# 2003 - not yet the vintage of the century

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We have spent the last 15 summers in the same wine-producing village in the Languedoc but this is the first year we have ever seen the special grape harvest signs by the side of the road. Slow down, we were told as early as the middle of August, beware of slow-moving vintage traffic. And indeed we have inched our way through this monocultural landscape behind vast grape-picking machines the like of which are generally kept under wraps until well into school term time. The village wine cooperative, usually a somnolent mausoleum of concrete and stainless steel during our summer holidays, has been the focus of village activity for some time.

The record-breakingly early 2003 vintage in much of Europe has already supplied column-miles to the newspapers, preparing their readers for a vintage of unprecedentedly fine quality. But are they right?

If picking early were a sure sign of wine quality then we wine writers would laud the wines of coastal Alicante and California's workhorse Central Valley above all others. We do not.

Early ripening is not all it takes to make great wine. What is needed is not just a high level of sugar in the grapes to be fermented into high levels of alcohol, but a suitable counterbalance of refreshing acidity and, perhaps most importantly, all the complex compounds required eventually to transform themselves into flavour, texture and, in red wines, colour and tannins to preserve a fine wine while it ages. For ease of reference we can call these compounds polyphenols and it is these which are still worryingly underdeveloped in many of Europe's grapes.

It is understandable that vine growers in regions which normally have difficulty reaching suitable grape sugar levels at all - England springs to mind - have been trumpeting the effects of this year's heatwave loudest. It must be truly wonderful for English vignerons to know that for once Nature has managed to deliver respectable levels of fermentable sugars all on its own. They will be spared the all-too-usual nailbiting through October hoping that sugars will reach at least the legal minimum before hopes are dashed by winter rains and rot.

One indubitably benevolent effect of Europe's exceptionally dry 2003 summer is that the vine, particularly prone to fungal diseases in wet weather, has been spared its usual summer plagues of various rots and mildews. So the grapes should be particularly healthy and under-sprayed. And, as it happens, many wine regions enjoyed a relatively wet winter and/or spring, so few vines are showing the dry, yellowing leaves that betray severe water stress.

But there are downsides to such a dry summer. The grapes will be small and not particularly juicy so crop levels will almost certainly be lower than usual. The ratio of skins to juice will probably be much higher than usual so the resulting wine runs the danger of being almost too tough and concentrated with some dried-out flavours. And as any schoolchild knows, when there is no water, no photosynthesis can take place, which means there is the constant danger that the ripening process itself stops. The high sugar readings in some grapes may well have resulted from desiccation rather than genuine ripening. Sugar levels may look superficially encouraging but the polyphenol levels are still dangerously low in many European wine regions. This is unlikely to make for well balanced wines and is presenting vignerons with problems they have never come across before: grapes that may end up with too much sugar by the time they have a desirable level of polyphenols.

What to do? Jean-Michel Cazes of Château Lynch Bages in Pauillac - so experienced a Bordeaux veteran that he has retired from running AXA's manifold wine interests - reported recently that the Cabernet Sauvignon grapes in his classic bit of the Médoc were a very long way from true ripeness and even the naturally earlier-ripening Merlots had a way to go before they had built up suitable levels of polyphenols. Even Merlots on Bordeaux's right bank, usually relatively early to mature, have not yet done their stuff according to Fiona Morrison, a British Master of Wine who had the acuity to marry Jacques Thienpont of Pomerol's world-famous Le Pin. 'What a vintage. Everyone is talking about it being the greatest vintage ever but the numbers just don't add up. How can you expect to have concentration, and for us most importantly balance, when it hasn't rained for almost three months? There are lots of different theories abounding. For once we believe that we should wait (we are usually one of the earliest pickers) - [respected oenologist Denis] Dubourdieu and others seem to agree - to see if we can get some more depth in the grapes (they are surprisingly light for the moment). And the boys [their two young sons] have been coached in doing rain dances.'

One wine-producing country that has been making considerable noise about the likely superior quality of its 2003 vintage is Germany which is home to some of Europe's most northerly vineyards.

As early as 18 August the Deutsches Weininstitut in Mainz announced 2003 as 'a vintage that could make history' but one of America's most seasoned Riesling specialists David Schildknecht is sceptical. 'The last time (and indeed one of the few times this century) when conditions were comparable was in 1976. While it has been inordinately hot this year, there has been appreciably more rainfall than in 1976. It's [still] clear that the vines crave water. But how much good would rain do now for growers and wine lovers? The Riesling grapes are already softening, at which point precipitation begins to bring more risk of rot. If it rains and the temperatures remain high, there could be a repeat of 2000 [when rot spoilt vintage prospects] on a far greater scale.'

'Suppose it remains hot and dry. Nobody wants a repeat of 1976, a year in which nothing was harvested below Auslese level [producing nothing but very sweet wines] and in which the flavours due to truncated phenolic development, desiccation and low extract were showy but in many instances monotonous and short-lived.'

'All we know for sure now is that 2003 extends and accentuates the freakishness that has been a characteristic of so many vintages since the nineties. The wines will reflect this, but just how is something we shall only glimpse this autumn and more fully realise once the young wines ferment.'

Wise words indeed. None of us can gauge wine quality with any certainty until all the grapes are gathered in and the young wines are tasted next spring - at the earliest. As usual, do not take too much notice of the most noticeable headlines.