

Preliminary 2016 Bordeaux vintage report

A year of two long extremes : totally wet for the first half then totally dry for the second. But first, we start with a third one :

An exceptionally warm and dry November & December...

Winter arrived under unusually clement skies. November 2015 was warm, dry and sunny, then December broke all the 100-year records of heat and registered a rainfall deficit of 120mm. According to the meteorologists, this was one of the effects of the strongest El Nino ever, and there would be more, they said, during the expected transition into an equally strong La Nina. They were to be right : the year would indeed be extreme, in two more very long periods, one wet the other dry. Right from the start of the New Year, we would pass rapidly into six months of incessant rains and storms, after which, at the end of June, we would suddenly switch once more into an equally long period of record drought. The story of the vintage is that of the impact on the vines of these two contrary and extreme long phases and the decisions taken along the way by those who had to deal with them.

...turns into a totally wet New Year

For the whole of the first three months of the year, an unending series of depressions came through the region from the Atlantic, bearing names as unusual as the weather they brought : Quirina, Ruzica, Ulrika. They produced impressive volumes of rain, above all in January with its 233mm, not seen in the region since January 1920. At the same time, the temperatures remained high : +2°C above the average. Pruning had to wait until later, sometimes delayed even more by those who were now beginning to fear frost on the **buds**, a few swellings having been noticed as soon as early March. If it had not been for the cooling effect of the water-saturated ground and for the few days of cold air at the beginning of the month, we would have had an immediate and dangerous bud-burst right then and there. In the end, and most fortunately, we observed it a good three weeks later, as from 20th March, most of it happening quickly after the very warm weekend of 26-27th March. The vineyard had gone from an advance of three to « only » one week.

...continuing very wet and stormy into spring and early summer

April and May threw some very chaotic weather at Bordeaux, continually alternating from cold to warm to cold again and bringing frequent showers. This made the vine grow very slowly and by the end of April, the shoots were hardly at 20 cm, thus losing all their advance. With such stuck growth, it was a harrowing time and allusions began to be made to 2013. But such a comparison did not take into account one essential difference : the uniformity of the shoots. All the buds had burst more or less together and now, when you looked down the rows, they were all at the same height. This is quite exceptional. Normally, such a slow-down produces irregular growth and even yellowing of the foliage, but now this was not at all the case, the vine remaining splendidly and vividly green. It was generally agreed afterwards that the excessive amount of water in the soil had loaded it with a goodly dose of nitrogen nourishment.

Frost was never such a problem in Bordeaux as elsewhere in France. There were a few isolated problems in the lower-lying vineyards of Graves, Sauternes and the Right Bank on the nights of 7th, 17th and 28th April but the limited damage was considered at the time to be no more than a « natural crop-thinning », for the « sortie » had been very generous. In addition, such incidents were nothing compared to the horrendous frosts of 26th-27th April in Burgundy and the Loire. In Bordeaux, the thermometer went (very slightly) below zero only seven times in the whole season.

May became as chaotic as April, except that it was much warmer and the swings were more violent, with numerous severe storms, some bringing hail, especially on certain sectors of the Entre-Deux-Mers. Once again, Bordeaux went comparatively unscathed compared to Chablis, Burgundy,

the Languedoc and Cognac. Solidarity amongst vigneronns allowed for no rejoicing, but the fact was that Bordeaux was just about the only region in France to be spared these two catastrophes.

Now the embryo bunches were ready to **flower**. Continuous rain and temperature fluctuations are not exactly ideal conditions for preparing the vine to flower effectively and once more there was talk of 2013. The very first flowers could be observed on the Right Bank during the gusty storms of the final days of May and the final flowers during the cool of mid-June. We feared the worst. But we hadn't taken into account the intermediate period of 2nd - 11th June when, except for a big shower on the night of 6th, the weather remained fine, with daytime temperatures stable enough between 21 and 28° and night-time temperatures very stable at 15°. It was this « magic window » that accounted for 80% of Bordeaux's rapid and regular flowering, at the same time effectively concluding much of the flowering that had started in less perfect conditions at the end of May. The later ones, flowering after 12th June in rainy and cold conditions, did less well, ending in a fair amount of coulure, millerandage and irregularity.

