

## **An embarrassingly good vintage**

Back in November, many owners were already quietly confident that their 2010 was better than the already legendary 2009 but, coming hot on the heels of the hallowed 2009s, they seemed embarrassed to say it too loudly. Today, half of Bordeaux is less timid in assessing 2010 as great if not greater than 2009, while the other half is more reserved in such a judgement. But there is one point of total agreement: it is totally different from its predecessor.

Both vintages have enormous concentration and high alcohols. Both have great power and weight. But there the similarities end: the 2009s are, superficially anyway, softer wines made from gentle, progressive weather, with gradual concentration coming from perfect summer ripening, followed, continuously and without interruption, by further concentration from a perfect autumn. The year had gone through the gears seamlessly with no jolts.

The 2010s on the other hand are robust wines made from more aggressive and extreme conditions and their concentration comes from more extreme dehydration. They are the product of drought, of a more irregular sugar build-up in summer and a sudden re-concentration at the finish. And, most importantly, they get their higher acidities from the cooler August-September minimum temperatures and from the cooler autumn.

Add to all this the 2010's later spring water replenishment, in June as opposed to April, all just a bit too late to get a gradual start to the vegetation, the yo-yo June conditions for the flowering and the consequent need, as in 2000, to catch the season back as from July, and a parched dry summer that knocked it back into shape, and the harsher, very robust and strongly tannic style of the 2010s begins to be explained.

And what caused such a cold winter, such erratic conditions in early summer and such a hot and dry high summer and autumn? I apologise for this but once again we have to go back to the South-Central Pacific where we left off last year with a mild El Niño system that had unexpectedly developed in June 2009 and had ended up creating a slight wobble in the air flows over the Atlantic, producing Bordeaux's fine regular Bordeaux summer of that year. This had been an unusual result. Historically, strong El Niños produce cool summers in Europe: the poor Bordeaux summers of 1925-26, 1972-1973, 1987-88 correspond exactly to strong El Niño events; and one of the strongest of all times in 1789 is supposed to have caused the crop failures and bread shortages that sparked off the French Revolution. In 2009, it had not been strong enough to inflict such disastrous weather on the whole of Europe, only the north and east, whilst the south west was spared.

This El Niño event continued up to June 2010, some say also aggravated by an almost total absence of solar activity (no nice auroras to admire in the Arctic this year), and over the winter it had the effect of displacing the Icelandic low-pressure systems further east, which in their turn sucked Arctic air down round them, anti-clockwise, into Europe. Hence the very cold winter.

When, in May-June, it was succeeded by the strongest La Niña since 1973, there was a short period of erratic conditions during the transition, disturbing Bordeaux's month of June. Thereafter, as it got ingrained, its effect rolled eastwards over the American continent, resulting in exactly the opposite conditions of 2009: a cold and dry South American winter, a miserable California summer, heatwaves in the south and east of the USA, and finally the warmest ever North Atlantic sea surface temperature, which, when joined by an unusually warm Labrador current descending from the fast-melting polar ice cap, strengthened the unsettled summer westerly winds. These came in on a more southerly track than usual, over Ireland, southern Britain and the Channel, leaving the retreating Azores high-pressure system to benefit only the south-west. Northern Europe had a miserable summer, and could hardly believe it when we said in October that, down in Bordeaux, we were parched from drought.

## **Winter 2009/10**

We couldn't know it at the time, because we didn't know that we were going into such a dry year, but the very high early winter rainfall was to become the saving grace of the vintage, storing up in the depths of the soil a reserve of dampness that would become crucial in the dog days of summer that were to come.

As soon as the 2009 harvest was over, some tight low-pressure systems moved very slowly over England and then got stuck over the Channel, spinning off wheels of rain-bearing stationery fronts. During the first 11 days of November, it rained and rained, and again at the end of the month, bringing twice the average precipitation for November: 204 mm against the average 106.

December, with 92 mm, and January, with 78 mm, were par for the season and kept the water tables nicely topped up. From then on, apart from normal rainfall in March and a very wet June (when it came a bit too late - 2 months later than last year), we were to experience continuous drought all through the rest of the vineyard year.

