2010 vintage report - Languedoc

8 Nov 2010 by Graham Nutter

Graham Nutter of Ch St Jacques d'Albas in the Minervois sends the following report of the harvest just completed.

After a winter with low rainfall, a spring of unusual snowfalls, a summer of variable warmth with ultimate heat - and a long 'Indian summer' autumn, it was yet another year of putting one's faith in the gods for a respectful harvest. It's too early to make any sweeping conclusions as to the ultimate product, but quantities are certainly down (again) while quality is excellent, reflecting the dry warmth and north winds of August and September, with little rot or disease. Syrah and Grenache are excellent *chez nous*.

Winter 2009/2010 was cold and dry, with little rainfall - certainly insufficient to replenish the water tables after two below-average years of 2008 and 2009 and not enough to permit the vines to support the region's semi-arid summers. We 'normally' receive some 650-750 mm (25-28 inches) of rain a year, with most of it in autumn/winter, but the 12 months in question witnessed only 350 mm up to the end of September, putting the vines under real stress, especially the younger vines which have not had time to put down deep roots. (Most Minervois vineyards, especially the AOC plots, are dry-farmed.) Unusual snow in March and April provided some limited relief - and scenery more akin to Meribel than the Minervois.

Summer started cool, with tourists complaining of lack of sun. July and August heated up to the relief of all - but with no additional rain since mid-June. And as we entered September and harvest time, we had had only half the normal annual amount of rain. The vines at St Jacques, however, exhibited surprisingly little stress at this time (no yellowing leaves) even though the grapes were certainly not ready for picking. Full of sugars - but far from having phenolic ripeness.

We picked our (small) harvest of whites - Vermentino, Viognier and Roussanne - early morning on 3 September. The musts were very aromatic with high sugars and juicier than we expected (a precursor of positive surprises later with the reds?). The young Syrah and Grenache were then picked for the rosé. Again, they were more fleshy and aromatic than we anticipated. Both are now picked by machine, given the unattractive maths of hand picking. However, we employ the driver of the machine ourselves - rather than hiring the task out to a contractor, paid by the hectare harvested - and he is thus able to operate slowly and carefully. Examination of the vines afterwards displayed little, if any, damage and ironically left on the vine unripe grapes (which don't fall off easily when unripe). We then waited and waited for the older Syrah and Grenache to ripen, with the Mourvèdre and Carignan the last to reach full maturity. With no rain, the vines were closing down to protect themselves and sucking juice from the grapes in the process. It was a stressful time for us too!

Our prayers were partly answered on 24-25 September, when we received 27 mm (an inch) of rain, just enough to provide comfort to the vines and juice to the grapes. Two days afterwards, we rushed to harvest the Syrah and Grenache, both by hand and machine. The grapes were small but very concentrated, giving strong and darkly coloured juice. The Mourvèdre then came in, not as ripe as in 2009, but clean, fresh flavoured and juicy. The Carignan remained stubbornly unripe - and again we waited.

Rainstorms then hit us over 8-9 October, dropping 150 mm (6 inches - a fifth of an average year's rainfall) over 48 hours. A disaster for the remaining Carignan? No. Given its thicker skins, inspection showed more benefit than any damage from moisture take-up. The Carignan came in on 18 October, once the fields had dried out. Thus ended our longest (over six weeks) and our latest harvest since 2001, when we bought the domaine. But the soil is definitely thankful for the moisture.

Given the delicate nature and high sugars of the fruit, cellar treatment has been light-handed to say the least. Cold soaks and slow, low-temperature fermentations have been *de rigueur* for many tanks. The high sugars fermented slowly, as the yeasts strained under the effort. And pumping over has been minimal. However, the up-side was that fruit health and quality was exceptionally good, given the long, warm, dry summer. Memories of the 2003 harvest are recalled, but with higher acidity and with a quality emphasis from the quasi-drought, rather than from heat? There is also plenty of natural acidity. The entry-level wines will be accessible early on, while the wines based on older vines will need some cellaring. Late harvests are often good harvests - and 2010 has been no exception.