checked in with Beaune I found out it was wet and cold; spring was taking its good time to get the vines moving.

Jun - weeds, flowering and photosynthesis: This was the month, year, a lifetime of weeds. With rain what do you get? Growth all over and not just the vines. Because we use neither herbicides nor pesticides (and many other growers are now doing the same) the theme of the month and of the year was; weeds (*mauvaises herbes* in French). Grass, some flowering weeds, some weeds that have roots like potatoes (but they do not pull out easily) and my nemesis thistles, were everywhere. For about three weeks on and off along with our 16 year old apprentice we pulled and hoed weeds like Mr McGregor. This boy got in shape and felt every one of his 51 years. The vines looked great but we knew that if it rained again, we would be back at it once more in August. This was not a happy thought, but being human we suspended belief for a time in order to admire our beautiful and well kept vines.

Let me digress a minute and talk a bit about flowering process and the role it plays with harvest (one of the most important and critical of the whole year). Simply put, this is the period when the embryonic grapes bloom and are fertilized. This is no different than any fruit and the relative success or failure of flowering directly relates to the level and the timing of the crop.

When we have clear, sunny skies and a bit of a wind, the flowering occurs uniformly and quickly; say in five days or less. When it is cold, overcast, and rainy the flowering is less successful; the potential crop is reduced and, most importantly, the ripening period is elongated and not uniform.

What is the point, you ask? Well it takes about 100-105 days for grapes to ripen from flowering. If flowering occurs late and unevenly the crop level will be reduced, harvest will be later and the bunches of grapes will also ripen unevenly. Thus one can have different parcels ripe at different times and also have varying degrees of ripe grapes on the same bunch. This is not easy to manage and thus gives one a challenging product to vinify.

Finally, and most importantly, because Burgundy is so far north in the northern hemisphere (Dijon is at 47.30 d north, Seattle is 47.55) we get a great deal of sun early in the season but as the season progresses we have fewer and fewer hours of sun. Thus we are on the proverbial slippery slope of needing more and more sunshine to convert the starches to sugars (remember photosynthesis and 10th grade biology) as the hours of daylight get fewer and fewer from summer to fall. *Voilà, mes amis*; a small lesson in how geography is tied to horticulture.

Jul - the kitchen sink: Have you ever seen what mildew can do? Mildew is a fungus that grows on leaves and if not treated causes the leaves to wilt, dry out and eventually fall off, thus inhibiting the ripening process (remember photosynthesis above). This year, especially around Volnay, there was pressure from mildew. We treated many times and had things more or less under control until July 26.

After having pulled weeds, and had our vines ploughed by our intense plougher Jean- Francois (who, with his specially designed, low impact tractor, knows more about soil, the moon, biodynamics and how the vines and soil live and breathe than I can even imagine) on 23-24 Jul, our vines looked like a well kept garden. However, we were then hit by the kitchen sink; hail. From above St. Romain I looked down to the valley and saw a white impenetrable curtain cut off all visibility between Monthelie and Meursault; I knew we had problems.

About two hours later I made my way to the vines. There were still torrents of water descending down the road and hills around Pommard and Volnay. The vines in some areas seemed to have been submerged and then I saw up close the hail damage. We were hit hard and we lost 50-75% of the crop in two of our vineyards. It is unimaginable the damage that hail does in such a short period of time, literally slicing through and off the leaves and the baby grapes.

If hail occurs late in the season when the grapes are in their final ripening process, the damage can cause the grapes to rot. Earlier in the season it can give off flavours if the grapes do not dry out, fall off or are cut off at harvest.

There is more to come... and you cannot make this up.

