

Douro 2010 - a most unusual year

22 Oct 2010 by Jancis Robinson

Paul Symington (second from the left) of the Symington Family Estates, producers of Graham's, Dow's, Warre's ports et al, wrote the following report at the beginning of this week as the last of their Douro grapes came in:

After three very dry years, the winter of 2010 saw an extraordinary change and the Douro had an absolute deluge. There were days in the vineyards when all that could be heard from every quarter was the sound of running water. Since the Douro is an area of mountain vineyards, this brought us considerable problems of erosion and fallen stone walls; it was a challenging and very expensive winter. At Bomfim we had 50% more rainfall from October to March 2010, 789 mm instead of the mean 524 mm. This was a lot of additional water, but much needed.

The world's great vineyards are all famed for their particular soils and how these cope with drainage, and the Douro is no different. A wet winter is vital in order to replenish the humidity deep in the schistous rock of our vineyards. Rarely has a wet winter been as important as this one. We had no rain at all in July and August, literally not one millimetre for more than eight weeks. These are not normally wet months, but the long-term mean is 10 mm and 28 mm respectively and this is valuable. To add to this challenge, August 2010 was hot with an average daily maximum temperature over 35 °C. To quote Miles Edlmann, one of the members of our viticultural research team, 'Vines need humidity and temperatures below 35 °C to photosynthesise, so it came as no surprise to see that maturation this summer was delayed'.

Once again the ability of our Douro grape varieties to cope with the harsh climate became evident. In a hot July and August, the considerable leaf growth resulting from the wet winter was most welcome as the abundant leaves shaded the bunches and gave the vine more ability to ripen the fruit. The old vines with deep roots were better off and in the Douro these roots can go down 25 metres and more. Here among the deep fissures of our particular schistous rock there was thankfully still plenty of humidity this year. Many expensive hours were spent watering the vines that were only six and 18 months old in July and August, or many would have certainly died. The upside of the lack of summer rain was that the grapes were almost entirely free of any disease and were in very good condition, minimal treatments having been needed.

[Presumably thanks to the vine shutdown in high summer] We had a delayed cycle this year, so we started picking some five days later than usual, on the 13 September at Quinta do Vesuvio, 16 Sep at Sra Ribeira, Telhada, Vale Coelho and Tua. Quinta dos Malvedos, Bomfim and Retiro started on 20 Sep and Cavadinha in its cooler and higher position was started only on 23 Sep.

It soon became clear that some varieties had coped a lot better than others. The Touriga Nacional had very good phenolic maturation, but was held back by my cousin Charles Symington and our vineyard manager Pedro Leal de Costa almost to the end in order to get a more complete ripeness. Miles writes, 'the Nacional had very dark seeds early on and the flavours were well developed'. The juggling act that we have every year was played out again. Chancing the weather forecasts, analysing the impact of the small showers on 1 Sep (1.6 mm) and 7 Sep (2.4 mm), with another 6.6 mm on 17 Sep, all make the difference between making good wines and making really great wines. It was decided to bring in the Tinta Barroca first, followed by the Roriz, with the Nacional coming in only at the end of the month, just before the Touriga Franca. Picking was actually suspended for a few days on some of our vineyards to give the Nacional more time. This was an expensive and risky choice; the pickers have still to be paid or they will leave and are most unlikely to come back, and the weather forecast may not be right...

It appears at this early stage (some tanks are still fermenting) that the Touriga Franca, always a late ripener, has performed less well in some vineyards this year. Franca did not like the conditions in some areas, but in others it was very fine. But the excellence of the Nacional has more than made up for this. Charles wrote, 'the wait was well worthwhile, the Nacional musts being well balanced with good colour, producing wines with very elegant aromas'.

Virtually throughout the harvest, we have had perfect weather. Charles: 'The showers (in September) were small interruptions to the clear blue skies and pleasantly warm weather experienced throughout the entire month'. On 3 Oct, as often happens at this time, strong storms blew in from the west and over the Marão, and we had a lot of rain overnight in the Douro. But remarkably the weather improved again and the forecast heavy daily showers simply did not fall. Today [17 Oct], the weather is still fine as the last grapes come in.

So 2010 proved again that in the vineyard no two years are ever the same. Yet again we had a very different cycle for our vines and we have used our experience to try to get the very best from our fruit. Yields have been larger than the last two years, which were very low, but we have only returned to normal productions at our own vineyards. Overall the region is likely to have had quite a large year.

Once again our family were managing two large wineries, Sol and Bomfim, and we again ran no fewer than seven small specialist wineries at Vesuvio, Sra Ribeira, Canais, Tua, Malvedos, Cavadinha and Roriz. Each small winery had its dedicated team making no more than a few hundred pipes. They are now finishing some five weeks of non-stop work as this report is being written. Our winemaking teams have made some very good ports and DOC wines this year, they now deserve a few days off.

For additional and detailed information about the 2010 harvest go to:

<http://malvedos.wordpress.com/>