Bordeaux 2012: The Late Show

4 Oct 2012 by Gavin Quinney

As a complement to Martin Krajewski's reports from Ch de Sours in the Entre-Deux-Mers, Gavin Quinney sends the following report from more classic wine country, mainly the classed growths of the Médoc. These later-ripening grapes look very healthy.

The red-wine harvest finally got underway in Bordeaux this week. Merlot is being brought into the increasingly high-tech sorting areas (see photos below) at a leisurely pace, as leading châteaux take advantage of the clear skies and wait for optimum maturity of their precious grapes. Incredibly, it's still too early to call.

'We have the potential for a very good vintage but the weather over the next two weeks will be crucial', said Christian Seely, MD of **Ch Pichon-Longueville** in Pauillac (harvest reception area pictured here), where Cabernet Sauvignon is king. His winemaker, Jean-René Martignon, confirmed that they won't start picking the later-ripening Cabernet until the week of 15 October. They, along with most of the top estates of the left bank, were picking Merlot this week.

Hervé Berland, the new CEO at **Ch Montrose** in St-Estèphe, agreed. 'I'm asking for God's help with the Cabernet Sauvignon as this is my first vintage'. He chalked up more than 30 years with Ch Mouton Rothschild. 'I am hopeful because we had a lovely August and, as we say, August makes the must.

'We can move quickly if we need to. You know, and this is a lovely story, we have had pickers at Montrose from the same village in Spain for the last 50 years - can you believe that? - and we now put them up in our newly-restored cottages at the end of the drive by the Gironde.' (Harvest workers' cottages are not the only investments being made at Montrose, that's for sure.)

Down the D2 at **Ch Palmer** in Margaux, Thomas Duroux makes a wine with a higher percentage of Merlot than the other great châteaux of the Médoc. 'The Merlots have been at the right sugar levels for two to three weeks. The main challenge this year is whether we wait for them to have fully ripe tannins, without knowing if they will ever get there, or to pick a little bit sooner to keep the freshness and complexity of aromas. We prefer to keep the aromatic finesse, and take care of the tannins through gentle extraction in the cellar. So we will finish our Merlot this week with one or two blocks left for next Monday or Tuesday. With Cabernet Sauvignon it's different because we don't get overripe Cabernet in Bordeaux.' (The photo below shows Merlot being picked at Léoville Barton.)

John Kolasa, who runs both **Ch Rauzan-Ségla**, over the road from Palmer, and **Ch Canon** in St-Émilion, has started the Merlot at both estates. 'I am more worried about the Cabernet Sauvignon here in Margaux than the Merlot and Cabernet Franc in St-Émilion. We just started picking the young Merlot plants at Canon and we should be okay there for next week when we start the older ones. But we can't tell what it will be like later in the month.'

Over in St-Émilion, none of the top estates had picked anything other than young Merlot vines earlier this week. Even the cave co-operative was quiet, with just two or three tractors waiting to offload their trailers full of Merlot grapes. The sugar levels are certainly high enough but the pips are still a bit green. As there is no rot to speak of, at least not for now, growers at every level can afford to wait.

In the warm terroirs of Pomerol next door, the Merlot ripens earlier, so they're about halfway through the harvest. Gently does it though, as Ronan Laborde of **Ch Clinet** confirmed. '2012 will be the most stretched-out vintage for us, from the date we started the harvest earlier in September until the end of next week.'

As for timing, it seems bizarre that the harvest is only just beginning for reds, when all the grapes had been picked by this time last year.

An October harvest in 2012, however, has always been on the cards after a late budburst and a wet start to the growing season in April. Flowering in June was drawn out too, leaving bunches at different stages of potential ripeness, and July was also cool and damp at the start.

Since mid July, however, we've had a fabulous summer. 'People in England often assume that because it's rained there in summer, it will be a wet vintage everywhere', explained Christian Seely, at the risk of upsetting his fellow countrymen. 'That's true for Hampshire' (where, to give him his due, he co-owns a vineyard) 'but it is certainly not the case for Bordeaux'.

Post mid July, it rained here on 5 August, but not again until Sunday 23 September. It then rained for three days, off and on. A modest amount of rain turned out to be largely beneficial but it was an anxious time for all vignerons shortly before the harvest.

Most areas had between 45 and 60 mm over these few days - the 30-year average for September is 83 mm - although they had a little more in Margaux, with reports of 70 to 90 mm. 'We had 86 mm in Margaux, and only about 50 in St-Émilion', said Kolasa.

If the rain in the last week of September had carried on into October, the mood would have darkened considerably. But the skies brightened up, and so did everyone's spirits. The forecast is fine now until next Monday 8 October at least.

I'll report back on how it goes (it's a bit premature to talk about the low yields) and to cover the dry whites, which are all in, and the sweet ones, which certainly aren't.

In the meantime, I shall try to sneak into the brand new winery at Ch Mouton Rothschild, and to ask Anthony Barton of **Ch Léoville Barton** what he really thinks of his brand new optical sorting machine, pictured above left (Merlot berries being scanned) and below.

Whatever next?