



## **2011, an unprecedented year: The earliest harvests in the history of our Maison!**

### ***Vines and the weather in 2011 – a complicated year for wine-growers!***

2011 will be a year to be remembered for its back-to-front seasons. At first, the wine-growing year got off to a very typical start with a cold, harsh winter. December saw an average sub-zero temperature of -0.5 °C, compared to the previous ten-year average of +4.2 °C, making it a freezing cold winter! The recurring snow and rainfall during the winter also provided the ground with all the water it needed – this always augurs well for the wine-producing season to come.

From March onwards, the trend was reversed: a virtually summery climate settled over the Champagne region until the end of spring. This early heat caused impressive acceleration of growth and was accompanied by a marked lack of rain.

The vines were in full flower in May, 3 weeks ahead of the usual dates: May 24<sup>th</sup> for Chardonnay, May 25<sup>th</sup> for Pinot Noir and May 29<sup>th</sup> for Meunier. These unprecedented early dates already hinted at harvests in August.

The lack of water was already making an impact, with dry soil causing the vines to feel the first effects of drought in certain locations. The probability of a “very ripe” harvest was on the cards, backed up by medium-term weather forecasts predicting that the warm, dry weather would continue through to the end of July!

The secret of good wine-growing has often been “working with the weather”, so we prepared for this contingency, adjusting our vine-tending practices, using different tilling methods to limit competition and maintain soil moisture (so as to limit the effect of the drought on the vines as much as possible), and keeping the leaves in order to protect the grapes against the harsh summer sun.

Fortunately for the vines, with the month of June there came a change to more unsettled, cooler and rainy conditions; these lasted through until mid-August. Autumnal temperatures spread across our region throughout the summer, with alternating warm, cool, raining and stormy periods.

These “back-to-front” conditions slowed down the ripening process – which, in spite of the early development this year, began to take on a very “classical”, even “northern” pace.

In terms of parasite control, 2011 ranks among the great successes: the work carried out by our teams in the vineyards and a fast response on our part enabled the use of plant protection products to be kept to an absolute minimum. By choosing natural products whenever possible, we were able to achieve our objective of a very clean, healthy harvest, with recourse to very few artificial products.

### ***2011 harvests and ripeness: a careful watch on yield remains the key to success***

The rainy, stormy month of July, with prevailing west-south-westerly winds, disturbed the conditions at the onset of ripening. Significant differences in ripeness soon became apparent, perhaps due to the particularly cold weather in July, or else the result of the early drought before flowering.

The truth probably lies in a combination of these two phenomena, exacerbated, as always, by the rather high yield of certain plots: beyond a certain yield, the vines were late in the onset of flowering or reached this stage at very different times.

Ripening took place during the rather oceanic weather which characterised the summer of 2011, with cool, rainy days following on from almost suffocatingly hot ones – all of this accentuated by the long daylight hours of August.

It was to this chaotic environment that our wine-growers returned from their brief holidays in early August, just in time to adjust our growing techniques. While it had been a wise decision in the spring to protect the grapes against a hot summer, it was now becoming clear that in these unexpected weather conditions, the vines would need a boost to reach maturity. So our teams removed some of the leaves, thinning the cover and creating more space for some of the grape clusters, so that the air could circulate round the grapes and give them better exposure to the sun, enabling the ripening process to be completed.

Thanks to all the vine-tending work and moderate yields of around 12,000 kg/ha across the Louis Roederer vineyard (10,000 kg/ha for Pinots Noirs and 14,000 kg/ha for Chardonnays), the ripening process began in excellent conditions in early August for all three varieties.

It was amid these unprecedented, atypical conditions in terms of earliness that we met with all our heads of sector on August 17. This traditional meeting is an opportunity to carry out a full review of the progress of ripeness and hear all the observations from the terrain. Here's what we noted at that meeting:

- *Phenolic ripeness is extremely high, which is rare and unique at this stage: the Pinot noirs are high in anthocyanins and the seeds are already ripe. 2011 should therefore produce very colourful Pinot juices, ideal for rosé*
- *Total acidity and malic acid are below “usual” values. Total acidity is falling rapidly, twice as fast as usual (losing over 0.4 g/l/day compared to the usual value of 0.2 g/l/j). This unusual drop in acidity is due to the hot weather on certain days and probably also to dilution issues*

- *Tasting the grapes already reveals some fine, clear, fruity aromatic intensity*
- *The sugar concentration is rather low this year, probable confirmation of some dilution*
- *The vines' health is under perfect control for all varieties*
- *The plots are very diverse, with very big differences between certain plots; these differences are closely correlated with the yield*

These very precise findings – the result of thousands of observations, fruit tastings and other analysis – led us to abandon the traditional “sugar” reference in determining our harvesting dates. The harvesting path was also tightened up in order to take into account the big differences in yields between plots.

And so it was that picking began on August 22<sup>nd</sup> in Aÿ, August 23<sup>rd</sup> in Verzenay and August 24<sup>th</sup> in Avize, with the aim of the mid-point of harvest falling around August 28/29<sup>th</sup> and the end of the harvest planned for September 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup>, with a total harvesting period of 13 to 14 days. The average ripening period, between full flowering and the mid-point of the harvest, was therefore 96 days this year, compared to the ten-year average of between 92 and 94 days. This made for a traditional ripening period, in spite of it being such an early year!

As in every year, the trick for picking was to be able to “juggle” our teams around the different plots and sectors, allowing the ripening process to continue at its own pace, even during the harvesting period.

In the end, the three varieties have produced excellent results, with an average natural alcohol content of 10% for our vineyards, total acidity of 6.9 g/l, a pH value of 3.07 and malic acid concentration of less than 6 g/l. Fermentation is marked and clear, with very fine citrus and floral hints.

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2011 has nevertheless been a complicated year from a wine-growing point of view. We had to adapt to sometimes extreme and often unpredictable weather conditions, calling for changes of strategy right in the middle of the summer, and making proper yield control crucial. There was also the issue of deciding the right date for harvesting, with phenolic ripeness being reached despite somewhat low natural sugar levels. The wine-grower's tailored attentions will once again be a major differentiating factor, and excellent wines are sure to follow as a result.