November was unusually warm, 2.9 °C above normal, and the yellow leaves stayed stuck to the vines well into December, a month which started off warm, but then which careered into a sudden cold snap from 13 to 21 December. On the 17th, when Eastern Europe was at -30 °C, we hit a 'mere' -7 °C, still very chilly by Bordeaux standards. The prevailing winds had changed from the warm southerlies of November to very cold continental easterlies and northerlies for December, January and February, all three months returning average temperatures well below the average, so that this became the coldest January since 1992 and Aquitaine felt like eastern Germany. On 6 January, snow fell, an unusual occurrence in Bordeaux, and it stayed on the ground for a full week (however, not quite as extreme as in Britain). Over the whole winter, we had 40 days of freezing temperatures as compared with the average 22, more than enough to ensure that the vines remained dormant and a good antidote to any bugs that might have been having any malicious intentions.

### **Spring 2010 and the budding**

With winter receding, we started to go into an even more irregular weather pattern, certainly a product of the nascent La Niña system, which elsewhere would culminate later in the year in the disastrous crop failures and mine floodings in the southern hemisphere and the devastating hurricanes in NE Australia. Meanwhile, in France, some equally erratic things were starting to happen. On 28 February, a freak hurricane Xynthia slammed into the coast just north of Bordeaux, claiming 59 lives in the Vendée. There followed an uncanny freezing calm that descended on Bordeaux for the first two weeks of March, as the Atlantic high-pressure systems, so typical of good Bordeaux summers but not winters, ballooned over the whole of Europe, sucking Arctic air down through Scandinavia. There were 10 frosts over this period: it was a very unusually long period of frost so late in the winter, the likes of which we had only been seen before in March 1971. It similarly was responsible for the season's lateness which would never be caught up.

It ended rapidly on 17 March with a return of those low-pressure systems over the Channel, bringing warmer, damper and then rainier conditions up to 4 April. A full 63 mm of March's 68 mm of rain fell now. These should have been perfect conditions for activating a strong budding. But it had been just a bit too cold, and continued quite cool well into April. We saw a few swellings trying to push through the dry wood before the end of March showers, but it was only when this damp, cool period ended and the warmth accelerated that the budding could really get under way. Most of the bud break was to happen therefore mid April, between 4-8 days late, and quite spun-out (although less so than last year). However much everyone realises that the flowering rather than the budding dates determine the earliness or lateness of the rest of the vineyard year, there were some concerns that we really were getting a little too late. In addition, April and May continued in the same irregular vein as March, both months starting showery and cool, then crescendoing into unusual heat before dropping back cool again. It was at this time that the vine started to do what it was going to do all year: produce short periods of intensive growth, interspersed by long periods of consolidation, totally different from its progressive development of the previous year.

Most buds had burst by mid April, and by the end of the month, the right bank and the warmer gravel soils had good growth, with shoots of 25 cm or so, whilst the left bank and cooler central area vineyards were still a sea of little flecks of pale green, looking like an impressionist landscape, barely out to two leaves. Such disparity was very noticeable and we were still quite late but nevertheless the mood was positive. The mid-April and mid-May night-time temperatures were very low but there had been no sign of spring frost; there was absolutely no pressure from disease, most properties still only on their 2nd spraying as late as end May; and the *sortie* was well-set and plentiful so that you could now see a good number of regularly spaced and healthy-looking bunches.

### **Early summer 2010, and the flowering**

With the drought continuing through May, it was now time for the vines to flower, and after such yo-yo conditions of April and the persistent drought continuing throughout May, the prospects were not perfect. The vine seemed not only thirsty but also confused by such changeable conditions. From 21 May, egged on by sudden heat, it tried hard to flower, and in many cases succeeded, especially for the Merlots and Sauvignons and then the scorching weekend of 5 June brought on a further bout of very rapid flowering of both Merlots and Cabs. It all started to look as though it would be OK after all. But then suddenly on Sunday 6 May, night temperatures spiked back down to a horrible 10 °C and, as from Monday morning, a jumble of weak stationary fronts brought a series of cool nights and grey, showery days. Many flowers of this period ended up infertile (*coulure* or shatter), whilst those bunches that we had previously thought had set successfully, especially the older Merlots, now ceased to develop and became *millerands* (aborted).

There seemed to be no particular geographical reason for successful or unsuccessful flowering. Both banks, all central and outlying areas got hit indiscriminately. It was more a question of each flower's individual evolution at certain precise moments such as that Sunday night cold snap or during certain phases of the previous yo-yo conditions. But as usual, it was the Merlots rather than the Cabs that were hit. This event became a big factor in the reduced yield of the vintage and of any disparity of potential quality at the end.

