

Two very different reports on the 2003 grape harvest

3 Nov 2003 by JR

Compare and contrast these two reports on this year's vintage from [Jean-Christophe Mau](#) of Ch Preuillac in the Médoc and [Franciscan Estates](#), the California wine estates of Constellation Brands. They certainly give a flavour of the varied concerns and preoccupations of the harvest season.

2003 - A sun-soaked vintage at Chateau Preuillac, Médoc, Bordeaux

Very high alcohol content, extremely early harvesting dates, very low yields and relatively low acidity levels - these are the main features of this atypical 2003 vintage.

The vines of Château Preuillac resisted the heatwave rather well on the whole, apart from one plot of Merlot on which the leaf-stripping was a little too zealous and some bunches were lost.

We started the harvesting of this 'extrovert' vintage on 12 September, with just one hectare of Merlot that had been somewhat burnt by the sun. In fact, it was only on 17 September that harvesting really started, about 10 days ahead of the normal date. The initial observations on the Merlot grapes were that they had thick skins as a direct consequence of long, intense exposure to the sun, average anthocyan extractability and low juice yields. The only awkward factor was the very high alcohol content causing the end of the fermenting process to be very slow with slightly higher volatile acidity levels. For example, one of our vats of Merlot, with a potential alcohol content of more than 15 degrees, took almost 19 days to complete its alcoholic fermentation.

In contrast with the Merlot grapes, the Cabernets reacted much better to the great heat. Admittedly, alcohol levels were very high, but the harder skins proved more resistant to the sun, and the pips had time to reach just the right level of maturity by the end of September. One of the errors many will have made with this vintage is to choose when to pick the Cabernet grapes solely on the strength of their alcohol potential and without taking the phenolic ripeness of the skins and pips into account. At Preuillac, we spent hours tasting and re-tasting grapes from our various plots of Cabernet vines to make sure that we got all that essential ripeness. If the skins and grapes were not perfectly ripe, we would be taking the risk of wiping out the beneficial effects of all the sun and missing out on a great vintage.

We therefore took the risk of waiting until 1 October to start picking the Cabernet grapes, despite all the stress that goes with the possibility of losing the harvests by repeatedly delaying. On the Cabernet grapes, the skin : juice ratio was even greater, with the grapes really releasing very little juice. The resulting wines should be very concentrated, so care will have to be taken to avoid excessively long vatting and over-the-top extraction. The skins are also very hard and the acidity levels are quite good for Cabernets.

As far as the Médoc is concerned, I remain convinced that the success of this vintage will be essentially dependent on achieving the right expression of the qualities of the Cabernet grapes.

It was only on Tuesday 7 October, after 12 days of harvesting spread over four weeks, that our brave grape-pickers finally finished off the 30 hectares of vines of Château Preuillac.

The 2003 harvest will go down in the history books as much for the earliness of the harvest as for the quality of the vintage... It is sometimes said that 'The good things in life are rare'. A wine that is ripe as well as rare - what more could we ask for?

Jean-Christophe Mau

The 2003 harvest in California

- From Ken Shyvers at Estancia, Monterey and Paso Robles:

We're about 70 per cent through harvest and anticipate being finished around the first week of November. Pinot is completely in and it's looking good. It finished fermenting, has been drained and pressed and is currently on the way to the barrel room for malolactic. Yields were a little low but quality is high. We've finished picking our Chardonnay at our Pinnacles Ranch in Monterey. Quality looks very good. We are finishing up picking Merlot from Hog Canyon Vineyard in Paso Robles and will be finishing up Zinfandel over the next few days. We are just beginning to pick Cabernet down there. Mount Crushmore is working very well and we're very happy with the quality of the fruit and how we've been able to maintain it through the new processing system. It's been in place for ten days and has held up to our high expectations.

- From Grady Sibert at Quintessa, Rutherford, Napa Valley:

'We're picking grapes'. The end is approaching quickly and we'll be finished by the middle of next week for the Quintessa Estate. All of the Merlot and Cab Franc is in and the Cab Sauv should all be in by Monday or Tuesday. We've picked 438 tons of grapes total. Our vineyard crews have been starting at 3am to keep the fruit cool, which will be good over the next few days as we experience a warming trend that's expected to last until Tuesday. In the winery we have split shifts. The first crew starts at 5am and the second crew starts around noon and stays until nine or ten at night doing pump overs, etc. Some lots are already in barrel - the earlier Merlots - others were drained and pressed on Friday.

