

2001 harvest report - from Jean-Michel Cazes at Ch Lynch Bages

22 Nov 2004 by JR

Here's the second and final Bordeaux vintage report from Jean Michel Cazes, recently retired from leading AXA's wine interests and now based firmly at his family's Ch Lynch Bages in Pauillac. This is far from the last word on the vintage of course, but in my experience he has over the years been one of the most reliable sources of information, so you may be particularly interested in his comments on the overall likely quality of the vintage at the end of this report. Tuesday 16th October

- The harvest

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The glorious weather also favoured the stability of the harvesting teams. The rate of rotation was low, less than 10% of the workforce. Our harvesters worked well, with the harvest being accomplished in just 12 days, instead of the 13 that were planned. We have decided to pay everybody this 13th day. In addition to this, everyone who was present daily throughout the harvest will receive an extra day's wages as a 'consistency' bonus. These measures are of course welcome and constitute an encouragement for everybody to come back next year.

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During the first phase of maceration, the increase of the habitual parameters, that is the rate of anthocyanes and IPT (tannin index), is a little slower than last year. The figures however appear to be continually increasing at the end of the vinification, more notably than usual. We can predict a final concentration slightly below that of last year, which, it's true, was quite exceptional.

The yield seen is down by about 10% on that of 2000, and this also confirms the observations that we made during the first week.

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temperature.

- Sauternes

A special word should be said regarding the harvesting in the Sauternes region. The information we are receiving is very promising. The weekend of the 6th and 7th followed by the change in weather conditions have created perfect conditions for a glorious harvest, not seen since 1990, both in terms of quality and quantity. The grapes were perfectly ripe and the botrytisation, which was widespread following the rain at the end of September and the beginning of October, ceased to evolve, and accentuated the concentration of the grapes, which continued throughout the week. After the 2000 harvest which was, unlike all other regions of Bordeaux, most disappointing for the Sauternes wines, this difficult region has at last, in 2001, achieved its 'harvest of the century'. It's certainly their turn ...

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Tuesday 9th October

- Preparation

Our 2001 harvest has followed an unprecedented effort of preparation of the vines. From the month of July, in all three of our properties - Lynch Bages in Pauillac, Ormes de Pez in Saint Estèphe and Villa Bel Air in the Graves

region - we began an early leaf removal. This operation out was carried out either manually, or with the help of our new thermal and mechanical machines. The goal was to eliminate the leaves situated at the level of the grapes, in order to help photosynthesis, increase the concentration of the grapes and, down the road, at the end of the vegetative cycle, ensure a good sanitary level of the fruits.

At the end of July we also began with the green harvesting, which was done everywhere in the vineyards, except on the oldest vines. The purpose was to reduce the fruit load of the vines, hence improving the ripening conditions by eliminating the clusters which were too close to each other.

At the end of August we finally conducted a second manual leaf removal process.

All this preparation, which is designed to improve the quality of the harvest, also has the effect of making the work of the harvesters quicker and easier, bringing as well a greater flexibility in the planning of our picking.

- The Harvesters

Contrary to alarmist rumours which were going around in September, we have not had any difficulties in recruiting for our teams of harvesters (principally local people) which are set up as follows :

- Lynch Bages : three teams, harvesting simultaneously, with in total 140 cutters, 30 carriers, 24 sorters at the end of the rows, three tractor drivers and three team-leaders
- les Ormes de Pez : one team of pickers, made up of 45 cutters, eight carriers, eight sorters, two drivers and one team-leader
- at Villa Bel-Air, where the vineyard is still young as it was only planted in 1989, we have recruited few extra personnel. We are harvesting mainly with our permanent staff.

In the vatrooms and cellars we have nine people working at Lynch Bages, of which four are on internship from various universities (one Italian, three French) and three people at both the Ormes de Pez property and at Villa Bel-Air. During the harvesting we do not stop working in the cellars, with a racking team taking constant care of the 2000 vintage which is in the process of barrel-aging at the moment.

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At the beginning of September we were planning to attack the picking around the 10th for the white grapes at Bel-Air, and a few days later at Lynch Bages. We had planned the red harvesting for the week of the 17th at Bel-Air, and the 24th at Lynch Bages and Les Ormes de Pez. However the evolution of the ripening led us to put everything back by about a week.

Our white grapes were actually picked at Bel-Air in the week of the 16th September, and at Lynch Bages from the 25th through to the 27th September.

For the reds, the decision to push the harvesting dates back was made around the 15th. At Villa Bel-Air, thanks to the flexibility of our team, we were able to harvest in 'slots' - first the merlots which were picked the 24th and 25th September and then the 28th and 29th to finish off, next were the cabernet francs which were picked on the morning of the 4th October, and finally the cabernet sauvignons on the 4th, 5th and 6th October. The harvesting in the Graves was therefore finished last Sunday.

