Loire 2009 - vintage report

16 Nov 2009 by Charles Sydney

Charles and Philippa Sydney, courtiers en vins de Loire *based in Chinon, sent this enthusiastic preliminary report, written mid Nov. All photos courtesy of Charles.*

Although it's still a wee bit early for a complete vintage report (strange, but I do like to taste the wines as well as watch the grapes coming in!), I'd guess it's safe to say that 2009 is going to be a great vintage for us in the Loire.

And given the economic hassles that follow frost and hail damage in 2008, *la crise* and a god-awful exchange rate, that's a blessing!

A 'classic' year that started with a real winter (minus 13 °C here in Chinon), early summer storms (including viciously damaging hail 16 Jul that effectively wiped out the crop in Menetou-Salon, Quincy and the Coteaux du Giennois) and a hot, dry and loooong summer that (bar 4 days of much needed drizzle and mist around 20 Sep) ran all the way through to 23 Oct… when all the reds were safely in and then the growers in the Layon were starting to think 'raisins' instead of grapes.

Oh - and all that followed by an 'Indian' summer that just happened to last the entire month of Oct, just to make sure we'll have some more world-class moelleux to beat Yquem (again) in a future blind tasting.

14 Sep, the first to kick off was the Pays Nantais, where results are good but a little more mixed than we'd expected, with some truly great wines (no exaggeration) from the likes of Jérôme Choblet in the Côtes de Grandlieu, Pierre Sauvion at the Château du Cléray at Vallet (Grands Chais' new Muscadet flagship estate) and with the team at Domaine de la Fruitière in the heart of the Sèvre et Maine (photo taken at Dom des Herbauges, mid Sep).

Great because the guys had taken on board the lessons of 1991 (hard frost as per 2008 = low yields = vines over-compensating the following year) and had pruned 'normally' before going back into the vineyards to de-bud in the spring and then again in the summer to thin out any excess crop. These wines came in at 11-12° natural [alcohol] with yields of 50 to 55 hectolitres per hectare and have lovely fruit, wonderful concentration and balance.

Unfortunately, too many of the region's producers have short memories and were happy to let nature have its say, so I'd guess the vast majority of producers are at 60 hl/ha or more, and with those guys selling in bulk we're looking at way more than that. The result is simple: higher yields = less concentration, and we're looking at grapes coming in at 10-10.5°.

Hey, but I'm not complaining - the grapes are healthy and have come in with nicely balanced acidity and the wines are going to be easy to drink, full of fruit and sensibly priced.

The best wines are on a par with 1989 or 1997...

A week later and it was time for the Sauvignon producers of the Touraine to start picking - and the wines are really, really attractive. Despite 2008's low yields, the crop is reasonable (say 60 hl/ha on average, which suits Sauvignon right down to the ground) and the grapes are healthy and ripe (the photo shows Touraine Sauvignon 22 Sep).

And this seems to be holding for both smaller producers (even Henry Marionnet is at 50 hl/ha) and for the larger players, with Gilles Bac at the Bléré cooperative talking an average 60 hl/ha with 12.5° natural and acidity levels at harvest around 5 g/l (expressed as sulphuric).

With the more committed growers we've got an extra dimension… big, really ripe wines with depth, sweet fruit and loads of ripe Sauvignon aromas (think citrus and box wood and none of that cat's pee associated with less ripe grapes). Higher degrees, maybe, but with wonderful freshness and balance.

In Sancerre and Pouilly things seem pretty similar (sorry, I've only tasted with a small number of growers there - more next week), with harvest starting over a wider period running from 18 Sep for some with others hanging in till the end of the month.

Yields are variable - most growers would say low (the cynic in me says they always say that), with some areas - notably the prime Chêne Marchand vineyard in Bué being badly hit by hail.

Christophe Denoël at Pouilly-Fumé's excellent cooperative cellar reckons on the same overall yields as last year, so there we're looking at around 48 hl/ha (v the permitted yield of over 60), but the wines have an almost cristalline purity and concentration that is far, far superior to the rather lean 2008s.

Over in Sancerre, Arnaud Bourgeois reckons they're about 20% down on 'normal' (so think 50-odd hl/ha), but that the quality is fab… From what I've tasted, this is going to be a vintage to remember: think 2003 ripeness with the freshness of 2006 and you'll get the idea.

(The sore point is prices - comments about steadily increasing prices for Sancerre seem to appear with unfortunate regularity in the mainline press - most growers actually held prices last year and are likely to reduce them slightly this year. The visible and damaging price hikes in the UK over the last couple of years are due 100% to a UK policy of rising taxes and weak exchange rate - to give you an idea: the ex-cellars price to hit £5.99 was 2.25 €/bt in 2006 and is currently 1.40 €/bt. With e £/€ parity, 8 pence duty rise and 20% VAT, that could be 1.14 €/bt in 2010.)

The comparison with the truly great vintages holds for the reds too, with the summer heat and drought blocking the vegetation for the Cabernet Franc vines just as in 1989, when we had 120 days between flowering and harvest.

This time we got even luckier, with those 4 days of rain in September restarting the vegetation and pushing the crop to real maturity - despite a really late harvest that didn't commence till early Oct, with a few of the bravest growers gambling on continuing sunshine and hanging on till 19 Oct before picking (the photo shows Couly-Dutheil's harvest in front of our house at la Grille on 22 Oct).

The results should be outstanding - seemingly with more fruit than 1989, so maybe more on a par with 1990 (Jacky Blot at the Domaine de la Butte in Bourgueil rates this as better than 2005), but I'd sooner wait till some of the malos are finished before committing myself that far!

Finally, the Chenins… maybe that's called leaving the best till last, but it's too early to say with any honesty as some of the guys over in the Layon are still picking (16 Nov…).

The dry wines in both the Touraine (Vouvray and Montlouis) and in Anjou should be delightful, with loads of fruit, concentration and balance as reasonable yields, fine weather and continuing efforts in the vineyards (especially in and around the Layon) pay off. In Vouvray the guys are chuffed to bits, bringing in fruit-rich secs and demi-secs before starting their selective *trie* picking for moelleux.

And over in the Coteaux du Layon, the stickies should be just that - sticky!

More anon….