



The 2009 vintage: typically continental weather conditions and majestic ripening!

Vines and Climate

The winter of 2009 was the way winters in Champagne used to be: crisp and dry, as cold as northerly latitudes should be, dominated by high pressure that kept temperatures 1.8°C below the seasonal average of the past 15 years. This return to classical winter weather promoted very even budbreak, with the vines emerging from dormancy much later than usual: 10 April for the Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, with the Meunier following on 16 April.

Spring was warm and wet but with marked variations in rainfall from one Champagne cru to another. Freak Atlantic weather systems wreaked havoc throughout the spring and early summer months (mid July), bringing thundery rain and unusually severe storms. Some areas recorded twice the average rainfall (most notably our Aÿ vineyards, on 3 July). Poor weather interfered with vine growth, leading to wide variations in the onset of flowering. The eastern half of the region enjoyed 'drier' weather (Côte des Blancs and Montagne de Reims areas, home to most of our own vineyards) and after a slow start the Chardonnay flowered on 11 June, followed by the Pinot Noir on the 14th and the Meunier on the 16th. Poor weather at this critical stage in vine development did however lead to abnormal fruit set among the Chardonnay vines, which for the second year in succession produced only moderate yields.

But the real 'scourge' of this year's harvest was downy mildew, flourishing in the warm and humid conditions that prevailed in this year's spring. Infestation spread like wildfire, causing serious damage to leaves and grape clusters in the wettest areas. Our biodynamic vineyards were particularly at risk, calling for extra vigilance on the part of winegrowers.

Late July marked a return of the high-pressure system seen earlier in the season – a welcome if unexpected change that bathed the entire Champagne region in hot summer sunshine until well after the harvest.

2009 Ripening and Harvest

August was hot and sunny, with virtually no rain until October, creating ideal conditions for the onset of ripening.

The combination of heat and drought created just enough water-stress to stop early vegetative growth and keep berry size small, favouring a truly exceptional rate of ripening.

Ripeness assessments based on pre-harvest sampling indicated an earlier harvest than in 2008 – despite the very late budbreak this year. In the event, the rate of ripening continued unabated until the harvest, which commenced a full week ahead of time.

Another advantage of the hot sunny weather was a perfectly healthy crop, with negligible incidence of Botrytis rot. Those cases that were identified were mainly due to grape-worm attack and posed no threat to grape quality or our pursuit of optimum ripeness.

That term - ‘optimum ripeness’ – means something different to every Champagne House. Here at Louis Roederer, what we are looking for is that critical moment when the grapes reach a peak of physiological, phenolic, aromatic and textbook ripeness.

It’s a subject on which we have been working for a long time. Our experience shows that, depending on the year, sugar content is not the only measure of ‘optimum ripeness’ but just one of a complex range of indicators that must be taken into account by the winegrower. Others are total acidity, pH value, malic acid and of course, flavor.

Ripeness assessment is an enormous task, requiring the detailed monitoring of every plot so as to identify the ‘right moment’ to pick the grapes in each case... The moment when the grapes have the taste, strength, energy and natural balance of their particular terroir... the ‘ROEDERER taste’!

In 2009, this usually meant delaying harvesting as long as possible, aiming for grapes with more than 11° potential alcohol, a malic acid content of 5-6 g/l, and a good concentration of fruit.

Picking therefore commenced on 10 September, starting with the Pinot Noir plantings in the Marne Valley and Chardonnay vines in the Côte des Blancs, followed on 15 September by Pinot Noir vines in the Montagne de Reims. This was five days ahead of the 2008 harvest date.

The average date of harvesting was 16 September for the Chardonnay and 18 September for the Pinot Noir, i.e. roughly 96 days after flowering and on a par with recent years (close to 95 days).

Yields from our house vineyards registered 10.9° potential alcohol, with total acidity of 6.9 g/l. Agronomic yield was 11,500 kg/ha, in an appellation limited to 9,700 kg/ha.

It is far too early to make any reliable comparisons with previous years, particularly given the special nature of the 2009 vintage. But going by the drought conditions in late summer, the perfect health of the grapes and the ‘targeted’ ripeness of the fruit, we can look forward to some lovely vintage wines to come... Naturally, we will do without malolactic fermentation this

year, so as to preserve all the freshness and natural balance of a harvest characterized by 'majestic' maturity.

Setting aside the promising results of our own vineyards, performance across the rest of the region was very mixed due to the unsettled spring weather. Some areas will have done very well, producing powerful, concentrated, vinous wines typical of vintage Champagne... Other, more densely planted vineyards, have suffered outbreaks of mildew at the expense of grape ripeness and concentration. But in every case, we can expect some excellent NV Brut. As for our vintage bottlings, we now look to the judgement of our ever-attentive tasters to confirm the results of our winegrowers' sterling efforts throughout this 2009 season. More about that in Spring 2010!

Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon
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