- From Larry Levin, Franciscan Oakville Estate and Mount Veeder:

Over the last week it's been slow due to the weather. I went back through records when some sugars were at 25 and tracked them to see what happened after the heat spike and then cool break, some have dropped two brix. Over the last week to week and a half, numbers have stayed flat but the quality of the grapes have improved significantly. It's the perfect dream where we have hang time to build flavors and tannins and don't have to pick on high sugar. Naturally, it causes us to be impatient, but we're getting used to waiting.

Weather this week will continue to be mid 70s to low 80s. We have just barely started Cabernet, still have much estate Merlot out there. Some of the lots that were high sugar two weeks ago weren't fully coloured and mature in flavours - now we're tasting dark, blackberry flavours in skins and tannins that are almost sweet tasting, very flavourful. We've got just about 2000 tons left, just shy of 50 per cent done with harvest. At Mount Veeder, we've picked small lots, Malbec on both ranches, a bit of Merlot on both ranches. On some of the bigger blocks, we've gone in and pulled off the fruit that's dehydrating, so we could leave the rows and blocks that need more maturation.

- From Joel Peterson, Ravenswood:

As of Thursday, we were about 67 per cent of the way through harvest. Thanks to perfect weather, we're getting a nice, slow evolution of flavour and characters so the flavour has continued to improve. We're now on a very smooth finish, and can do everything we want to do exactly when we want to do it. We have finished almost all Zinfandel and it's looking great. Now we're mostly picking Cabernet, Syrah and Merlot. Syrah quality is good, crop is pretty normal. Merlots tend to be very dark and fairly high in structure. Cabernet looks very good, with good colour, nice bouquet and ripe flavours.

- From Steve Reeder at Simi, Alexander Valley and Russian River Valley:

The cool weather returned and harvest became slow, almost boring. Once you get the adrenaline pumping and you set record days for tons crushed, it is hard to slow down. The weather has been perfect and the remaining fruit, mostly Cabernet Sauvignon, is hanging just fine. The flavour curve has caught back up with the sugar curve and we are now harvesting fruit with excellent balance.

The last two weeks of September saw about one half of our whole vintage come in the doors. Very ripe, juicy and flavourful, most of these wines are finishing primary fermentation in the barrels and tanks. These early wines, mostly Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc and some Merlot, are tasting great. White barrels are being topped and malolactic bacteria, our special Simi isolate, is being added so that the secondary fermentation can proceed. This fermentation will help soften the acidity in the Chardonnays, along with adding a richness of texture and creamy/buttery notes.

The first two weeks of October were slow. Classic morning fog returned to help moderate temperatures and more importantly, add some moisture back to the air, vines and soil. This season has been warm to hot but it is the very low humidity of the ripening season that has had the greatest impact. Our best growers, like Alberto Zamora, Simi Vineyard Manger, managed the stress by keeping the drip irrigation on when the hottest time came. This allowed the vine to withstand the heat and dehydration from the low humidity. By doing this in the hottest part of the season, he was able to keep the plant alive and happy. Once the more temperate climate returned, the vines perked back up and the maturation process was on again. Those who did not manage the stress through drip irrigation found the canopy shut down and when the cool weather returned, it was too late. The leaves were turning brown and the vine was shutting down for the season.

The last 10 days have delivered us some outstanding fruit. The finish of our Goldfields Estate Chardonnay Vineyard in the Russian River was a turning point as we now turn most of our attention to Cabernet Sauvignon. Perfect weather and green leaves in the canopies have helped the Cabernet to reach optimum flavour and colour. The wines in the tank are inky dark purple with high-tone fruit and fairly big extract. I got to help shovel out one of the first tanks that we pressed. The must was warm, everything was purple and the aromas... Well, you'll have to take my word for it now, but in a few years, you will be able to swirl the glass to smell and taste what I am talking about.