On a more positive note, the lateness had been partially caught up and we were now about on the same schedule as 2009: late but not seriously late. Secondly, there was excellent air circulation among the bunches - especially the *millerand* ones - all already looking unusually big and long, probably due to rapid growth from the hot, damp week immediately before the flowering. This would make for a much safer situation if the weather turned damp. Thirdly, the big rainfall of mid June (91 mm - the average for the whole month being 63 mm) had reinvigorated the soils. We would have preferred it earlier, as in April the previous year, but were happy with what we got, as this was to be virtually the final precipitation of the vineyard year. It was the most defining moment of the vintage: without it, the vines would have totally shut down during the long summer drought that was to come.

## High summer

With the June rains out of the way, 2010's mid-season turbulence started to steady in Bordeaux and from 20 June right through the rest of the summer, the Azores high-pressure system brought its permanently hot north-westerly air flows into the region, protecting it from the series of depressions that continued to slam through the British Isles and northern Europe. Bordeaux was thus shielded from the worsening turbulence of world weather that drowned thousands in the floods in Pakistan and China, that produced the violent heatwaves in the US and that made the California 'May gray' and 'June gloom' persist into July and August.

The end of June spike of heat was impressive, with daytime temperatures suddenly up at 28.1 °C for those final 10 days, compared with an average of 23.5 °C. This provoked violently fast growth of the vine's hitherto unprolific foliage, necessitating a more urgent *levage* (lifting the foliage onto the wires) and more *écimage* (topping) than usual.

The heat and, above all, the drought continued all through July and August, which between them registered 534 sun hours, two hours more than for 2009's exceptional summer and 50 hours above the average. During these two months, there were only 11 days when it rained at all, and then only very slightly, totalling just 32 mm against an average of 114 mm. So this really was total drought - more so even than in 2005, when the odd thunderstorm had alleviated the situation and a little more so than in 2009 with its occasional shower or two.

As in 2009, however, the heat was never excessive, apart from the occasional spike of 35+ °C, and it came in from the moister ocean rather than from the drier east. There were 44 days over 25 °C, pretty close to the 30-year norm of 38.1 days. There were 17 days over 30 °C (the norm is 12.7 days), but only three days over 35 °C, so we were far from the brutal scorching conditions of 2003, 1990 and that all time record 1921.

The main difference from 2009 was that July was the hotter month of the two, with average temperatures at 22.4 °C against the norm of 20.8 °C, whereas August was considerably cooler: 20.8 °C against a norm of 20.9 °C. In 2009, it had been the other way round, with the temperatures rising progressively during July and August, accounting for a much more gradual ripening. In 2010, with the greater heat coming earlier, the sugar build-up was accelerated a bit prematurely and, as in 1998, seemed to trap some of the more acidic elements into the concentration process. Then the cooler August, and especially the very cool nights of mid-August, often down to 10-11 °C, preserved that freshness of acidity as the grapes moved towards total ripeness. Combined with the shrinking effect of the drought on the berries (they often lost 30% of their weight through dehydration at this time), this element of acidity got exaggerated and went on to become a salient feature of the 2010 vintage's style of fresh and often aggressive tannins for the reds and enhanced aromatics for the whites.

The *véraison* (colour change) was noted 4-12 August, the drought conditions encouraging the vine temporarily to abandon its foliage and devote all its attention to its fruit. So the cycle caught up its lateness a little, now down to about four days later than the norm, further suggesting, in spite of the terrific build-up of sugars, that this hot, dry year would also be late and therefore bear little resemblance to similarly dry but very early harvests such as 1990 or 2003.

During the summer, the usual vineyard work continued, but with less crop-thinning than last year. The first green harvest of late June / early July was generally lighter than usual, since a lot of the Merlot had already been lost to coulure and millerandage, and the spacing of the grapes had been naturally more satisfactory anyway. The second culling, at the *véraison*, when any laggard bunches and grapes are weeded out, was also quite light, except for some of the millerand bunches.

There was little need for pest control. Oidium and grey rot were at an all-time low and it was so dry that few felt the need for anti-botrytis treatments. The cochylis and eudemis moths were a bit of a problem, especially the third generation at the end of August, but nowadays these are treated more and more by sexual confusion than by spraying. This was becoming an easy year for those properties that were on their final qualifying year to qualify for organic certification.

