

Douro 2007 - end of harvest report

Charles Symlington Family Estates, owners of Graham's, Dow's, Warre's, Quinta do Vesuvio and Smith Woodhouse in the Douro region of Portugal (as well as Blandy's in Madeira), has sent the following vintage report. Although their main production is port, they also produce Douro table wines such as Chryseia, Altano and Quinta de Roriz. It's easy to sense what a nail-biting vintage it has been and to hear the sighs of relief as the last grapes are picked - in a different order from usual. Yet again, as in many parts of Europe, the dry September and October harvest weeks were literally a godsend.

A very good vintage has been completed in the Douro, making it likely that this will prove to be one of the exceptional years when the weather combines with the work of the viticulturists and winemakers to produce some very special wines. January started with the rather odd weather that has characterised recent years. Only 4mm of rain fell in this month and although February brought good rain, March and April were again quite dry. However, October and November of 2006 had been wet, giving a very substantial 386 mm of rain in 8 weeks, and this was sufficient to replenish the water tables. Throughout the spring and summer all the streams and springs in the Douro valley were running at levels not seen for some years.

The winter was mild with very few frosts and March brought stunning weather. Miles Edlmann, the Symington viticulturist recorded 'beautifully crisp and bright, with crystal clear air and plenty of sun... people working in the vineyards in shirtsleeves'. Consequently, the vegetative cycle began early with budburst in the experimental vineyard at Cavadinha falling on 15 March; at least two weeks ahead of normal. April also experienced some beautiful weather. Again, Miles recorded 'brilliant clear blue skies, and the Douro looks stunning, the vines have begun to fill out and delineate the terraces with contour lines of green. Amazing displays of wild flowers complete the picture'. Flowering came on 18 May, the same date as last year, but still much earlier than 2004 and 2005. Again, fruit set was fractionally earlier, with an average date of 22 May. But during this month, the Douro had overcast skies, cool weather and rain; this caused a certain amount of 'desavinho' (poor fruit set [this can lead to lower yields - JH]).

June was decidedly un-summery, with a very wet middle of the month (60mm of rain was measured at Bomfim). This brought the risk of fungal problems and secondary infections of downy mildew. Leaf growth was very strong, further complicating the task of controlling the spread of disease. It rapidly became clear that due to financial hardship, or because they had got used to several very dry years, or both, some farmers had not treated their vines and had substantial losses. The more careful farmers who read the signs and treated their vines had few problems, but of course they had added expense. July brought more showers on the 15th and 16th which further complicated the fungal situation in the vineyards for those who had trusted fate. Temperatures dropped sharply on the 23rd and 24th, exactly when a violent weather system brushed the northern edge of Iberia on its way to the UK, where it caused severe flooding.

Due to the colder weather, veraison [when the berries change colour - JH] was considerably delayed. Normally, the grapes in the river Quintas have changed colour by mid to late July, but this year, these vineyards had mostly green berries into early August. Again, this month was mild, without the usual searing summer heat. Charles Symlington wrote at the end of August 'The cool nights these last few weeks have been ideal for polyphenolic development [including colour, tannins and flavour - JH], which reached unusually high levels as early as 20 August'. This was a clear indicator that this year had the potential to be very special. On the 25th and 26th, 15mm of rain fell which was an excellent bonus to an already well prepared fruit crop. The moderate temperatures of July and August, combined with good soil humidity, had produced good acidity, well sized grapes with relatively soft skins and an excellent potential for colour extraction. The fear, of course, was more rain prior to picking; the soft skins and the precedent of fungal infection would have spelled disaster if any significant rain had come in early September and swollen the already full grapes. Charles wrote on 3 September; 'Maturations are developing very favourably... analytically we are a week behind average... we will however need dry conditions. Any further rain will almost certainly ruin what otherwise could potentially be an exceptional vintage'.

September started with perfect weather and although a thunderstorm hit the valley on the night of Sunday the 16th, afterwards came beautifully clear days without any cloud. The weather stayed remarkably stable and temperatures dropped a little. Fruit arrived at the wineries at very good temperatures and in perfect condition; the late ripening varieties such as the Touriga Franca having had ideal maturations. During the last few days of September the skies became quite grey and a couple of days of showery weather appeared. It looked as if things were taking a turn for the worse. But on 2 October conditions brightened up and fine weather returned once again, lasting until the end of harvesting.

Picking started at Warre's Quinta de Telhada on the 10th September and at Quinta do Vesuvio on the 14th. At Graham's

Quinta dos Malvedos, picking started on the 17th and at Dow's Bomfim it started on the 24th. At Warre's Quinta da Cavadinha, always one of the last quintas to start harvesting due to its unique position, picking started on the 27th September. At Quinta do Ataíde in the Vilariça, picking for some of the Symington Family's DOC wines had started earlier on the 3rd September.

As expected, the vintage started some ten days later than average. Due to the cool conditions, the Symington wine making team decided that the order of picking should be changed from the usual pattern. Rather than picking the Barroca first they started the vintage with Touriga Nacional. The Nacional delivered excellent sugar/acidity balance, the phenolic ripeness being ideal, with sweet ripe tannins dominating the palate of some tremendously aromatic wines. Following the Nacional, Barroca was picked with a steady Baume of 13? to 14?. This variety did not enjoy the more temperate climate as much and although the grapes had good graduations, the rich ripe style of these wines was not as evident. A more elegant style prevailed which, although attractive, was quite out of character for a variety that is best known for its robust and structured wines. The vintage continued with the Tinta Roriz which gave unusual amounts of colour coupled with some fantastic berry fruit aromas. Picking finished with the Touriga Franca which had enjoyed exceptional conditions throughout the vintage.

On 15 October Charles Symington wrote: 'We are now reaching the final days of the vintage here at Quinta do Bomfim. It is another beautiful clear day with mild temperatures. We have become so used to this type of weather over the last 6 weeks that we have almost started to take this for granted. One feels very fortunate to have had near perfect conditions throughout this vintage, allowing us to produce some very promising wines'.

There is no doubt that the Douro valley has produced some exceptional Ports and Douro DOC wines this year. Their evolution in vat and cask over the coming months will be followed with great interest.