

Argentina - 2009 harvest report

24 Jul 2009 by Julia Harding MW

Frenchman Philippe Rolet, general manager of Alta Vista, sends this report of their experience of the 2008/09 growing season and harvest in the two areas of Argentina where they work: in Mendoza at the foot of the Andes and in Cafayate, further north and higher up. He sums up conditions in Mendoza as 'a dry vintage with excellent thermal amplitude ... probably one of the best of the decade'. Some of his comments may not apply to every producer in these two regions but they give an interesting early insight into 2009.

MENDOZA, above 1.000 meters

An early and moderately cold winter

2008 winter was preceded by several waves of cold. The first one reached Mendoza the 14th and 15th of April and caused a frost which affected most of the vineyards of the region. The harvest was not finished at this time. This frost destroyed a great number of the new plantings that had been established during the spring, and produced defective buds on productive vineyards, which lowered the production of the vintage 2009. The winter set in early in Mendoza and we registered increases in the average temperatures by August. The last frost happened the 6th of September.

A dry spring

From mid September to the end of November, we registered only 23 mm of rain in Mendoza. Climate was temperate, without notable Zonda wind events and the flowering of the vineyards was good for all varieties, particularly for the Malbec grape, which is generally affected by flower abortion.

A warm summer with excellent thermal amplitude

The summer in Mendoza was constantly warm, but without high peaks of heat. In the day time, we registered only 9 days with temperatures above 35 °C, and the hottest day did not pass 38 °C. The nights were particularly cold. We monitored in January an average difference of temperatures between night and day of 15.7 °C; 15.1 °C in February; and 14.9 °C in March. This thermal amplitude is similar to the 2007 vintage and superior by 1.5 to 2 degrees to the average of the last years.

A perfect autumn

Since 1998, this has been the driest end of summer and autumn we monitored ever: One rain event of 1 mm in February, Four rains totalling 32 mm in March, no rain in April. That is to say, a winemaker's dream.

CAFAYETE

Unusual vintage

A hailstorm destroyed almost 300 hectares in Cafayate on the 28th of November – never before seen to this extent. We monitored drizzly days during the months of January and February, which induced sanitary problems in March. A green harvest of bunches was necessary to maintain the quality of the grapes.

The Harvest

Except for a little hail damage in Temis, our vineyards were not affected this year. As a consequence, the yields were higher than usual at around 8.000 kg per hectare. All grapes were hand picked. The harvest started with Chardonnay for Premium Extra Brut base wine on the 4th of February. We continued with some Malbec for the Rosé and Chardonnay from the 25th. Malbec was harvested between the 20th of March and the 4th of May. The Cabernet Sauvignon was processed from the 10th of April until the 30th of April.

First impressions

General volume of production of grapes in Mendoza is below the average. However, this is not the case for our winery since none of our vineyards suffered significant damage from hailstorms. Malbec seems to be the great champion of the vintage. Despite the late dates of harvest, the style of the vintage tends towards fresh fruit, intensity with good length. Acidity was higher than usual, which augurs well for good ageing.