August - more of the same: The first 10 days of the month we had pretty good weather and I will not say that optimism abounded but the grapes were about on schedule and the worst seemed to be behind us. We went to the States for vacation 10-20 Aug and followed the weather online and I saw that it was cold and rainy. "You got to be kidding me," I thought. Here is a brief summary of my end of month weather reports:

21/8: cool am, clears up beautiful afternoon

22/8: rainy, cold (13) miserable, foggy misty

23/8: Cool, clear beautiful, chilly at night (will preserve the acids) made a fire

24/8: perfect 20/20: dry

25/8: overcast most of the day

26/8: perfect day

27/8: perfect

28/8: perfect

29/8: perfect: 29 deg Celsius the high

30/8: perfect: 78-80 Fahrenheit, dry

31/8: good day, hot and some humidity, showers at night cooled things off; maturity is slow and inconsistent.

The purpose of the above detail is to show you the contrasts of the growing season and to point out that there was no one theme. We saw just about everything except an extended high pressure system.

Sep - *prélevements and can you believe this weather?* I know harvest is coming when we start to go through the vineyards to do our *prélevements*. This is when we test grapes for their sugar and acid content from our various vineyards both owned and contracted. This is a very simple but thorough process of picking individual grapes from random bunches in order to obtain a representative picture of the vineyard. We do this every five to seven days in the early part of the season and then as much as every three days as we get ready to pick. After having worked some of the same vineyards for as many as 11 years we have a fairly good idea of how they progress to ripening.

Sep 1: 1st *prélevement*: in a word depressing. The grapes are far from being ripe. As low as 6.9 potential alcohol in the Hautes Côtes (not surprising) to the highest, our Bourgogne Pinot Noir at 9.6 (good - surprising).

Sep 8: Our rule of thumb is if the sun is out we should gain about one degree in ripeness (sugar) per week. This week we gained an average of 0.6 with a range of 0.1 to 1.1 with most of the changes in the 0.5 to 0.6 area. In other words ripening is moving at only about 50% of where we would like it to be.

Sep 15: about 0.5 this week.

Sep 22: 0.5 to 1.2 this week. Some better movement but inconsistent. Getting close to the minimum levels required for harvesting.

Now the weather report: looking back. The low point was Saturday Sep 13.

1/9: cool but humid. We were sweating during the *prélevement*. South wind. Bad.

2/9: sunny, beautiful morning but an overcast afternoon.

3/9: showers at 11:45

4/9: started to rain on/ off all day

5/9: rain and humid and heavy air. *Pas bon*. Heavy rain at night.

6/9: rain heavy all day

7/9: no rain, breezy, cool then some light showers in the evening

8/9: clear, cool but humid in the morning. Drier in the afternoon.

9/9: clear, cool morning. Just 8 deg Celsius. Chilly clear day but clouds came in late in the day. A few showers then cleared up but the air is still.

10/9: overcast and humid, then clear and hot and humid. Rain started towards 10PM. Thunder and lightning. Unreal. Poured all night.

11/9: Rained all day. At least it is cool.

12/9: Rain on/ off all day. Lightning in the AM. Cool 12-13 C. Miserable.

13/9: gray overcast misty. 3:00 starts to rain again. Not pouring but steamy. Rains all night.

THE MIRACLE 14/9: God is watching over us: perfect day. Dry, high in the 60s almost a full moon. We should have good weather all week.

15/9: perfect

16/9: perfect

17/9: perfect

18/9: 7 deg Celsius at Orches at 7:30 AM. 4 deg C just behind Pommard. A bit variable today and a bit overcast.

19/9: clear and beautiful

20/9: clear and beautiful

21/9: clear and beautiful

22/9: Visited Hautes Côtes. Chardonnay vines at Magny lès Villars. 60-70 deg Fahrenheit. North wind. Beautiful. Grapes drying out. My gut tells me there is no need to wait much longer in the Côte de Beaune. The grapes are concentrating and drying out. The hail damage and rot can be easily cut out in the vineyards and on the sorting tables. The leaves are variable and thus photosynthesis is a mixed bag depending on the condition of your vines. We are also seeing some late season oidium (powdery mildew) which gives a very distinct off flavour to the wines.

