



Potentially a great vintage ...

Louis Roederer's 2013 vintage *may* well attain the finesse of its glorious predecessor —the unforgettable 1988 vintage. The harvest began on Wednesday 2 October on the Montagne de Reims, and five days earlier on the Côte des Blancs and in the Vallée de la Marne; and everything, in this initial phase, hangs on this *potential*.

Potential means that 2013 may well be a great vintage. This potentiality depends on a combination of factors: nature's work and that of man . But it's very much a question of *potential*—it's by no means certain— because despite all the work and the care and attention lavished on the vines, nature always has the last word. And, in this initial phase of the harvest, nothing is certain. We're going to take a closer look at the situation by visiting the vineyards of Aÿ, Avize, and Verzenay, the winery in Reims, by speaking to the winegrowers, observing the grapevines, and tasting the grapes.



There's a prevailing sense of confidence at Aÿ ...

When we arrive at the press house in Aÿ in the morning, we meet Quentin Sauvage, who is a tractor driver during the year and a wine presser during the harvest.



‘Things are going quite well.’

He says this with the typically understated enthusiasm of a countryman. He goes on to say that ‘It’s a good, plentiful harvest compared to last year; it’s going well.’

It’s only 10 a.m. and the grapes that are being pressed were picked that very morning.

‘The night team finished their shift at 6 a.m.; the grapes can’t wait.’

They’re Pinot Noir grapes from the Fourcheule plot and they’re used as an ingredient in the Cristal. The wine pressing process has begun.

‘The process takes four hours.’

It’s a traditional Coquard wine press. It can press 4,000 kg of grapes and make 25.50 hectolitres of juice. The very first juice (or ‘auto-pressing’) is the result of the grapes being naturally pressed or squeezed during loading. This juice is transferred to a separate fermenting tank. Then the first pressing, or ‘cuvée’, produces 20.50 hectolitres for the Cristal. Then comes the second part of the juice off the press, or ‘première taille’ (2 hectolitres), and ‘deuxième taille’ (3 hectolitres), which are not used in the Cristal.

A group of men smartly dressed in suits and ties suddenly appears: Frédéric Rouzaud, Managing Director, Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon, Cellar Master, are meeting the Prefect, accompanied by an official delegation.



Frédéric Rouzaud (on the right of the Prefect), Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon (on the left), and members of the regulatory authorities.

I ask Frédéric Rouzaud the same question I ask all the winegrowers: ‘How’s it going?’ ‘Things are going well. Nothing was certain with the weather. But it’s been perfect so far. The weather’s been reasonably cool with ominous skies, but no lightning. And that includes Sunday, despite what was forecast. Last weekend it was incredible because we were the only growers working in the vineyards. We cultivate early-flowering vines, so we were able to start the harvest earlier than other winegrowers.’



Frédéric Rouzaud and Thierry Consigny outside the *vendangeoir* in Aÿ

Cultivating early-flowering vines requires a lot of work throughout the year to ensure that the grapes mature at the right time, which intrinsically gives them greater quality —higher sugar content and more distinctive aromas—and enables the harvest to be completed before the rot caused by the rain can spread. There’s a link between the two: in order to harvest the grapes at an earlier date than that set by the regulatory authorities, winegrowers have to obtain a derogation that is only granted to those whose grapes have reached maturity with sufficient

sugar content. This year, the sugar content was set at 9°, and the grapes in Louis Roederer's vineyards at Aÿ and Avize had a sugar content of more than 10° before the harvest and exceeded 11° this week. Hence, the work carried out in the winter and spring—the pruning, leaf thinning, disbudding, tillage, and all the biodynamics—produces an early harvest, which also contributes to the final quality of the wine by avoiding rot.

Frédéric Rouzaud goes on to say that 'the harvest has been excellent on the Côte des Blancs and in the Vallée de la Marne. We're a little less sure about the Montagne de Reims. But if things turn out well, we may attain the equilibrium of the 1988 vintage. I'd be very happy if we were able to produce another Cristal 1988—my favourite wine!'

He takes us to the Bonottes plot; the Pinot Noir grapes grown there are used to make Cristal Rosé. We meet Harry Pettinay, the supervisor. Frédéric and Harry observe the grape clusters with great enthusiasm. I ask them why they're so pleased.

'They're small, fully ripe, homogeneous, and dense.'

Frédéric Rouzaud says, 'You can see that they've ripened in perfect conditions.'



Harry Pettinay, Thierry Consigny, and Frédéric Rouzaud in the Bonottes plot.

