

Vintage Report

2001

After a run of 3 excellent vintages, 1998, 1999 and 2000, we feared that the weather conditions just before the harvest in 2001 might upset the balance in this new vintage. The summer months had been exceptionally warm and then we experienced a hot, windy spell at the end of August.

These weather conditions provoked evaporation in the berries and reduced our crop by about 25% and they also menaced the phenol ripeness.

Normally, it takes about 130kgs of grapes to make 100 litres of wine. Based on the weather conditions, the ratio between the solid and liquid components in berries may change. Dry conditions during the ripening period upset the vine's feeding process and berries may be of low weight due to a reduction in juice.

We delayed the harvest's starting date to ensure more balanced maturity and the wines seem to have benefited from the concentration. This vintage may turn out to be the finest of the four, offering intense colours, concentrated aroma and well balanced fruit, despite low acidity levels.

2002

Would five in a row been too much to ask for ? Until early September, growing conditions had once again been excellent and we had a good, healthy crop ripening out in the vineyard.

And then the weather broke and we had heavy rain and lingering humidity for several days just before we started picking. This did damage to the Syrah crop in particular, less to the Grenache and virtually none to the Carignan and Mourvedre. Under these sorts of climatic conditions, the closer we are to picking, the higher the danger level and since the Syrah is generally harvested first, it was this variety that suffered most.

Once again, we decided to wait for the weather to improve, which it did, and let the maturity levels rise. Hand picking allowed us to eliminate any rotten grapes and whilst accepting another 25% drop in production, we have been able to protect the quality. Although they will be a bit softer than previous vintages, average natural maturity exceeds 13°, colour levels are good and the wines are showing well at this stage.

This is a vintage for drinking young.

2003

I am not too sure as to whether it is the effect of global warming or simply a cycle of a warmer weather pattern but, once again, we met during the 2003 growing period with early bud-burst and flowering. This was accompanied as of the middle of May by a rapid warm-up that was to last until the end of August. The summer temperature levels were not

extraordinary as such for the south of France but it was the length of the dry spell that was surprising. Plants suffer particularly when night temperatures remain high.

Again, we were lucky to avoid any drought influence thanks to the clay soils but it meant that what was looking to be a fairly solid sized crop turned out to be smaller than average because of the high solid to liquid ratio in the berries. Sugar levels were already looking impressive in August and in certain sectors of the Rhône valley picking started as early as the 15th and in the northern Rhône everything was virtually finished by the end of the month.

Considering that the phenol maturity at the Domaine was not yet up to the levels that we normally look for, I decided to hold off from picking until 3rd September (still some 17 days earlier than average dates in the 1980's). This decision paid off thanks to a judicious drop of rain on the 7th and cooler temperatures, allowing us to pick up excellent colours and mature tannins along with healthy alcohol levels averaging 14°.

There is also an excellent balance with acidity, so I feel that overall we have the makings of good vintage. Tannins may show a slight dryness but this is a characteristic of the vintage and should soften with ageing. However, there is excellent concentration of colour and fruit.

2004

We are back to what one might call a normal growing season, with slightly late bud-burst and clement summer temperatures. It is worth noting though that we have accumulated over the last two years an important deficit in water reserves. Fruit initiation takes place the year before each harvest, around about June, and the prevailing weather conditions influence the quality of the future buds. They have an impact also on the quality of the canes and energy reserves stocked for the coming year. This explains probably the low yields encountered in 2004.

Rain in August, about 4 inches, softened the affects of drought but made little change to the output, which is some 20% below normal.

Once again, I chose to pick late, starting harvesting on the 17th September. The crop was brought in in record time due not only to the low yields but also to the excellent health of the berries and perfect weather.

It is a bit early to make a solid judgment but it is reasonable to think that we are on to something rather good, with an excellent alcohol/acidity balance, very dark colours and rich, round tannins. It has been a vintage in which we can play around with the maceration lengths with no danger of excessive extraction.

To be followed with interest !