Burgundy 2012 - a difficult birth

13 Nov 2012 by Aubert de Villaine

Some vintages have an easy birth: the winemaker intervenes calmly and infrequently, like the crew of a sailing boat in calm weather. But it is not uncommon for the journey towards the birth of a vintage to be more like a war, a struggle at all times to keep the boat afloat and reach the goal without too much damage!

This was the case in 2012, which will always be a unique vintage - but which one isn't - and one which will long be remembered by those who were fighting on the front line against nature's best 'soldiers' - downy and powdery mildew.

March, however, was very dry and almost summery (22 °C on average). This provoked an even earlier budburst than in 2007, the benchmark for precocity. We thought we would be harvesting in August! But what we remember most from this atypical month were the thunderstorms on 26 March, highly unusual for the time of year but a foreshadowing of what the gods had prepared for Nicolas Jacob, our vineyard manager, and his team.

From April onwards, the change was radical: cold (-2 °C on 13 April) and humidity settled in. As a result, it was impossible to get into the vineyard to plough and the grass grew wildly, encouraged and sustained by the rain. For the same reasons, we had great difficulty treating the vines: we had to be ready for any window of dry weather in order to give the plants the protection they needed. Despite constant vigilance, downy mildew appeared and attacked the vines forcefully, eliminating a percentage of the crop which is difficult to assess but significant. Powdery mildew, too, found favourable conditions. And hail joined in the attack, hitting all of the Côte de Beaune, including our Montrachet, on 30 June.

Flowering began about 9 June, but it was drawn out over a month due to persistently cold conditions. This led to significant coulure.

Here's the balance sheet of the three months during which it rained one day in three:

- a crop already reduced by coulure and downy mildew which may well be heterogeneous at harvest due to the drawn-out flowering period
- but at the same time, coulure produced an interesting amount of millerandage, which always contributes to quality
- vigorous and healthy vines
- another positive: after an early sprint, vegetation growth slowed, allowing us to carry out manual work, such as disbudding, efficiently and without haste
- and, of course, the exceptionally early year became more or less normal, the time of flowering pointing to a late-September harvest.

At the end of June came the last 'eccentric' episode of the spring: a few days' heatwave burnt the young berries that were most exposed to the sun, further decreasing the yield and making it likely we would need to do an extra sort during harvest to drop the sunburnt berries.

In July, nature finally calmed down. We have suffered losses, but the enemy has 'retreated'. Thanks to these milder conditions, we can plough effectively, in some cases making three passes through the vines to rid them of invasive weeds. We carried out the last precautionary treatments in early August ... and it only remained for us to rely on the weather being at last closer to the season's norm.

This is what actually happened ...

August was hot and sunny with a heatwave and storms around 15 August. Each time, despite the wind often blowing towards the south, dry weather returned. The vine, having been well watered by the earlier rains, fed grapes generously, photosynthesis was promoted and sugar production progressed very rapidly. On the eve of harvest we had:

- small clusters of grapes with very thick skins and a high percentage of berries affected by millerandage
- sunburn on a significant number of bunches on the sun-exposed side of the vine as a result of the heatwaves, particularly the one in June
- on some clusters, one or two berries that never went through veraison, ie remained green, which will be rejected during sorting
- no botrytis.

In short, a very healthy harvest that could wait for full maturity. This is what we did, taking the risk of going well beyond the hundred days that normally separates harvest from mid-flowering when we decided on the harvest date.

We finally started harvesting the Corton fruit and some young vines in Vosne-Romanée with a smaller team on Friday 21 September and we started the 'big' harvest in Vosne-Romanée on Monday 24 September. The weather unfortunately deteriorated from Tuesday, and on Wednesday 26th it rained all day! We of course stopped harvesting completely that day and were very anxious because we feared strong botrytis attacks the next day.

But two factors combined to preserve the grapes effectively: on the one hand, the exceptionally thick and resistant berry skins and, on the other, cold weather, extremely cold for the season, did not allow botrytis to develop. The harvest remained exceptionally healthy. As every year, we still made a selection of the grapes as we picked - to drop the berries that were burnt and those that had not changed colour at veraison. This meant that sorting at the table was minimal and the sorting team saw a crop that was one of the healthiest in recent years. Since the weather remained cool, the fruit came in at an excellent temperature, around 15 °C, which allowed a few days' maceration before fermentation started slowly and gradually.

Fermentation has now lasted for nearly three weeks under the loving watch of Bernard Noblet and his vinification team. The first wines have been drawn off, notably that from Romanée-Conti, which was ripe first and therefore harvested first. The wines are very promising with beautiful colour and fresh, delicate aromas.

A separate chapter needs to be inserted here about Montrachet, which, like the entire Côte de Beaune, was hit by hail twice during the summer. These grapes suffered particularly badly. We harvested on Friday 28 September, ie before the end of the red harvest. This was a crop damaged by hail, botrytis and powdery mildew and needed severe sorting, resulting in a very small harvest, the smallest in recent years. We expect excellent quality but the yield will be less than half the norm.

For red wines, the yields are around 20 hl/ha, which is about 25% below normal. The average yields in 2009, for example, were 30 hl/ha.

A harvest like the one we have just completed makes us even more aware, if that were necessary, of the importance of gambling - and luck - in the success or failure of a vintage. To repeat what I said last year, it is essential to wait until the grapes reach full maturity. This year, with a perfectly healthy harvest, it was easier than last year, when botrytis was significant. But in both cases, it was necessary to wait for complete maturity, and we were lucky that the weather conditions became our ally, keeping it cool enough for the grapes to get through the heavy rain of Wednesday 26 September without being attacked by botrytis.

Crop losses due to consecutive attacks of downy mildew and sunburn on some bunches were certainly significant, but this reduction in quantity also contributed to quality since it led to a natural thinning which reduced the yield and allowed the healthy grapes to ripen better. It is quite possible that we would not have reached such maturity and quality had there been no losses.

Harvest dates:

- Corton: 21 September
- Romanée-Conti: 22 September
- Grands Échezeaux: 22, 24 and 25 September
- La Tâche: 25 and 27 September
- Richebourg: 27 and 28 September
- Montrachet: 28 September
- Romanée-St-Vivant: 28 and 29 September

- Échezeaux: 29 and 30 September