...then into a record drought for the summer

The vintage was all beginning to come together and the spectre of 2013 was fading out of the picture. Things were to get even better still : as soon as all the flowering was over, we were suddenly catapulted in the blink of an eye into high summer. The turnaround happened in one single night, that of 20th June : it suddenly stopped raining, the sun came out and the temperature went from 19 to 33° in 24 hours. The beaches, hitherto deserted, were invaded by the Bordelais and in the vineyards, sou'westers were traded for T-shirts. As usual, this turnaround was caused by a sudden increase in atmospheric pressure, but it also happened to coincide with the rapid transition out in the Pacific Ocean from El Nino to La Nina, and over in the UK from EEC to Brexit... Nobody could know it at the time but we were embarking on a four month period of absolute drought which would continue virtually unabated right through the harvest.

The previous months had been rather depressing : the constant battle against mildew, the waterlogged soil that prevented the tractors from working properly ; just rain and grey skies every day. But gradually, as the fine, dry weather set in, the mood now began to change. It started to become apparent that all the tribulations of the year's first half were not as negative as they had appeared. In fact, amidst all the understandable but rather unnecessary pessimism, there were quite a few positives :

–Huge reserves of water had been accumulated in the subsoil, which would come in very useful if this dry weather were to continue....which of course it did.

–The frost and hail damage that had sorely afflicted so many French vineyards had largely been avoided in Bordeaux and, barring some last-minute catastrophe, the harvest was starting to look sizeable.

–The risk of mildew had stressed everyone for many weeks, but in the end, it had mostly been contained by early treatments by those who had correctly anticipated it. Others got overtaken by it, and it ended up severely reducing their crop, sometimes to zero. Similar early reactions had been necessary to overcome the other big 2016 pest : the grape worm, inflicted by two very active generations of the cochylis and eudemis moth, so active that the sexual confusion tags on the wires had trouble controlling it ; and there would be a third particularly virulent generation in the autumn.

–Even more importantly, apart from a few cases of coulure and millerandage on some of the later-developing vineyards, the flowering had happened quickly and efficiently and we could start to plan for a nicely regular harvest of whites early September and reds early October. This regularity of flowering was always the most important of much missed Denis Dubourdieu's four prerequisites for a great vintage.

–June had lost us the week's advance, but we were still on time.

–And finally, had we not experienced exactly the same turnaround at exactly the same time, end of June, in 2000 and the winest had turned out not too shabby ?

In order to give maximum aeration to the vines during the damp conditions of June, the first de-leafing had been made, on the east side, a little earlier than usual, immediately after the flowering. No-one could know that the drought that had started in June would continue for many more long weeks, and some estates did a second de-leafing, as usual, on the west side, many of whom would later regret this when some exposed bunches became dessicated or burnt. This would be of no consequence for the quality of the vintage as such bunches would either drop off on their own or be eliminated at the sorting tables. It would just reduce their yield.

We were now going into a summer of such proportions of drought that we had no prior experience of its effects. We were sailing into the unknown. Between the end of the rains on 20th June and the « saviour » overnight rain of 13th September, a total of 85 days, Méridnac registered just 25 mm, less than 20% of normal. July was less extreme than August, so the build-up to total drought conditions was gradual, week-long dry periods being refreshed every 8-10 days, as in 1982, by a tiny night-time shower, just enough to keep the vine functioning correctly. Also, July was not that hot, ending up with a total of maximum temperatures of 27°2, very close to the norm. There were only four days over 30° and the days that went beyond that, especially the 19th at 38°5, which was very close to the record of 1990, were short-lived. As a result, the soil could retain a certain amount of humidity in this first month of drought and, when combined with temperatures and sun hours that were just about normal, the grape skins thickened regularly and early, making them better equipped for what was to follow in August.