## September-October and the harvest

Coming off such a dry period, with lawns yellow and roadsides like savannah, it was amazing to see the vines such a beautiful dark green, like Las Vegas golf courses, showing no signs of stress - apart from recently planted vines, many of which had keeled over, and occasionally others on lighter soils or exposed at the end of the rows whose leaves had started to shrivel and bunches to raisin.

The summer had been arid but the vines had never really shut down, certainly largely because the heat had been neither too dry nor too extreme. It was just a question of lack of rainfall: almost nothing since mid June. But at this time, many were worried about the effect of such drought if it were to continue into the autumn.

The forecast for 6-9 September was for the remains of hurricanes Danielle, Earl and Fiona to bring some alleviating rain, but they all veered off to the north, leaving Bordeaux with a few small showers, gratefully received and very invigorating, but of use only for the dry white harvest which had started on 31 August for the earliest Pessac-Léognan estates, on Monday 6 August for the Entre-Deux-Mers Sauvignons and on 13 September for most Sémillons. Apart from these little useful showers, the dry white harvest was undertaken in totally dry and often hot conditions, generally up until 24 September. It is a tribute to the cool nights of August that, unlike the previous year, these hot, dry conditions would make these white wines as fresh as they would be rich.

The traditional equinox disturbance had been very light. This year, it was rather the spring tides of 12 September that influenced the weather. The locals had said that if there was to be high pressure at the high tides, the fine weather would stay... and they were right: it did.

Now it was time to prepare for the red harvest. Back in August, they had mostly been preparing for a 22 September start, but, as the drought wore on and the tannins evolved so slowly, most pushed the programme back by a week. The feeling mid month was that, although the sugar readings were already at almost 14° for the Merlots and 13° for the Cabs, this was not the kind of vintage that could be harvested at will as in 2005 or 2009. Unlike both these vintages, there had just been too many difficulties: lateness of the harvest, coulure and millerandage at flowering, straggly bunches, irregular véraison, high acidities, stressed vines. In addition, just before the harvest, the tannin levels were getting out of control (often 50-70% more than 2009) and the total acidities very high (often at 4.5 g/l as opposed to 3.5 g/l last year).

As usual, the traditionally earlier-ripening vineyards of Pomerol and Pessac-Léognan now started picking: around the 22nd or 24th, during a second period of very light refreshing showers, and the rest during the much cooler week of the 27th. The musts came in black and dense, very sweet, and bursting with tannin. For the rest, it was an à la carte harvest that was generally delayed another week.

With these Merlots just about finished and the superb conditions continuing for the St-Émilion and Médoc Merlots that were just starting, September finished almost totally dry with just 23.8 mm of precipitation versus a norm of 90.3 mm, and also hugely sunny with 243 sun hours versus a norm of 182. The thunderstorms of the 7th and 8th were to be the only rainfall of the year to produce precipitation irregularly and the differences were significant: only 8 mm on Pessac-Léognan and the mid and south Médoc, but up to 30 mm on northern Médoc, St-Estèphe, Fronsac, parts of St-Émilion and southern Graves and Sauternes.

The forecast had always been for a lot of rain over the first 10 days of October. Bordeaux was supposed to be about to bear the brunt of the very deep depressions swirling across the North Atlantic, the remnants of several Caribbean tropical storms. In the end, the only really rainy day was Monday 4 October, with between 20 and 30 mm in all regions of Bordeaux, followed by 10 mm on the 10th. Apart from these two days, the weather was overcast but not wet. Hurricane Otto, predicted as the villain of the piece, decided to veer away from the usual clockwise track and to wander aimlessly about in the mid Atlantic, where it ended up dying out, close to the Spanish coast of all places, actually pushing the high-pressure system towards Bordeaux. We should build a monument in the Place des Quinconces for Otto.

This was the final clincher for the second half of the harvest. The vines were now refreshed from these two days of rain and, in very warm temperatures (the first 10 days of October were a full 5 °C over the norm), could function once more. After a few days, and the Merlots safely in, a cool, drying easterly air current blew into Bordeaux and, as in 1986, these fine, cold, dry days allowed the Cabernets to re-concentrate and to be harvested in the best possible conditions. The cold nights - on the 18th down to freezing - totally prevented any rot risk, and the fine cool days allowed the final touches to be put on the Cabs. Most finished by mid month, and when the rains returned on the 23rd, it was all safely in. These three weeks of October had gone from very warm to very cold but above all, the month finished with an incredible 180 hours of sun hours (the norm is 134).

