



2012... An exceptional year that will go down in history!

Vineyards and the 2012 Climate: this year confirms the difficulties of vine-growing in the Champagne climate!

The year 2012 was a very difficult year in terms of wine-production:

- A cold winter: intense frosts until February (average temperature 0.8°C) after milder than usual months of December and January (December 6.5°C and January 5°C). This sudden, intense cold snap (as low as - 20°C in Reims) resulted in the loss of buds, especially in the older cordons at the Montagne de Reims and the Vallée de la Marne. This was one of the most severe cases of winter frost damage since 1994.
- A rainy, cool spring was marked by:
 - Strong frosts on 17/4 and 17/5, especially in the early sprouting vineyards of the Côte des Blancs and the Vallée de la Marne. We were hit hard due to the advanced stage of our vineyards (Grands Crus) and our vine-growing technique which also tends to favor advanced preparation (ploughing).
 - 2012 was the wettest spring since 1994 (270 mm of rainfall from April to June compared to a ten-year average of 150 mm) with a succession of rainy spells and storms. Consequently, we detected a high number of outbreaks of mildew (to be expected as a result of the rainfall) in conjunction with significant powdery mildew, which is rare. At this point, we observed early attacks of powdery mildew and mildew in some plots, especially those weakened by their recent conversion to bio-dynamics.
- A humid, cool summer in July but dry and hot in August:
 - As is often the case, the last two weeks of June and the first two weeks of July were crucial (this is the period when vines are at their most vulnerable) and, unfortunately, it was particularly wet. During that time, we counted over 23 incidents of secondary mildew contamination. Showers on 3rd and 4th July, followed by rainfall on 13th, 14th and 15th July, proved too much and caused severe attacks of Black Rot (mildew). Flowering occurred during these difficult climate conditions: 16th June for the Chardonnays, 19th June for the Pinots Noirs and 21st June for the Meuniers (one week later in comparison to the ten-year average), which resulted in a high level of coulure in the reds (failure to develop fruits) and major millerandage (under-developed fruits) in the Chardonnays.
 - Miraculously, the weather changed at the end of July, the months of August and September were dry with occasional high temperatures. This improvement at the end of the cycle saved the rest of the crop. Better still, it enabled us to reach record levels of maturity, thanks also the small harvest.



Maturity and the 2012 harvest: a low yield... but a record maturity!

Maturation took place under a beautiful and surprising serene blue sky, a significant contrast with the difficult period in the spring. The warm, dry continental influence which is so typical of Champagne set in just in time to save the harvest.

These weather conditions were highly beneficial for all the grape varieties and particularly the black grapes (Pinot Noir and Meunier) which thrive in this type of climate where the water resources dry out slowly and progressively. Maturity is reached progressively, the musts are concentrated due to the increasingly low moisture level and phenolic maturity progresses rapidly.

For the Chardonnay, marked by millerandage, maturation was a little more complicated, with an impressive difference between the sugar content and the aromatic maturity.

Thanks to these moderate to low yields of around 7.500 kg/ha over the entire Louis Roederer vineyard, the kinetics of maturation were established under excellent conditions in late August/early September on the 3 grape varieties.

Our traditional meeting to prepare harvesting took place quite late this year. The data was as follows:

1. *The phenolic maturity is one of the highest ever recorded: the Pinots Noirs have a high anthocyanin content and the seeds are already very ripe. 2012 should therefore give highly colored Pinot juices which are ideal for rosé.*
 - *The total acidity and malic acid are also very high. The lowering of acidity is very slow and moderate.*
 - *Tasting of the berries is already giving a lovely aromatic intensity on the Pinots Noirs, but the Chardonnays are still very vegetal and lack body.*
 - *The sugar content is progressing regularly and smoothly.*
 - *The grapes are exceptionally healthy with no signs of botrytis.*
 - *The heterogeneity of the parcels is high, with considerable variations between some of the parcels which are largely yield-related.*



These detailed findings are the result of thousands of tests, observations and berry-tastings which showed that there was “no urgent need for action”! Checking maturation emphasised a high heterogeneity in the parcels and also within each parcel. Since the grapes were healthy and the malic acid content was high, we decided to delay harvesting for as long as possible and to spread it out by reducing the teams of pickers.

Consequently, harvesting began on 15th September in Cumières, on 20th September in Verzy and on 17th September in Avize with the aim of reaching half-harvest on around 26/28 September and ending on 4/5 October. It has been a long time since we last picked in October!

As in previous years, we had to be clever at picking time and ‘juggle’ our small teams of pickers from one parcel to another and also from one sector to another, in order to allow ripening to proceed at its own rhythm, even during the harvesting period itself.

Ultimately, the 3 grape varieties are showing very high quality with a high natural alcohol level of 11.6% in our vineyards, a total acidity of 7.1 g/l, and a pH of 3.07 and a malic acid content of under 6 g/l. Nevertheless, the Pinot Noir and the Meunier have reached very high levels of aromatic complexity, outclassing the Chardonnays.

2012 was one of the most difficult and complex years we have ever had in Champagne. It is highly probable that if high pressure conditions had not set in in August/September, the year would have been a catastrophe, both in terms of quality and quantity. But, as so often happens, the problems gave rise to great things... the low yields, which were the result of bad weather conditions, associated with these end-of-season continental conditions, allowed us to reach a rare and record level of maturity which will give birth to rich, strong and structured wines worthy of the greatest vintages of the Champagne region. Comparison of the maturity data between 2012 wines and those of previous years shows a maturity higher than that of 1996 and 1990... and a certain similarity with the great vintage of 1947!