In the Medoc it was a little more complicated as we had to keep a large team of harvesters on stand-by. In the week of the 17th September we contacted them all by telephone in order to fix the new start date, which was put at the 1st October for les Ormes de Pez, and the 2nd October for Lynch-Bages. We gave ourselves the objective to finish the merlots on Thursday 4th October, therefore leaving plenty of time for the cabernet francs and cabernet sauvignons to achieve a good level of maturity.

This programme was followed as arranged, helped by good weather, alternating between sunshine and clouds, with quite high temperatures. Our sorting teams, placed in the vines, and therefore in contact with the harvesters themselves, take great care to eliminate any imperfect grapes, and the harvest is beautiful.

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We have finished bringing in the merlots everywhere. They are magnificent, presenting a high richness of sugar, announcing a good degree of alcohol. The skins are thick and in very good condition and the fermentations are taking place without any problems. The first analyses are showing a constitution which is quite similar to that of last year, in terms of anthocyanes (colour) and IPT (total phenol index - indicating tannin). The level of acidity seems slightly higher than average, no doubt caused by a level of malic acid which is slightly higher than usual. This malic acid will disappear during the malo-lactic fermentation, and we are expecting to have figures which will be perfectly normal in our finished wine. The cabernets are consistent, and seem to be well formed. But I will be able to say more about that next week... The quantities that have been picked up until now leave us expecting an overall volume slightly below that of last year, a drop of around 10%.

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Jean-Michel Cazes

- The harvest

This morning, the title of Didier Ters daily column in the *Sud-Ouest* newspaper perfectly sums up everybody's overall feeling.

The title is : 'THANK YOU GOD'

Indeed, thanks to the magnificent weather that we have had since last Monday, our second week of harvesting has taken place under ideal conditions. Since yesterday evening the secateurs have been laid down to rest, the cook has received the traditional bouquet, and the kitchen will be closed after the final Monday evening meal.

Last week we were worried about a possible increase in the 'pressure' of the botrytis, favoured by the damp and hot weather. There was a risk of grey rot, which could have rapidly developed in the vineyard, leading to a more difficult harvest. But the weekend of the 6th and 7th October, and particularly the Sunday 7th, a beautiful day, changed the situation. After a short period of rain during the night from Sunday through to Monday, we experienced a whole week of dry and sunny days. The southerly wind brought us heat during the day, but the nights remained cool. Under these conditions the small spots of botrytis observed at the end of the first week were unable to evolve, the 'pressure', as the technicians say, disappeared and the harvesting conditions were perfect.

The glorious weather also favoured the stability of the harvesting teams. The rate of rotation was low, less than 10% of the workforce. Our harvesters worked well, with the harvest being accomplished in just 12 days, instead of the 13 that were planned. We have decided to pay everybody this 13th day. In addition to this, everyone who was present daily throughout the harvest will receive an extra day's wages as a 'consistency' bonus. These measures are of course welcome and constitute an encouragement for everybody to come back next year.

- The vinification

As for the merlots last week, the cabernet sauvignons have shown a richness in sugar highly superior to average levels. With the first maceration, the extraction of colour has been rapid. The fermenting juices are highly perfumed, ruby-coloured, with vivid shades due to the high malic acidity which was already noted last week.

During the first phase of maceration, the increase of the habitual parameters, that is the rate of anthocyanes and IPT (tannin index), is a little slower than last year. The figures however appear to be continually increasing at the end of the vinification, more notably than usual. We can predict a final concentration slightly below that of last year, which, it's true, was quite exceptional.

The yield seen is down by about 10% on that of 2000, and this also confirms the observations that we made during the first week.

The fermentations are continuing without any difficulty. The macerations will last for around 3 weeks, the first running-offs are planned for the beginning to the middle of next week. The decision for the end of the maceration

will be taken individually for each vat, in terms of its evolution and the impressions given with tastings. We are looking, as ever, for a maximum of fruit, having in mind to keep at bay the bitterness and astringency which could be caused by pushing the macerations too far, or by poorly controlling the macerations with regards to temperature.

- Sauternes

A special word should be said regarding the harvesting in the Sauternes region. The information we are receiving is very promising. The weekend of the 6th and 7th followed by the change in weather conditions have created perfect conditions for a glorious harvest, not seen since 1990, both in terms of quality and quantity. The grapes were perfectly ripe and the botrytisation, which was widespread following the rain at the end of September and the beginning of October, ceased to evolve, and accentuated the concentration of the grapes, which continued throughout the week. After the 2000 harvest which was, unlike all other regions of Bordeaux, most disappointing for the Sauternes wines, this difficult region has at last, in 2001, achieved its 'harvest of the century'. It's certainly their turn ...

- The Kitchen

The kitchen is an essential element of our harvesting system. Our courageous team of cooks was split into two, with the second team taking over from the first half way through the harvesting, last Sunday. Both teams worked under the guidance of Chef Maïté Bernard, and prepared over 3000 meals, the quality of which were enjoyed by us all. My favourite dish stays, once again, along with the classic lamb stew, the beef and carrot casserole. For the sauce Maïté traditionally uses old bottles of Lynch Bages, coming from slightly weaker vintages, for which tasting has become more unrewarding with time. Using them in the kitchen therefore gives remarkable results. This year we used an old stock of our 1972 Lynch Bages, from which 60 magnums were sacrificed for the preparation of the sauce of this famous casserole, made twice, for both Sundays during the harvesting.