The IPTs (total tannin counts) of the 2010 red bordeaux just harvested were absolutely enormous. But, unlike the gentler, more progressively evolved, tannins of 2009, these tannins were the result of hydric stress, of the dehydration of the juice that left more thick, hard skins than juice. There were also some raisined grapes among

them So there was real potential for harshness and everyone had to be very careful with their extraction. Anyway, extraction came so quickly that it was quite clear from the start that there simply was no need to work the skins too hard. Most eliminated the first and last *remontages* (pumpings-over), reduced the daily number from five to three, didn't do *délestages* (whole-tank wooshing), reduced any *pigeage* (cap-plunging), and most labs encouraged a 10% reduction in fermentation temperatures. Bitterness was never a problem: generally the grapes had only two pips each, the average being 3.5. The problem was quite simply hyper-tannin. The fermentations went much slower than last year, yet there was generally very good control of brett and volatile acidity - which is always dangerous with so much alcohol around.

The malolactic fermentations were generally very difficult to get started and, once started, to finish, in spite of, or maybe also because of, the high total acidity. Many said the acidities were more tartaric than malic. Some of the malos finished only in early March. The Burgundians can be proud of us.

One of the challenges of this vintage was the elimination of *millerand* grapes (see [Blatch on Bordeaux 2010 - the vines](#) for more on this). Often the harvesting machines or the de-stalkers would not do this properly, and in 2010 those who are equipped with vibrating sorting tables really won out. Manually, it was an extremely laborious process and, especially lower down the scale, not everyone was prepared to do it, so ended up with a touch of herbaceousness in the wine. Several estates now have electronic optical sorting capability (*tri optique*), and they are pleased they had it, although murmurs can be heard around Bordeaux, especially from the old guard, saying that this just adds to the boring uniformisation of modern claret.

## 2010 reds

These are solid wines and happily so - at current prices, we have to provide maximum bang for the buck! High sugars once again produced highly alcoholic wines, mostly slightly less potent than 2009 but sometimes in parts of the right bank and in most of Pessac-Léognan, even more. But if they have all the power of the 2009s, they have nothing of the opulence and thickness of the 2009s. They are much more rugged, have an incredibly strong tannic surge and there is more acidity in those tannins. Tasting them in any number is a challenging exercise, especially as the wines were much later developers and some are only just through their malolactic.

Distinguishing between the different forms of the enormous tannins is a detailed and tiring exercise this year and, in addition, allowance has to be made for the press wines which are often not yet incorporated in the blend. (Because extraction was so light, the press wines are usually excellent and will be used quite extensively.) The extra difficulty is that the cult of reductive *élevage* continues, mainly on the right bank, and little information is given about which of the samples come from unracked barrels and which from racked ones - often very recently - maybe for fear of complicating each year's conveniently simplified hierarchy of the wines. Why rock the boat? 'Don't ask, don't tell!'

The word going round is that these will be long-lasting wines, making the 2009s look like a softer, more rapidly evolving version. The jury is out on this, but it could be that nothing is farther from the truth: Bordeaux often has an initial preference for the harder, more traditional vintage. The same was said about the 1983s versus the 1982s at the start. So why should it be any different this time? And why should the initially more strongly tannic vintage be necessarily the longer lasting anyway? After all these are monster tannins that may never settle down, or maybe they will? Or maybe they will continue harsh all their lives?

Other great pairs in Bordeaux's history also seem to always have one softer and the other harder, but in the end the softer ones have about the same longevity as the harder ones: 1995-1996, the first drought-driven then softened by late-season rain, the second cooler and more tannic; 1985-1986, the first another drought vintage softened by late rain, the second a classic vintage of Cabernet re-concentration in October; the deep, mellow, soft-tasting 1929s preceded by the similarly rich but very tannic 1928s (so I am told); the soft and ripe-tasting 1900s coming hot on the heels of the just-as-generous but harder 1899s; and the 1869-1870s, equally concentrated but the first more balanced and softer, the second densely tannic and slow developing...

The strong nature of these 2010s would seem to point to a similarity to 2000 or 2005. Yet this similarly dry, hot year had a better first half, in spite of all its problems, than the 2000s, for which the sun only really started shining from mid July. The comparison to 2005 holds better, with its more similar drought conditions, the same number of sun hours in July and the same high but not excessive maximum temperatures in August-September. But 2010 was a drier year still than 2005 with 40% less rain in July-August, with higher maximum daytime temperatures in July but considerably lower ones in October and many more sun hours during the re-concentration period in September-October. All of this meant that the 2010s have more of everything than the similarly-styled 2005s. Their sugar concentration is greater, their tannins are far higher and seem to have more acidity in them, with more strictness of structure for both Cabernets and Merlots, and the whites have a more nervous kind of power and the Sauternes a more vibrant and aromatic style.

