2015 in the Languedoc - a vintage report

Graham Nutter (pictured below), owner of Laure-Minervois property St Jacques d’Albas (pictured) and provider of all the Lafons and Coches described in Masters of Meursault inter alia, provides this report of the most recent harvest in the Languedoc.

My 2015 report is late, for the simple reason that the wines have developed more slowly than usual. After two tastings of the final product last week, we only now have a confident indication of their character. Interestingly, a local told me last week that 20 to 30 years ago, growers showed their reds only in the summer after the harvest, ie some eight or nine months later. Today, we are asked to give samples within two or three months of harvest and have to gaze into a crystal ball as to their potential! Everything has to be quicker - but wine doesn't respond to the demands of instant communication. It takes its time, develops at its own pace and certainly doesn't conform to internet speed and press demands. A topic for discussion one day?

As of early December, it's now some nine weeks since the end of the 2015 harvest and the wines are revealing both character and a strong indication of their quality. Broadly, it has been what I call a Sinatra year (remember the song 'It was a very good year'?): good since the budding, during summer, during harvesting and once in tank.

Water tables had been replenished during the previous year's winter (2013/14) with some 750 mm (29.5 in) for the year, versus an average of 600-650 mm, thus setting us up well for 2014/15. It is important to remember this, as it is the previous year's rainfall that weighs in favour - or to the detriment - of the next year's harvest (the year to us is 1 October – 30 September the following year). Rainfall for 2014/15 was woefully inadequate, just 380 mm, which you would think would ring alarm bells with vignerons. Not for this year's crop, but it could well be a problem for 2015/16.
Spring blessed us with warm and dry weather, with no noticeable problems during flowering. This was followed by an equally friendly spring/early summer conditions for budding and leaf development (unlike the cold snap of 2013 which led to coulure and collapse of Grenache yields).

Into summer, the weather continued to be propitious for healthy and clean fruit. We experienced no hail, nor any rainstorms of any serious note. In spite of the lack of rain, the soil remained fresh to the touch (due to the above-mentioned previous year's replenishment of the water table), giving sufficient moisture to the vines.

Through summer, the long, dry months of July and August were memorable. Tourists loved it although I'm not so sure about the younger vines with shallow roots. Again, no disturbing weather intruded - and we looked forward to a rich and plentiful harvest. But we didn't experience the torrid weather of the summer of 2003; there were no high temperature extremes, nor hot nights. The vines were thus able to relax more at night time (compared with 2003) which was good for their health and acidities.

Hydric stress was an issue for younger vines with shallower roots, notably some Syrah planted in 2006. The older Grenache and Syrah just shrugged it off as a habitual event – and their deeper roots bought water solace. Little incidence of the yellowing of lower vine leaves was in evidence.

Harvesting began in early September when some variable weather returned, making selection of harvesting day a small problem. However, as we now harvest entirely by machine, we are able to bring in the grapes so much more rapidly - and at any time of the day or night. Machines are so much better quality compared with 10 years ago (when we picked by hand) and don't need coffee and croissants at breakfast!

Indian summer returned from mid September (and continued to the end of October). The warm days and cool nights were a joy for harvesting. We finished picking at the end of September, one week earlier than ever before (normally we finish around 8/9 October). The Grenache was the star of the year; ripe, healthy and very juicy. The Syrah yielded smaller but very concentrated and fruity berries. The Mourvèdre and Carignan were equally a joy to touch and taste. The earlier-picked Viognier and Vermentino whites were highly expressive, balanced by the necessary acidity from the cool nights, to denote high potential.

The cool nights and morning harvesting brought in fruit at under 10 °C (50 °F), which effectively provided an unplanned but welcome cold maceration before the fruit warmed up to fermentation temperature (above 10 °C), allowing colour and fruitiness to be optimised. And the initial fermentation of sugars lasted longer than usual, at least 18-20 days for the reds (versus a
more habitual 14-16 days). Cooler cellars reinforced this – and extended the malolactic conversion, which finished as late as early December for some tanks.

Development in tank has taken longer than usual. And the tastings of the fermented products on 3 and 4 December have not disappointed us. The Viognier has taken time to come round but now displays those apricot/peach characteristics, while the Vermentino (an increasingly popular cépage in the south of France, given its aptitude to semi-arid climes) adds mineral and floral aromas to the white.

The Grenache is a joy to taste (I'm putting some 100% Grenache bottles in my cellar for tasting in 2018), displaying finesse, depth and complexity, while the Syrah gives sweetness and longevity on the palate. Super reds should emerge from the area and my neighbours have big smiles when discussing their wines in tank.

The combination of replenished water tables from the prior year, almost perfect weather conditions for grape development and the harvesting of healthy and ripe fruit provided the Frank Sinatra backdrop to a potentially excellent vintage.

Dare we say une année vinabilis?

**Jancis writes:** In view of the recent thread in our forum about dogs and grapes, I thought I would include the picture below sent by Graham.