

Pauline Vauthier on 2009

11 Aug 2009 by Andrew Black

In view of the photographs we published recently in [What hail does to vines](#), we thought you might be interested in the following interview by Andrew Black, who sends out occasional [Première Presse](#) newsletters from his base in Bordeaux, with Pauline, daughter of Alain Vauthier of the most famous St-Émilion of all, pictured below showing its proximity to those limestone côtes, Ch Ausone.

The extent of the [hail](#) damage in May was not easy to assess immediately after the storms, and tending the damaged vines can be a difficult exercise. Pauline Vauthier, whose main responsibilities are the Vauthier family's vineyards, has been busy adapting the season's work to the situation...

You got a bit of a scare with those hailstorms back in May. What was the extent of the damage in the end?

The whole of the vineyard owned by the Vauthier family was affected by them. The least affected plots lost 10% of the crop while the worst affected had 80% wiped out.

What about Ausone, in particular?

It wasn't too bad. The vast majority of the vineyard only had about 10 to 20% damage. Only one plot was badly hit, and there we lost 80%.

Which plot was that?

One at the far end of the village. We'll only be getting 3 to 5 hectolitres per hectare there, I reckon!

I imagine you've had to adjust the way you work the vines after such a setback...

The first thing we noticed after the damage was that the vines went into their shells, so to speak. They were obviously a bit stunned, and this meant the shooting was delayed. The vines just shut down for a couple of weeks; and then, when they did wake up, the vegetation went a bit mad. Shoots and suckers were all over the plant –the vines looked like bushes. So there was massive de-suckering work to do to get rid of the non-fruit bearing shoots.

The next step was the traditional raising of the wires to train the shoots in an upright position, which is usually a relatively easy operation to perform. However, this year we had to be extremely careful not to break the shoots, as many of them had been made brittle or fragile by the impact of hailstones. Even after this training had been completed, some of the shoots slipped down, and we had to go through the vines a second time to re-position them. The end result was that de-leafing was done later than scheduled.

By the time you completed the de-leafing were the vines also behind in their cycle?

No, what delay there was from the hail was quickly caught up. Mid-flowering point was on 3 Jun, which is reasonably early.

How did the flowering go?

Very well, generally. We had lovely weather. However, inexplicably, some areas had [coulure](#). As usual, this was in the Merlot plots, as the Cabernet is much less prone to [coulure](#). So this has affected the crop size, too.

At least, you'll be economising this year on crop thinning work...

Strange as it may seem, we have also been crop thinning this year –but it has taken only a third of the usual time. It was not so much to reduce volume as to balance out the crop load on vines which had compacted bunches.

When do expect to be harvesting?

If we base our calculations on the date of mid-flowering (which is the usual method), we'll be picking between 20 and 25 Sep. However, we'll know with greater precision over the next couple of weeks, since I've just observed the first berries having changed colour (21 Jul). At this stage, it would appear to be quite a normal year as far as picking dates are concerned.

Depends on the weather in August?

Yes, particularly this year, because up till now, although the weather pattern has been very nice, temperatures have jumped up and down between 15°C and 35°C. It's been a bit weird. I'd much rather have a regular 25°C!

And what are your predictions for crop size?

Ausone will in fact be about normal. In the other vineyards belonging to the family, we'll be a bit low, in my opinion. We still have to do the crop thinning there, but with the losses caused by hail, we're unlikely to get the desired volume.

2008 was a small crop. Will it be a bit larger in '09?

No, it will be about the same.