In terms of individual vintages, if, by its velvety texture, 2009 has a lot in common with 1982, 1947 or 1929, then

2010, with its strong tannins, is more in the vein of 2005, 2000, 1986, 1949 and 1945, but with more sheer alcohol than all of these.

### **Merlot? / Cabernet? Left bank? / Right bank?**

Cabernets Sauvignon and Franc are quite clearly a major success. In some cases, in spite of their high alcohol levels (generally between 13 and 14°), they may not all have achieved the total ripeness of last year before the wintery nights of mid October were upon them and there are some with a little - not disagreeable - marmalade touch to the tannins. But generally they were absolutely ripe, having been picked further away from the early October rainfall and taking full advantage of the second drying concentration period of mid October. They are nicely aromatic but, above all, if not over-tannic, have a firm, tensile, strong structure of great breed.

The Merlots are once again very rich, in some cases as alcoholic or even more so than 2009, sometimes over 15% and mostly over 14%. This is tough to explain, as they were more handicapped than the Cabs by poor flowering in June and by becoming ripe close to or during the October showers. Maybe part of the explanation is to be found in their looser, less populous bunches that allowed the vine's vigour to be channelled into fewer grapes. More importantly, most pre-harvesting grape analyses showed that they dehydrated more than the Cabs, often losing 30% of their weight over the summer versus the Cabs' 10%. And finally, the Merlots are usually grown on the denser limestone or clay soils, which were precisely those that retained the most moisture during the drought, thus allowing better functioning of the vine during the dog days of summer. Whatever the reasons, the sheer alcoholic power of the Merlots puts them closer in style to 2009 than the Cabs.

### **2010 dry whites**

This is clearly going to be a tremendous vintage for whites. They are less fat but just as alcoholic as those other dry vintages 2005 and 2009. Yet they are more aromatic and vibrant, as bright and fresh as the 2008s but with all the weight of the 2005s and 2009s. The Sauvignons are especially aromatic, some to the point of a Kiwi gooseberry kind of floweriness. The Sémillons too are very concentrated and surprisingly aromatic (more in the grapefruit range of flavours), even more so when grown on the more water-retentive clay or limestone soils.

The cool nights of August trapped acidity and freshness of flavour into the grapes as they were approaching full ripeness. Then, just as most were preparing to harvest, there were those few early September days of moisture that re-awoke the vines for the final push and, by 20 September, most had finished, under the most ideal conditions possible, an unhurried and relaxed harvest. The vintage was not marred by any frost, as in 2008, or by any hailstorms, as in 2009, so there was more produce to select from, and the result is that they seem finer-tuned.

### **Yields**

After the budding, there was a natural excess of bunches, stemming from the perfect *aoûtement* of the previous year's wood, which is where the embryos proliferate if the conditions are favourable then. But after the bud-burst had confirmed this large potential crop, from then on, it gradually got whittled away, first by a difficult flowering resulting in coulure and millerandage, very heavy in parts; then by an uneven fruit set; then by weight loss in the grapes, and by the June-July green harvesting that was calculated for normal-sized grapes, before it was known that they would dehydrate by as much as 30%; and finally by a very strict final selection.

All this meant that the harvest often went from a potential 50-55 hl/ha right down to a final 30 or 40 hl/ha during the vineyard year. Very generally, top estates, which go to great lengths to weed out everything that is slightly imperfect, have produced between 10 and 30% less than last year, while lesser estates and many generics are about the same. Sauternes is the odd man out here, having been blessed with both excellent wines and a large harvest, most ending up with a total production, including second wine, on the maximum yield of 25 hl/ha. So we may be able to maintain primeur allocations of Sauternes this year, but certainly not quite the same amount of reds.

### **2010 Sauternes**

Less dense and less opulent than their monumental predecessor, these 2010 Sauternes and Barsacs make up for that by being the prettiest vintage of all time, with lovely, floral, uniformly pure and totally fresh-styled wines that are all the same beautifully lush and sweet.

