

Spain's vintage 2009

10 Dec 2009 by Victor de la Serna and others

Victor de la Serna, deputy editor of the Spanish daily El Mundo, eminent wine writer and now wine producer at Finca Sandoval in Manchuela, kicks off our report on the 2009 harvest in Spain. His overview is followed by the official Wines from Spain report (written in fact by UK wine writer Patricia Langton, end Oct) and then a little more detail from official sources in Rioja and Rueda. While at [WineFuture](#) recently, Jancis heard first-hand reports of vines closing down in Priorat due to the extreme heat and also that it was uncomfortably hot and dry in Rioja. Our picture shows night harvesting in Rueda.

VICTOR DE LA SERNA'S OVERVIEW

The 2009 vintage was basically a two-faced story in Spain, where the northern half tells a happy tale and the southern half plus much of the Mediterranean wine regions tells a less felicitous one.

The 2009 growing season in Spain resembled 2003, with fewer days of 40+ °C temperatures but, overall, a higher average temperature and even more drought than that infamous, ultra-hot vintage. In the warmer parts of Spain, with earlier harvesting dates, this meant a disproportionate percentage of grapes that had become raisined or had simply shrivelled on the vine even before they had reached ripeness. The drought and heat caused severe blockages in the ripening process. Production dropped measurably, and quality did too - unless the growers did a fierce selection in the vineyard, which was not always the case.

In the more northerly regions, including crucial red wine areas such as Rioja and Ribera del Duero, the later picking date did wonders this time, as many vineyards were rescued by some timely rains starting in mid September, which allowed for the vines to recover, for grapes to attain fine ripeness levels, resulting in a sizeable harvest quantity-wise, and turned a problem year into a top-notch vintage in qualitative terms. Some Ribera growers were speaking of 'spectacular wines' as early as November.

The production losses in southern Spain were not completely offset by the large harvests in the north, so that overall the 2009 crop was reported to have been 13% less than in 2008.

WINES FROM SPAIN'S REGIONAL ROUND-UP

Spain's winemakers are starting to relax after a short and often challenging harvest. However, while the condition of the grapes caused some sleepless nights due to the lack of water and high temperatures, especially in August, the results are now pleasantly surprising for many bodegas.

For white wines, hot, dry conditions were very welcome in Galicia and favoured Godello's full ripening in Valdeorras, but they proved more challenging in Rueda. For red wines the 2009 harvest needed careful management in the vineyard and, even more importantly, it is now testing the skills of winemakers throughout the regions. Later-ripening varieties including Garnacha and most indigenous varieties have fared better than early ripening varieties such as Merlot.

Alcohol levels for red wines are generally 13.5-14.5% and higher quality can be found where producers harvested at later dates and allowed grapes to reach complete phenolic ripeness. Look to Rioja, Ribera del Duero, Toro and Navarra for the best red wines from this vintage.

The summer drought and high temperatures have resulted in lower yields than expected for most regions. It is also a year when vineyard diseases are hardly mentioned.

Galicia

Rías Baixas

Producers in this cooler, coastal region are hailing the best vintage of the decade thanks to 'excellent climatic conditions'. Yields are higher than last year but adversely affected notably by damp, cold weather at flowering in the spring. Eulogio

Pomares of Zarate notes that early summer rain gave way to plenty of sun and high temperatures in August and September with fresher nights alternating with warm days towards vintage. He concludes: 'It's quite extraordinary to get these conditions [in the Rías Baixas] at the end of the growing season.'

Ribeiro

Volume is modest for Ribeiro but unusually dry conditions have favoured quality. Wines are described as elegant with good intensity and aromatic complexity, offering plenty of character and elegance.

Valdeorras

Higher summer temperatures resulted in good ripeness in Godello grapes - expect wines to be structured in style with plenty of character. Winemaker Rafael Palacios (Bodegas Rafael Palacios) says that favourable conditions 'have resulted in fantastic phenolic development ...I believe that the 2009 vintage will be on a par with 2005, my best to date.'

Castilla y León

Ribera del Duero

Generally speaking the vintage was much better than recent years for this region and is described by some as similar to 2004. The best wines will come from growers and producers that harvested during October.

Toro

'The wines from this vintage offer more colour, structure and fruit than in 2008, alcohol is balanced, acidity is good and there is little difference between sub-zones,' says winemaker Javier Rodríguez of Valsanzo. Producer François Lurton (Bodegas François Lurton) adds that some October rains helped to keep alcohol levels in check. He expects to make red wines 'with great balance, finesse and class'.

Bierzo

Winemaker Ricardo Pérez Palacios (Descendientes de J. Palacios) contrasts the cool harvest of 2008 which was characterised by slow ripening with almost the opposite in 2009 for Mencía grapes: 'The harvest took place at a frenetic pace for us and the biggest challenge was managing the volume of grapes arriving at the same time. It's a different vintage to other years and the wines look good - they will be more sophisticated and structured this year.'

