



A year of contrasts: Fragile, painstakingly-sorted Pinots; triumphant Chardonnay!

Vines and climate 2010

Winter was especially cold, marked by hard frosts that interfered with Pinot growth throughout the season. Freezing temperatures destroyed some of the vines and buds, leading to very uneven physiological development that had repercussions on flowering, yields and final maturity.

As a result, budburst occurred in the period 19-22 April, a good week later than the average for the past 10 growing seasons (11-16 April) but still fairly standard compared to the past 30 years in Champagne, which is after all the most northerly vineyard in France.

Spring and early summer was generally cool and dry, favouring excellent work in the vineyards with little incidence of disease except for oïdium in some of the Chardonnay plantings.

The vines flowered in the period 16-19 June, barely a week later than the average for the past ten years (11-13 June), though this year's floraison was especially hard to define due to the wide variations between sectors and even within individual plots. Uneven cluster development -large, shouldered bunches growing alongside much smaller ones- was probably a delayed symptom of winter frost damage.

By mid-July the vines were showing signs of water stress, but any worries about an impending drought were washed away in August (14-16), when three months' worth of summer rain fell in just three days. The long-awaited rains were enough to kick-start the ripening process -with disastrous results in some places where Pinot vines in clay-limestone terroirs absorbed so much water that the berries swelled to bursting. What was an extremely rare event for Champagne led to crop losses and early outbreaks of botrytis.

Ripeness and harvests 2010

The rate of ripening this year was as spectacular as in 2009 (a year that remains a benchmark for Champagne), despite frequent outbreaks of rain in late August/early September, with mild, wet, Atlantic conditions that should have slowed down ripening and saw botrytis run rampant among the Pinot plantings. More than ever this vintage, it was a race against time to bring in the grapes at peak ripeness before they spoiled on the vine.

Two weeks of harvesting, two very different sets of conditions.

Week One: all hands on deck!

Braced for catastrophe, pickers set to work on 13/9 in Aÿ, 14/9 in Avize and 15/9 in Verzenay. This was one of those very rare years when all three sectors were ripe for harvesting at the same time – speed was of the essence.

It was soon evident that everything would depend on serious sorting: eliminating any spoiled or poor-quality berries and retaining only the finest fruit. This meant hiring a lot more pickers and tracking their every move to make sure they dealt with every plot at the perfect moment. On average, more than 30% of Pinots berries were eliminated at the sorting stage - an unusually high proportion, but this was the price we had to pay for quality grapes.

Week Two: all smiles again as Champagne goes Continental

Halfway through harvesting, it was 'all change'. Northern weather brought sunny days and cold nights, with nocturnal temperatures of 2-5°C that acted like a natural refrigerator. In other words, textbook continental conditions: cold enough by night to prevent the grapes from spoiling, hot enough by day to promote ideal ripening. These new conditions were particularly welcome in the coldest areas where ripening is always a problem. Fruit from these plots reached the presses in good health, at levels of ripeness rarely achieved before.

The grapes being particularly fragile this year, rapid pressing was essential, with every batch of grapes kept separate. We also had to analyse a wider range of factors, to confirm the efficiency of sorting and adjust the rules as harvesting progressed.

In the end, the Chardonnay came out on top, with 11.2% natural alcohol and acidity of 7.2 g/l, followed closely by the Pinots with 10.9 % alcohol and 8.1g/l acidity – great balance and a testament to perfect ripening. Yields were good for the Chardonnay but at a record low for the Pinots due to intensive sorting.

So after months of battling against botrytis, will the quality of this years' Pinot Noir and Meunier have been worth it? All will be revealed in the course of the next few weeks.

Winter tastings should tell us more about this 2010 vintage, which is a year of contrasts if ever there was one. But if the Chardonnays show to best advantage, then we feel sure that our winemaking skills and mastery of blending will draw excellent results from the Pinots too.