

Douro □ the 2008 vintage

20 Oct 2008 by Paul Symington

Paul Symington of the Symington port group sends the following rather equivocal report on the 2008 harvest in the Douro Valley which suggests Julia was pretty lucky with the weather on her [recent visit](#) to Quinta do Noval.

Some years we are very lucky in the Douro and 2008 was one of those years. We had a very wet and stormy April (144 mm at Bomfim, the 16 year average is 66 mm) that caused quite severe 'desavinho'. May was also quite damp, bringing the same problem to the vineyards above 350 metres that flower late, so fruit set over the whole region was low. But the next three months were very dry although cool. With the low winter rain, April excluded, we would have been in real trouble if the customary Douro heat had appeared.

No vines can survive the blazing Douro summer heat unless there are strong reserves of water. For some bizarre but thankful reason the real heat never came. August was windy, but brought none of the hot easterly winds that come off the Spanish plain and bring days of burning temperatures (there is a local saying: 'neither a good wind nor a good wedding comes from Spain'). The wind blew consistently from the west, up the valley from the Atlantic 100 kms away. Our viticulturalist wrote at the time 'this wind is kinder since cooler and damper winds are less likely to dry out the vines or cause them to shut their stomata and close down photosynthesis'. Total rainfall in August was just under 5 mm, less than a third of the average and the mean temperature at Pinhão was 23.7°C, one degree cooler than normal, the same as in July.

For all these reasons our vines were late in ripening their fruit and it became clear that a delayed harvest was on the cards. Charles Symington wrote on 2 Sep, 'the maturation studies in mid August showed the lowest readings on record'. But then things started to go well: rain from 4 to 6 Sep, followed by good heat, with a high of 31.3°C on 10 Sep and 31.9°C on 15 Sep. Charles noted 'conditions have brought about rapid sugar accumulation'.

Picking started on 3 Sep for white DOC wines, but then was delayed for a week to take advantage of the fine weather, recommencing on 8 Sep for both white and red DOC wines. But the fruit was not ripe enough for making Port. Some producers got worried, the forecast was terrible and gave very unsettled weather for as long forward as the experts dared to predict. The Douro became busy with panicky people harvesting, but this was far too early. It did rain very heavily in some westerly areas of the Douro on 21 and 22 Sep and things looked grim and the forecast even grimmer.

We resigned ourselves to dodging the showers and harvesting in the rain for the next two critical weeks. But the rain never came. The sun returned the next day and never gave up, with temperatures in the high 20's every day. Those who had done proper maturation studies and know their vineyards knew that it was wrong to pick (for Port) in early September because the grapes were simply not ripe enough. The risk that some took paid off handsomely.

We were able to pick our best grapes slowly and without pressure from 24 Sep to 15 Oct. In these critical three weeks the weather could not have been better for the grapes. Only on 7 Oct did it rain for a couple of hours in the afternoon, but this did no harm and then the good weather returned again. Our last grapes were picked and on the very next day it started raining. It was essential to pick late this year after the cool July and August, but constant rain during the picking would have caused real damage to the fruit and to the wine. Somebody up there was looking after us this year.

The grapes were in excellent condition and produced wonderful colour (soft and thin skins worked their magic: the result of the relatively cool ripening in July and August). Baums were very good at 13.5° to 14.5° and the grapes had fine acidity and the musts gave good aromas. This was a really good year in the Douro, both for DOC wines and for Port. Charles wrote on 14 Oct, 'what has been produced looks extremely good, even grapes coming in at this stage from high lying areas are producing some impressive wines'. Those that picked early missed the boat, those that risked things have some lovely wines in the cellars.

We can yet another very complex vintage, operating no less than eight wineries in the Douro. This is a real logistical headache and not a cheap option, but it pays off handsomely in the quality of the wines year after year.

At Malvedos we made just a few hundred pipes, as we did at Senhora de Ribeira, Vesuvio and at Cavadinha. But this meant that the wine making teams at each of these small specialist wineries could make their wines without undue pressure and every lagar and tank is treated with the care it deserves. That is not to say that outstanding wines were not made at Bomfim and Sol, but we have found that being able to make the selection in the vineyard and direct the best fruit to the most appropriate winery is a major quality advantage.

It remains to be seen how the wines will look next month and in December when we will have a good chance to assess them, but the first indications are very encouraging. It will not always be like this; these past two years we have been very lucky.

PDS

17/10/08