Rueda

Verdejo wines are more structured and complex this year. However it was a difficult year for Sauvignon Blanc. [see below for more from Rueda]

The North

Rioja

The general view for Rioja is that this year's vintage is generous in quantity and good in quality. However, as always, this varies according to the location of the vineyards and whether growers waited for grapes to tick all the boxes. Look to the Rioja Alta and the Rioja Baja for the best wines and younger drinking wines from the Alavesa, which was more affected by rain during the harvest.

Winemaker Telmo Rodríguez of Compañía de Vinos Telmo Rodríguez, who has vineyards at Briones (Rioja Alta), concludes: 'The skins had aggressive flavours at the beginning but that is not showing in the wines now. I'm astonished by what we had in the grapes in the vineyards and now the result in the wines.' [see below for more detail]

Navarra

Like neighbouring Rioja, Navarra's vineyards benefited from very favourable weather in September and October which allowed red varieties to ripen well, especially indigenous varieties including Garnacha. White grapes did not perform so well on the whole. Quality is high, especially for young wines and crianzas, and volumes are generous.

Central Spain

Madrid

Producers' reports differ but all agree that 2009 was challenging for this region with high temperatures (sometimes 38-40 °C in August as high as 25 °C at night) making this year's wines very different to those of the cooler 2008. Gregorio Martínez of Vinos Jeromín is pleased with the 'complete ripeness' and Garnacha with 'more fruit character and colour

than usual'.

Méntrida

After a good start to the year and 'perfect' conditions in the vineyards, the extreme heat of August came as a shock for winemaker Dani Jiménez of Bodegas Jiménez-Landi: 'I wanted slower, more balanced ripening but it wasn't to be... but the vines that are good are always good, it's the terroir.'

Despite fears of green flavours or jammy fruit, Jiménez is pleasantly surprised that his wines, while not showing the complexity of the 2007 and 2008 vintages, have, he says, maintained their characteristic freshness and elegance especially from older vineyards and indigenous grapes.

La Mancha

Harvest in La Mancha started earlier than usual on 11 August allowing the wide variety of grape varieties now grown in the DO to arrive at the bodegas in a steady stream. Grapes were generally very healthy and more concentrated in flavour and higher in alcohol compared with an average year and the intense heat was offset by night-time harvesting of trellised vines. Volumes in La Mancha are down by 20-30% due to dry conditions and uprooting programmes.

Catalonia

Milder temperatures at the end of August and generous rainfall in early September allowed vines to recuperate in the northern region of *Costers del Segre* and very good quality showed by harvest. Winemaker Tomàs Cusiné (Tomàs Cusiné) described the 2009 harvest as 'balanced and complex and one that may well turn out to very pleasing'.

In *Penedès* cooler night-time temperatures in September slowed the ripening process and, accompanied by dry weather, grapes were picked in excellent condition.

Meanwhile for *Priorat* the picture looks mixed with some zones being more affected by the high summer temperatures than others - some were hit by heat spikes nearly reaching 40 °C in three different weeks.

Aragón

Cariñena, Campo de Borja and Calatayud

Particularly dry conditions affected vineyards without irrigation systems in many areas and resulted in raisined grapes and heady alcohol levels. Those situated at higher altitude, featuring heavier soils or better water reserves fared better and have offered wines with more balance.

Resident winemaker and consultant Norrel Robertson MW says: 'In terms of style and quality we are looking at a harvest somewhere between 2003 and 2006 - that is to say hot and fairly alcoholic. Some exceptional wines will be produced but only where winemakers have spent time in the vineyards selecting parcels to seek out balanced flavours and tannins.'

Somontano

Many producers were able to compensate for the dry summer conditions thanks to irrigation systems. Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah performed well followed by Chardonnay, Gewürztraminer, Garnacha and Tempranillo but Merlot struggled. Alberto Santiago, winemaker for Bodegas Olvena, summarises: 'It has been a challenging year due to the work in the vineyard and the winery in order to obtain wines of the desired quality from our vineyards.' Somontano is one of the few regions to have harvested a larger crop than last year. The harvest produced 17.5 million kilos of grapes, a rise of 6% on 2008.

The Levant

The same hot conditions and rain at the wrong time made the vintage complicated in many regions yet some wines show surprisingly good acidity and alcohol. In *Valencia* Rafael Cambra (Bodegas Rafael Cambra) says: 'The Monastrell that we picked before the rains shows modest alcohol for this region (13.5°C). It will be very exciting to see how it develops - the wine is showing good fruit character without overpowering structure and opulence.'

In *Yecla* Daniel Castaño (Bodegas Castaño) is satisfied with quality having brought forward the harvest for early ripening varieties to the first two weeks of August and picked most grapes ahead of the rains. Monastrell stands out here too.

Meanwhile Bobal in *Utiel* is one of this year's surprise performers. Winemaker Toni Sarrión of Bodegas Mustiguillo rates

quality above 2008 despite 'a complicated ripening period' and the onslaught of rain and even hail in some vineyards.

The South West

Extremadura

The harvest here was particularly early - some producers had finished by 22 August - and produced low yields. Alcohol levels are high, but other aspects such as colour and aroma are said to be good. Winemaker Bernard Lucena at Viñas de Alange concludes: 'This is a vintage that started in a complicated way but thankfully it finished with wines showing great potential.' Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Syrah stand out.