As in 2009, and also 2005, the summer drought produced an exceptional build-up of sweetness in the grapes, giving the concentration a similar head-start. But this time September remained almost totally dry, so the skins

remained hopelessly thick and hard and it took a long time for the botrytis to do anything with them. So the similarity to those two vintages ended here, the 2005 and 2009 having botrytised fast and massively early in October, the 2010s, with half the September precipitation of 2009, which was already half that of 2005, getting spread out over a full seven-week period with the bulk of the best of it late rather than early in October.

So there they were mid September looking at lovely golden, rich grapes, without an ounce of bad rot to be seen, but no noble rot either. It was then that the showers of 6-9 September loosened things up a bit, and were followed by a crescendo of heat up to 30 °C on the 15th which brought on some isolated patches of full botrytis and also some excellent shrivel. So very slowly a small and laborious first picking was generally undertaken as from the 15th and became generalised from the 28th. These first pickings produced a very small quantity of concentrated musts of up to 24% potential alcohol, with a clean, incisive apple/citric character.

By the end of September, the botrytis had virtually dried up again, and many stopped harvesting completely. The showers of the 3rd, and the 30 mm of rain on 4th October, followed by a succession of very warm days up to 12th, produced a sudden onrush of widespread botrytis, but the moist oceanic air flow prevented it from concentrating properly and a lot of it stuck at *pourri plein* without being able to concentrate properly to the optimum *rôti* stage. Some managed to do a second and third picking by carefully selecting out small quantities of individual *rôti* among the *pourri plein* from about the 8th to about the 17th but there was not much of it and again, it was a very laborious process.

This was not a particularly happy time for the Sauternais, who were now well into their fourth week of picking, with not that much to show for it. The *pourri plein* was mostly already over 20% and some was picked at this time, more out of impatience than anything else.

Then suddenly, it all flipped to *rôti*. The wind had gone round to the east on the 12th, producing the same drying effect as for the final ripening of the reds. At last, for those who had had the patience to wait, the second half of the month provided the best of the crop, and also the most volume, usually around 80% of the total. The musts came in as fresh and pure as the first ones, but now with much more richness and the added complexity of aromas that can only come from such full botrytis.

Many finished after this, picking a little wider to reduce the sweetness a bit, but quite a few continued on into November, picking right up to the 4th and even, for one or two, to the 6th. These were not always the best pickings. The quite heavy rainfall of 23-24 October often fell on botrytis that was too old and tired and, with a few exceptions, there was a drop in complexity as well as in sweetness and acidity, especially after the further showers of 29th.

The wines are still in their separate lots, but generally the hallmark of the vintage, after the opulence of 2009, is one of grace and charm, less concentrated, less persistent but immensely pure and fine, generally with a much more delicate balance of barely 14% alcohol and 120-135 g/l residual sugar (but there are a couple at 160-165 g/l, as in 2009) and above all with a refreshing acidity from the cool summer nights and also from the often freezing nights of later October.

They seem to combine very neatly features of all the last three vintages: the complexity (without the absolute power) of 2009, the spiciness (without the frost devastation) of 2008 and the absolute purity of 2007. This vintage is probably capable of long ageing but, as we wait all those years for the massive 2005s and 2009s to be ready, will provide greater earlier enjoyment while still all fresh and primary.

## Conclusion

So ended, for the second year running, an extreme vintage. Exceptional pairs of seasons always seem to coincide with very turbulent global meteorological conditions. In 2010, globally, the weather went crazy. The re-assurer Munich Re had to deal with 950 natural catastrophes, as compared with the 30-year average of 615. They caused 295,000 deaths and 97 billion euros of damage... and the Australian floods are not yet in the figures, nor any earthquakes or tsunamis.

Bordeaux was no exception. It was a violent vineyard year that tested the vine's resistance to chaotic conditions: during its grape formation, to extreme drought during ripening and to a high variation of hot and cold temperatures at the end - totally the opposite of the previous year's just as excessive but very regular cycle.

Bordeaux's 2010 is a vintage born of extremes but the extremes went the right way. They could have gone the other way. Those 1000-km-wide anomalies in the American summer were often down to 200 km by the time they reached Europe. Maybe the butterfly effect exists - but for Bordeaux, in reverse... The bad summer and autumn weather was never far away: and it would have taken only a slightly southward track in a transatlantic depression system to wreck the whole scenario (as in 1976). While Bordeaux was baking, northern Europe was under water. It had been a very close call... or maybe it's just that someone up there still likes us...