Next Friday we will gather together all of the personnel from our properties for a large end-of-harvest meal.

- The crystal ball

It is still very early, but who can resist the temptation to predict the character and quality of the harvest?

All of the oenologues in the region seem to be in agreement that this vintage is 'classic', rich and built to last, with serious tannins.

Where will the 2001 be placed in the range of excellent wines produced in Bordeaux over the last 20 years? After a large exchange of views over an early morning coffee, with Daniel Llose, our technical director, Jean-Paul Polaert, in charge of Lynch-Bages, and Stephen Carrier, the young cellar master who replaced Guy Bergey, now retired, at the beginning of this year, a consensus is starting to emerge : we rank the new 2001 vintage a little below the four great vintages of the last 20 years, which are, in our opinion, the 1982, 1989, 1990 and 2000. Its character is similar to the 1986, 1988 or 1998 vintages. Its intrinsic quality could also be compared with those of the 1996, 1999 and 1985, even if the structure and the style of these years are a little different.

This 2001 is about to begin its journey, which will take it first, in a few days or weeks time, into the barrels. It will be racked a number of times throughout the length of 2002, and bottled around the month of June 2003. Our clients will receive it throughout the winter of 2003/2004, and it will then be drunk for a long time to come. The wine lovers of tomorrow will no doubt remember that this 2001 harvest was contemporary of dramatic events. I simply hope that the day that these bottles will be opened and drunk, our children will be able to evoke the tragic events of September and October 2001 placing themselves strictly on the historical plan A sad page of the history of our world today.

Tuesday 9th October

- Preparation

Our 2001 harvest has followed an unprecedented effort of preparation of the vines. From the month of July, in all three of our properties - Lynch Bages in Pauillac, Ormes de Pez in Saint Estèphe and Villa Bel Air in the Graves region - we began an early leaf removal. This operation was carried out either manually, or with the help of our new thermal and mechanical machines. The goal was to eliminate the leaves situated at the level of the grapes, in order to help photosynthesis, increase the concentration of the grapes and, down the road, at the end of the vegetative cycle, ensure a good sanitary level of the fruits.

At the end of July we also began with the green harvesting, which was done everywhere in the vineyards, except on the oldest vines. The purpose was to reduce the fruit load of the vines, hence improving the ripening conditions by eliminating the clusters which were too close to each other.

At the end of August we finally conducted a second manual leaf removal process.

All this preparation, which is designed to improve the quality of the harvest, also has the effect of making the work of the harvesters quicker and easier, bringing as well a greater flexibility in the planning of our picking.

- The Harvesters

Contrary to alarmist rumours which were going around in September, we have not had any difficulties in recruiting for our teams of harvesters (principally local people) which are set up as follows :

- Lynch Bages : three teams, harvesting simultaneously, with in total 140 cutters, 30 carriers, 24 sorters at the end of the rows, three tractor drivers and three team-leaders
- les Ormes de Pez : one team of pickers, made up of 45 cutters, eight carriers, eight sorters, two drivers and one team-leader
- at Villa Bel-Air, where the vineyard is still young as it was only planted in 1989, we have recruited few extra personnel. We are harvesting mainly with our permanent staff.

In the vatrooms and cellars we have nine people working at Lynch Bages, of which four are on internship from various universities (one Italian, three French) and three people at both the Ormes de Pez property and at Villa Bel-Air. During the harvesting we do not stop working in the cellars, with a racking team taking constant care of the 2000 vintage which is in the process of barrel-aging at the moment.

- Harvesting Dates

At the beginning of September we were planning to attack the picking around the 10th for the white grapes at Bel-Air, and a few days later at Lynch Bages. We had planned the red harvesting for the week of the 17th at Bel-Air, and the 24th at Lynch Bages and Les Ormes de Pez. However the evolution of the ripening led us to put everything back by about a week.

Our white grapes were actually picked at Bel-Air in the week of the 16th September, and at Lynch Bages from the 25th through to the 27th September.

For the reds, the decision to push the harvesting dates back was made around the 15th. At Villa Bel-Air, thanks to the flexibility of our team, we were able to harvest in 'slots' - first the merlots which were picked the 24th and 25th September and then the 28th and 29th to finish off, next were the cabernet francs which were picked on the morning of the 4th October, and finally the cabernet sauvignons on the 4th, 5th and 6th October. The harvesting in the Graves was therefore finished last Sunday.

In the Medoc it was a little more complicated as we had to keep a large team of harvesters on stand-by. In the week of the 17th September we contacted them all by telephone in order to fix the new start date, which was put at the 1st October for les Ormes de Pez, and the 2nd October for Lynch-Bages. We gave ourselves the objective to finish the merlots on Thursday 4th October, therefore leaving plenty of time for the cabernet francs and cabernet sauvignons to achieve a good level of maturity.

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