South Africa's 2010 vintage

4 Feb 2010 by Gary Jordan

Hardly is the northern hemisphere wine harvest over (in fact when last I heard, some Canadian wine producers were yet to pick their 2009 Icewine), than the southern hemisphere harvest begins. Gary Jordan of Jordan Estate in Stellenbosch (and, incidentally, co-owner of the new London restaurant High Timber) expects to begin picking today and sends this report on the season so far in his region. Seen here are visitors picnicking on an open day at Jordan Estate. The sun does apparently shine somewhere...

The build-up to the 2010 vintage has been an interesting and challenging one. Winter cover crops of triticale and rye were sown in near-perfect conditions with 47.4 mm of rain and average temperatures of 18.2 ºC in April 2009, encouraging steady, even growth, helping to minimise any erosion on even our steepest slopes. Good winter rains (462 mm at Jordan Estate between May and end August) ensured that dams were 100% full and running over relatively early in winter.

Budbreak
Budbreak was two weeks earlier than usual, but cool September temperatures delayed shoot growth. Minimums of less than 6 ºC being recorded, with the average temperature for the month a relatively low 12.7 ºC.

Downy mildew outbreaks were common throughout the wine regions, but a combination of good luck and good planning ensured that crop losses were minimal, although mildew spores were regularly seen on the tops of the young shoots. Our weather station paid for itself 10 times over this season, as the vineyard spray programme could be planned in advance of any cold fronts that seemed to hit the Cape with monotonous regularity. Early summer canopy management had to be planned with predicted wind speeds in mind, and while Jordan Estate was spared the phenomenal wind damage that hit vineyards in other wards of Stellenbosch, September and October wind speeds were almost double the average for the summer months and this delayed early vineyard growth.

New vineyards
Only 21.8 mm of rain was recorded in October, and this enabled newly prepared soils to dry out sufficiently for us to plant a new north-facing, medium potential Glenrosa soil to Cabernet Sauvignon as well as a cooler-sited vineyard to Chardonnay. The latter area had been strip-mined during the tin mining days of the late 1800s, and it has taken many years of earth-moving and many hundreds of tonnes of compost to re-establish this. A small area adjacent to the Cobblers Hill vineyard was planted to Petit Verdot. Who knows, from eight years' time we may consider adding a tiny percentage to the Cobblers Hill blend.

Conditions during early summer
Record rains in November of 102.8 mm (compared with 66.6 mm in November 2008) ensured that this month was one of the wettest November months in many decades. Relentless rain caused significant damage to graded vineyard roads, and staff had to spend valuable time fixing the damage when we could least afford it.

Cover crops were allowed to grow for longer than usual before being cut in an attempt to dry out soils and encourage fine-root growth. Three additional teams of contractors had to be hired to help sucker and remove unwanted vineyard shoots. Dense canopies were avoided by topping and tipping later than usual in the season and therefore minimising any extra side-shoot development growth. Foliage wires were also carefully positioned so that shoot tips remained undamaged in windy conditions.

Farming for flavours
Shoot positioning, suckering and leaf removal in the fruit zone seemed to take much longer than usual for this vintage, but was essential to ensure ripe flavours, particularly on red varieties. Virtually no rain (5 mm) fell in December, with an average temperature of 19.1 being recorded for the month. Warm days were tempered by cool nights, with very little irrigation being needed. A total of 736.8 mm of rain was received between January and December 2009, roughly equal to the long-term average for this area. Veraison, the onset of ripening, appears to be a week later than usual, although Cabernet Sauvignon is slightly more advanced. This may be a logistical challenge later in the vintage as Cabernet Sauvignon harvest dates may yet again clash with white varieties such as Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay.

Time will tell how the 2010 vintage pans out. Provided we don't have any serious early-harvest heat waves, 2010 could

end up being an exceptionally good quality vintage, but one where the number of hours spent in one's vineyards will directly correlate to the optimally ripe fruit flavours of the wine.