As it turned out, with its tiny 11.3 mm of rainfall, August was in fact no drier than July but its sun hours were 26% above normal and its two long heat-waves (12th-16th, 22nd- 27th) were much more extreme. The vines on the lighter more filtering soils started to get blocked and the young vines, even when properly watered (which is allowed for young vines) were beginning to wither. In the end, it is amazing that the catastrophe predicted for such vines at this time never really materialised and very few actually ended up with yellow leaves or no leaves at all. They would go on, if vinified very light, to produce fine, fruit-driven wines that would be perfect for second cuvées.

It was now time for the « **véraison** ». We feared it would not go well, such was the vine's preoccupation with its own survival. But two small showers arrived just at the right time on 30th July and 4th August, bringing a total of only 16 mm but just enough to wake the vine up from its somnolence and to give it the energy it needed for this important function. Just as had happened for the flowering, we had an incredible bit of meteorological luck in a very short space of time, and could now look forward to great regularity of ripening that only further heat stress could render more variable : in the same way as 20%* of the flowering missed the sweet spot in June, so now the same percentage*, stressed by the drought, dragged out its **véraison** to the end of the month. In these two events are to be found the estimated 40%* of the Bordeaux crop that fell short of excellence. For the remaining 60%*, the heat and sun hours of August were totally beneficial for consolidating the grapes' ripening, with the added bonus of very wide day/night temperature differences, sometimes as much as double (35-36° daytime ; 17-18° night-time), contributing to the great aromatic potential and freshness we would notice later. * my estimates

...which continues into the autumn, relieved by just three showers

Still in a state of absolute drought, the period from 21st August to 13th September was as hot as it was dry, above 30° almost every day. It was in such conditions that the whites had to be picked, Haut-Brion starting its white **harvest** at 7 am on 1st September, followed a week later by the rest of the earlier Pessac-Léognans, then, during the whole of the remainder of the month, by the rest of

Bordeaux's dry whites, finishing on the cooler terroirs of the Entre Deux Mers on 30th.

On 13th September, the temperature suddenly plummeted and in the space of a single night, we went from summer to autumn, just as suddenly as we had gone from spring to summer on 20th June. From this moment on, in place of 30-35°, we would henceforth be at 20-25°, at last normal for the season. It became another important factor in the retention of freshness in the grapes. But of much more importance was the substantial rain of that same night, which produced 30-50 mm of precipitation across the whole of the Gironde. It rained all night long, steadily and continuously, penetrating rather than running off the parched soil, which seemed grateful to retain all that the sky gave it. In some areas, this welcome rain continued next morning and over the following few days in the form of little drizzly showers. It was the saving grace of the vintage, which, without it, would probably not have gone the distance. It was the third piece of luck to totally change the course of the vintage, after that of the flowering and that of the véraison. A good two weeks before the red harvest was due to start, it breathed new life into the vines, allowing them to put the finishing touches to the grapes' ripening and ensuring by the same token total absence of any vegetal pyrozenes. The volume and weight of the Merlot grapes increased rapidly, but without any splitting : thankyou July for making their skins so thick and elastic. For all the rest of September, it was cool but very fine, allowing for an unrushed and relaxed finish to the dry white harvest while waiting, in just the same relaxed way, for the Merlots to get fully ripe.

It rained again on 30th September. 10 to 20 mm fell everywhere, allowing the grape-skins to soften and their tannins to fine down. Both banks picked all their Merlots during the following week of 3rd-7th October. Although the weather was remaining fine, it was beginning to get really cold, above all the nights of 7th - 11th October at 4-7°C. For those Merlots still on the vine, it became a race between the slowing of the final ripening and the necessary softening of the skins. Up to the 15th, all the final Merlots were brought in, perfectly healthy, very black and looking lovely. For the first time, I was using them as table grapes... Then the first Cabernets started to be ready. The weekend of 15th-16th, the Cabernet harvest was at its maximum at a very relaxed pace when the wind suddenly went round to the south, then calmed completely, rendering the air very damp. The humidity level went swiftly up from 60-70% to 95-98% and stayed there for the rest of the month and so these last Cabernets suddenly had to be picked faster, at their extreme limit of total ripeness.