23/9: Beautiful clear day again.

24-28/9: We start picking our Bourgogne Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. We will pick our vines and some contracted Bourgogne in Pommard from Wednesday 24 to Sunday 28. Weather is amazing. Sun, no clouds, north wind, dry and it even sunburned my ears.

Over the weekend we also brought in our contracted Chassagne and Puligny grapes but saved picking our parcels until Monday, St. Aubin Dents de Chien on Tuesday the 30th and finally our Fixin and Vosnes on Wednesday and Thursday on the 1st and 2nd. We finished on Saturday 4 Oct with our Chambolle and entered our Hautes Côtes Chardonnay on Tuesday the 7th with perfect weather to follow all month.

If I tell you any more details on what was picked when I will bore 99% of you to tears but what I want to do is to give you an illustration of how quickly things changed for the better by returning to *prélevements* and the numbers. Numbers can lie but they can tell us something if we know what to look for.

Here are the *prélevements* from three of our parcels; some owned, others contracted. In all cases we control when the parcel is harvested. The numbers correspond to the potential alcohol as expressed in the potential sugar (ripeness) in the grapes. Each number corresponds respectively to 1, 8, 15 and 22 Sep. The last number is the actual sugar/ alcohol that we had after the grapes were picked about five to seven days later.

Puligny Montrachet (owned): 8.4 / 8.9 / 10.0 / 11.0 / Final: 13.4-13.7

Chassagne Montrachet Premier Cru La Maltroie (owned): 8.0 / 9.10 / 9.4 / 10.8 / Final 12.9

St Aubin Premier Cru Les Murgers des Dents de Chien (contract): 8.0 / 8.6 / 9.6 / 10.9 / Final: 12.2-12.4

Bourgogne Pinot Noir Monpoulain: 9.6 / 9.9 / 10.4 / 11.0 / Final: 11.6

How could we get such decent sugars in such a short period of time? I believe we actually had higher levels all along. Because of the wet weather we began to have rot on the Chardonnay which in most cases in Burgundy is a good thing because it is of the noble variety. However when one goes to pick the grapes, one has a tendency to grab the intact berries because the mushy brown ones (with all the sugars) are just that; mushy, so it is not easy or practical to include them in ones sample.

In short, the spectacular weather we had, with a strong north wind for two to three weeks, dried everything out. Sugars soared but quantities dropped. It is the old saying 'name your poison'. Should one harvest unripe, rotten grapes, or ripe grapes with some noble rot on the whites and have clean reds in significantly lower quantities - quantity or quality? For example our Chassagne Maltroie produced four barrels which is about where we thought it should be. Our Puligny was difficult/ disappointing with the yields. There were only 10 barrels out of the 15-16 that we could make and wanted. Puligny is known for its high water table so this added to the noble rot; thus there was an increase in great flavours and sugars but a subsequent loss in volume (also due to the poor flowering). Interestingly, St Aubin seems to be one of the sweet spots (as well as the Hautes Côtes). Here flowering occurred later and quickly thus missing the bad weather in June that caused the uneven and long flowering elsewhere. Thus St. Aubin had a healthy harvest both in quantity and quality.

Voilà, mes amis. I hope I have not scared you all away. As of today the white wines are fermenting quite nicely and are in some cases done. We took our last red off the skins last Tuesday and they will go in barrel this week. The colours are good, the flavours are clean and pure; a good surprise. We made the reds " *piano, piano*" and the naturally cold maceration, along with a little *pigeage*, brought out the good flavours.

October - The Côte d'Or: This is my 16th fall in Burgundy and I must tell you I do not remember one more spectacular. The vines, apple trees and poplars have been on fire with a wonderful mix of gold, yellow and red for the last three weeks; a real joy to absorb. I hope all of you have a terrific fall and I will report back to you soon about the 2007s.

Regards, Alex