

## Bordeaux 2011 - Blatch on Sauternes

29 Apr 2012 by Bill Blatch

*For the last few years we have been delighted to be the first to publish the annual Bordeaux vintage report assembled with enormous diligence by négociant Bill Blatch of Vintex (see, for instance, [Blatch on 2010 – the wines](#)). He has just retired. Berry Bros have cannily signed him up to write a Bordelais answer to Jasper Morris MW's excellent book Inside Burgundy. So he has been less inclined than usual to spend weeks hunched over the manuscript of a comprehensive report on Bordeaux's 2011 vintage. However, Steve Webb of the online sweet white Bordeaux specialist Bordeaux Gold has persuaded Bill to write the following report on the exceptionally successful Sauternes 2011s and we are thrilled to share it with you.*

There seems to be no doubt in anybody's mind, especially mine, that Sauternes is by far the best part of the Bordeaux 2011 vintage. The wines have superbly fresh acidity and beautiful fruit aromas yet also great sweet concentration and classic botrytis character, all totally in what we might call the modern style of great Sauternes. As such, I find it a superb vintage, not quite at the absolute level of 2001, nor with the sheer opulence of 2005 and 2009, but not far off, and, by its remarkable freshness, very different in style from any of these.

### Weather favours Sauternes

The reason for this success is really quite simple: the Sauternes region, although blessed with marginally less extreme conditions during the growing season than the red-wine areas, had basically the same weather that produced the same components of pronounced aromas and tight acidities everywhere. In Sauternes, the big difference was that the very same, wet end-of-summer conditions which initiated the noble rot and the extreme dry heat of September and early October that produced such galloping concentration in Sauternes were exactly the same ones that, in the red areas, weakened rather than strengthened the grapes, resulting in very fine but lighter wines.

As elsewhere, after an exceptionally early budburst, the hot dry month of April got the growing season off to a very early start. A freak hailstorm on the morning of Easter Monday 25 April luckily didn't affect the quality of the wines at all but decimated part of southern Sauternes, slamming into the vineyard from the village of Budos and hovering around the south eastern hillsides of the village of Sauternes and Bommès for long enough, a few minutes, to cause up to 50% damage. The plateau of Lamothe (Lamothe Guignard and Despujols) and southern Bommès (La Tour Blanche) were the worst hit, with Guiraud and Filhot severely damaged and Yquem and Clos Haut-Peyraguey just a little.

That early development was to stay all the way through the hot, arid early summer; the cool, damp July and the warm, wet August - resulting in one of the earliest harvests on record, in most properties on the same dates as in 2003. However, there were a few little differences in Sauternes that alleviated these extreme conditions. Firstly June saw more rainfall in Sauternes than elsewhere, especially in the eastern part of the appellation, resulting in less dehydration of the bunches that final weekend of June. Secondly the summer rains came earlier than elsewhere while the temperatures, especially at night, were still low, resulting in better recovery mid-August and all that great acid retention. And finally the heavy storms of 23 and 26 August, coming at the critical final ripening phase, had half as much rain in them in Sauternes as elsewhere. Sauternes could have done without the very heavy storm of 3 September but was still 5-10 days away from harvest, and anyway whatever bad rot there was had already developed, with night-time temperatures having soared to 5 °C above normal after all that rain, and growers had already started dealing with it.

### Early harvest

The harvest generally got under way around 8 September, mainly to weed out the bad rot but also to pick some small quantities of wonderfully fragrant yet concentrated nobly rotten grapes. Those that waited a few more days generally regretted it as the bad rot had by then spread and the proportion of grapes that had to be rejected rose. Needless to say, this is second nature to the Sauternais and in no way affected the quality of what was retained (cf 1997).

Some estates would later say they lost a lot to the bad rot, others almost nothing. There was generally more of it in Sauternes than in Barsac, possibly because Barsac was spared one of the three storms that plagued the end of August, but more probably because of the draining capacity of the different soil structures and the aerating capacity of different exposures. Paradoxically, grey rot affected some of the vineyards on lighter, more filtering soils, maybe because the vines here had been more weakened by greater drought stress in June. It was difficult to tell exactly why some vines were affected and others weren't – just as in the red wine vineyards.