The year that had started so early thus ended late. The bunches came down the sorting tables in perfect condition : these sorting tables were hardly necessary this time for the elimination of rotten or laggard grapes ; only for the millerand and raisined ones and, as usual, any residue of vegetal matter. Once the harvest was in and crushed, the colour and the aromas were released immediately. There was no need to labour the extraction process beyond the first few days of fermentation, the order of the day being for very gentle and infrequent pumping-over and especially for great care with cap-plunging. There was general concern about compromising the vintage's velvety tannins with hardness from any grapes that had got blocked during the summer or with any bitterness from the year's very large proportion of pips. It was the opposite of 2015 when you could do whatever you liked whenever you liked during fermentation and maceration : this year, they needed to follow their own course, to be accompanied rather than managed.

Polymerisation of polyphenols / anthyocins / tannins having been more complete than last year, everything is softer and silkier and the fruit consequently appears riper and less aggressive. The reds are definitely more aromatic than the whites, where the Sauvignons, picked before the September shower could relieve them, got a little neutralised by the drought and the Sémillons became more vinous than fruit-driven, with hints of pear rather than the usual grapefruit. Alcohol levels are generally not as high as in recent years, except for certain parts of the Right Bank, Fronsac for example. Where Merlots were often at 15° last year, they were « only » at 14° this year, and the

Cabernets ended up mostly around 13°. It is said that the slowing of photosynthesis during the summer drought was the cause of this lesser sugar in the grapes. The acidities were thought to be low before the harvest, but after fermentation, became quite high for the whites and very satisfactory for the reds. Such unexpected acidity was apparently due to the accumulation of nitrogen in the vines during the rainy period, subsequently only partially reduced back again by the summer drought.

The Merlots just loved the long, dry summer and autumn and turned out very black, quite dense, occasionally even sumptuous, equal if not superior to 2010. The summer conditions clearly benefited the Merlots – except the younger vines or those on lighter soils, where they suffered more during the drought : these wines are much lighter but very succulent (provided they were vinified softly), just sometimes a little « cooked » as in 2003. As always the Cabernets coped with the situation very steadily and some will be truly great wines, especially on the top self-regulating terroirs of the Médoc and Graves. The remainder seem very fine too, in a more structured version of the velvety style of the 2012s. The Cabernet Francs seem a bit more variable, especially those planted on warm terroirs of fine gravel.

Yields

France produced 43.2 m hectolitres in 2016, down 10% from 2015, many regions having been ravaged by frost and hail. Bordeaux, however, was almost totally spared these problems and managed an increase of 7%. Most of the top estates seem to have produced a very satisfactory 45 to 55 ho/ha.

Sauternes

By September, after such a dry hot summer, Sauternes' grapes had got very ripe, but the continued drought prevented the botrytis from taking hold. The rain of 13th September changed all that, but not as much as expected and the first « tries » during the second half of September were consequently very small although of excellent fine-styled quality, especially when some beautifully raisined grapes were mixed in with them.

The vineyard then once again became too dry for further botrytis, until 30th September when it rained more heavily (40 mm) than on the rest of Bordeaux. This provoked a second generation of good botrytis and another « trie », this time of good size, but mainly restricted to Barsac and some earlier vineyards in Sauternes. On the remainder, under the influence of the cold nights of 7th-11th October, it took longer to develop from « pourri plein » stage to « rôti ». It needed the little shower of 10th and the humidity of the following days to get it to really advance into a « magic week » of fabulously concentrated botrytis from 17th to 25th October under radiant sunshine and cool easterly breezes. It was now that most estates picked the biggest and best part of their harvest. Great Sauternes years all seem to have such a week.

Thereafter, some small 3rd, 4th, up to 8th « tries » were picked, right up to the end of the month and occasionally well into November, during the afternoons after the morning mists had lifted,. They produced small volumes of musts that were just as concentrated but a little less vigorous.

The blends have not been done yet, but we can start to guess what they will be like: a bit lighter than the 2015s, less massive than the 2009s and, by their relatively low pH, less vivacious than the 2014s but, by the finesse and purity of their concentration, they will certainly qualify for a position amongst such vintages, rather in the same way as the very fine 1988s did amongst the fuller-styled 1989s and 1990s.

Bill Blatch, January 2017