The South

Málaga

A cold, wet winter allowed vines to rest and recuperate after several years of severe drought. Spring was dry and mild resulting in healthy vines and high summer temperatures prompted an early harvest - producer Jorge Ordóñez (Jorge Ordóñez & Co) started on July 31 'to ensure a good balance between acidity and alcohol' and reports high quality and much better volumes than last year.

RIOJA IN MORE DETAIL

This report was published by Wines from Rioja.

The last grapes of the 2009 harvest were picked in vineyards near Haro on 26 October 2009, making this one of the earliest harvests in the history of the Rioja region, having started two months earlier in Aldeanueva del Ebro on 27 August. The total production was of 412.3 million kg of high-quality grapes.

The growth cycle ran around 10 days earlier than previous years, starting with flowering in May/June. High summer temperatures of up to 35-37 °C meant that alcoholic maturity was reached earlier than usual, although phenolic ripeness took longer to develop. Low rainfall in the summer months reduced expectations in terms of quantity although the majority of the vineyards developed well despite the lack of water, except those in arid and very stony soils.

Hydric stress was lessened by rainfall on 16-18 September, when only around 5% of the grapes had been harvested; largely white grapes in the Rioja Baja. This rainfall also helped balance the phenolic and alcoholic maturity of the grapes. From this point onwards, the weather conditions were sunny and dry until the end of the harvest, allowing the grapes to reach perfect maturity with little incidence of vineyard diseases. Around 1,700 ha of vineyards in the Rioja Baja were damaged by a hail storm on 24 May but other than this, weather conditions allowed a very healthy production both in terms of quantity and quality.

The final production of 412.3 million kg of grapes by 657 wineries was the same as that of 2007, and somewhat larger than last year's harvest. Given the excellent conditions at bud break and fruit set, a green harvest was carried out in many vineyards in order to keep yields within limits set by the Consejo Regulador. These limits, set at 6,500kg/ha for red grapes and 9,500kg/ha for white, optimise the quality of Riojan wine.

Production levels, along with quality and levels of ripeness, are controlled by 180 harvest auxiliaries who visit the weighing stations of every single winery in the region. Magnetic cards are issued to each of the region's 19,000 vineyard owners allowing the Consejo to trace the source of every single grape that arrives at a Rioja winery for processing and therefore the yields and production of each and every vineyard in the DOCa.

RUEDA IN MORE DETAIL

This report comes from the Rueda regulatory council.

The total crop brought in this year by wineries registered in the Rueda DO amounts to almost 60 million kilograms of grapes, of which 57.35 million are white wine varieties.

The surface area of vineyards harvested in this 2009 vintage covers a total of 10,720 hectares (26,478 acres), of which 9,969 hectares (24,623 acres) are planted with white varieties and of which 974 hectares (2,405 acres) came into production in this harvest for the first time. The number of growers registered with the Rueda D.O. is 1,417 while there are

54 wineries. No new bodegas were registered during this vintage.

Very low rainfall was recorded in this year's growing season from spring on. This, combined with high late August/early September temperatures at the end of the season brought about punishing conditions for the vines, causing speculation that the crop size would be smaller than 2008. However, thanks to a subsequent drop in temperatures and the arrival of rain showers, together with the strong resistance of the rustic and adaptable Verdejo variety and a substantial increase in the surface area of the vineyard, the 2009 vintage produced a record crop size, in which 96% was made up of white wine varietals, most of which was the Verdejo grape variety, with 47 million kilos, representing 82% of the white grapes harvested by the wineries.

The grapes had remained in very good health, thanks to the lack of rain and absence of dampness, which enabled the threat of botrytis or 'grey rot' (a disease typically found on grapes during periods of rain or severe dampness) to be kept at bay. Potential alcohol levels were just what the wine-makers wanted, and wineries were able to pick plot by plot, according to their own specific criteria and interest.

The Rueda harvest, which was mostly carried out at night [see photo above], began with the Sauvignon Blanc variety on the night of August 24th, ten days to two weeks ahead of normal picking dates on account of the hot weather during the last days of August and this varietal's shorter growing season in 2009. The Rueda harvest got into full swing between the 9 and 26 September, gradually winding down until these last few days, when the last batches were brought in to make special wines, such as semi-sweet and other types of wine.

Another noteworthy fact is that 88% of the harvest was picked by mechanical harvester. Carried out well, this system of picking is fast becoming an asset for wineries in their search for quality, thanks to the speed of picking and the possibility of harvesting at night-time, without sunlight and with low temperatures. This has resulted in the Rueda appellation becoming one of the most advanced wine regions in Spain.

The Rueda Regulatory Council, in addition to its five inspectors already operating in the appellation, took on 44 supervisors for this vintage to keep a watchful eye on the quality and the origin of the grapes, checking their source, the yields in the vineyards, the health and the quantities of the varietals that were brought in to each of the appellation's wineries, and rejecting those bunches and berries that did not conform to the standards set out in the regulations of the Regulatory Council.