### Heart of the vintage

It was now that the weather pattern started to change, at just exactly the right time: from 8 until 16 September daytime temperatures soared to 30 °C under the radiant skies of the higher pressure system that had at last returned, developing and concentrating the botrytis, allowing picking to continue at quite a leisurely pace, bringing in more beautifully aromatic lots. Then suddenly, with a few small showers 17-19 September, there was an explosion of concentration, just like in 2001, that necessitated immediate attention. This was to be the heart of the vintage, slightly earlier in Barsac, during the cooler temperatures of 17– 21 September, a little later in Sauternes during the progressively hotter period 21-27 or so. Most estates brought in a good two-thirds of their crop now, harvesting unusually fast and often wider too, picking non-botrytised golden grapes in the same baskets as the fully *rôti* botrytised ones in order to keep the sugars down to a reasonable level. Ten years ago, some estates would have rubbed their hands together in glee at the thought of musts with a potential alcohol of 30°. Not any more; times have changed.

The cellars were under enormous pressure to keep up with such a sudden increase in the quantity of grapes coming in, and the days extended far into the night. But with the similar experience of 1990 and 2003 behind them, they are now generally well-equipped for such events, reluctant as they must be to lose out on these few days of glory that could offset all those other days, months, years of hard slog.

Most estates finished between 27 and 30 September, the final lots, as so often, with rather more tired botrytis and often not the best. The weather was still dry and incredibly hot, every day at 30 °C right into October - figures that had not been reached since 1921 or 1947 - then tailing off from 5 October to more normal, cooler days. Some estates did a few small final pickings into October, often once the main body of pickers had been sent home, all on their own, 'pour se faire plaisir', producing some soft, rich and spicy musts that would come in very useful later to counterbalance the extreme freshness of the first lots.

### A year of opulence

With most wines still not assembled, we have to assess the different lots and do the assemblage in our heads, and interpret as best we can the way these lots are marrying together in the obligatory sample bottles of primeurs tasting week. But the general character of the vintage cannot be denied. This is a year of opulence, with residual sugars of the crus classés mostly at 130 – 160 g/l, about the same or slightly less (often voluntarily) than the 2007s, but with the difference that the individual lots are much more uniform in terms of alcohol/sugar balance.

The alcohols are generally quite reserved, usually between 13.5 and 14%, and above all, the acidities are high, often over 4 g/l [sulphuric; the equivalent of just of 6 g/l tartaric], not quite at the levels of the 2001s but enough to give a great spark to the concentration. The fresh fruit flavours are very apparent now (they weren't during the fermentations), bringing floral and citrus flavours right to the fore, borne out by the slight sharpness of acidity. There is something of dry white Graves in these flavours, all tensile and fresh, maybe from the effect of the use of far more non- botrytised grapes than usual? In my view, this gives a wonderful aromatic side to the wines but slightly detracts from the complexity and maybe prevents the 2011 from becoming a nine or even 10 Gold Star vintage.

(NB Now that I have left the trade, Steve at Bordeaux Gold has persuaded me to adopt a new rating system that awards Gold Stars for a wine's quality, its year and its value see [here](#) for more details.)

*Steve Webb of Bordeaux Gold adds the following on Sauternes pricing in 2011:*

A quick word on pricing and scores for the 2011 Sauternes. Generally prices are either the same or up to 14% less ex château for 2011 with average scores from a bundle of critics slightly higher. The exchange rate is also better, meaning that the 2011s are typically between 5 and 20% cheaper than the 2010s for potentially better wines. The 2010s were themselves up to 25% cheaper than the 2009s. As you are well aware, the Sauternes prices anyway have not increased by anything like as much as those of the reds over the last decade or more, so a reduction on what we consider to be an already fair price seems a very sensible move by the Sauternais.