This is in part an allusion to the different situation of the grapes in a neighbouring vineyard, where semi-trailers and tractors can be seen in a large parking area in the middle of the vineyard.

The farmer in the Managing Director's suit can't resist saying, 'It's a waste of good land; they should have grown vines there instead of making it into a parking area!'



But we're more interested in the grapes in the Bonottes plot. Harry Pettinay explains: 'The quality is also dictated by the age of the grapevines and the disbudding in May. There's less fruit on the vines, and the grapes that have been left to ripen are of better quality. There's also been a bit of *millerandage* (the formation of seedless grapes that will never grow to maturity), which reduces the yield but contributes to the quality; it's still important, of course, to select the right grapes during the sorting process. Less fruit on the vines increases the grapes' air exposure. It's like a bowl of fruit: if there's too much fruit on top of each other, they eventually rot.'



David Gaquère, the supervisor of the grape pickers who come every year from the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region, is very happy with the good weather conditions, which make it easier for his team of 62 to work. Harry explains:

'They've always been very conscientious, whatever the weather conditions. The work here is specific: they have to meticulously sort through the grapes and discard any rotten, green, and pinkish grapes. The quantity's also good this year; it's actually a little higher than expected, thanks to the September rains, which fed the grapes.



Avize: less quantity but more quality.

We drive 12 km south to Avize. The first person we meet is Léna Włodarczyk, who assesses the quality of the grapes when they arrive at the press house. She's very confident. This morning she recorded a sugar content of up to 12.2°.

'Yes, the grapes have a good sugar content and distinctive aromas.'

She also has to assess the level of rot:

'It's not more than 10%, so everything's going well. There's a good atmosphere and everyone's happy.'



Jeremy Morizet and Alexandre Fiabale, the wine press accountants, are in good spirits in their small office. They'd prefer a little more weight: larger, heavier pips. The Cellar Master probably wouldn't agree. And Danny Truffaut, the tractor driver, adds: 'The harvest is better than in 2012. Perhaps not as good as a normal year, but somewhere between the two. And the quality's high.'



Léna Włodarczyk



Danny Truffaut

We go in search of Hervé Boutet, the sector manager. We find him in his office; he's a little downbeat, despite the quality of the harvest. He's immersed in paperwork and he'd obviously be happier out in the vineyard.

A lady's talking to Frédéric Rouzaud, who's also travelled to Avize from Aj. Maryse Krier is a longstanding friend. She cultivates two hectares of grapevines.

'It's a case of *décuillage*: the harvest is 7,500 kg/ha, which is 30% less than expected.'

Frédéric explains to me:

'Do you know what *cuidage* and *décuillage* mean? *Décuillage* means that the harvest quantity doesn't meet expectations.'

Maryse Krier: 'The grape clusters weigh 70 to 80 grams, instead of the expected 120 grams.'

Frédéric Rouzaud: 'Are you going to use some of your reserve?'

'Yes, five thousand.'

'You've still got a reserve?'

'Yeah, I'm ok, but I'm worried about some of the younger winegrowers who haven't had the time to build a reserve, and some of them are in debt.'



Hervé Boutet, Maryse Krier, and Frédéric Rouzaud

We head back to the vineyard, where we encounter the supervisor, who, unusually, is a woman—Morgiane Vereken. She also recruits her grape pickers from the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region. She's very confident.

'The quantity's not so good, but there's no need to do any sorting today, as all the grapes are of good quality.'

At midday, her shrill whistle resounds throughout the valley—it's time for lunch break!



Morgiane Vereken



Gwendoline Loesch



Jonathan, Frédéric Roche, and Adam Policlik

The battle of Verzenay

We head 30 km northeast to Verzenay —Frédéric Rouzaud seemed less confident about the Montagne de Reims sector. Louis Roederer's harvests start on Wednesday 2 October.

'Five days ahead of the official opening of the grape harvest', Mickael Bléandou, sector manager, tells us, 'on 7 September ... no, sorry I meant 7 October—I keep forgetting!'

This is a revealing slip of the tongue: this year, the vines are at least three weeks late compared with the pattern of the last fifteen years.

'The first plots we harvest are those we're less confident about. We were able to start a little earlier because the 9° sugar content was attained and is now 10°. We'll start on the other plots—the ones that have been less attacked—a little later, when they are more mature. That's essential for a vintage.'

Indeed, to create a vintage win, and to make Cristal, Verzenay is *the* essential ingredient and is a fundamental part of the blend. Without Verzenay, there can be no Cristal, and no vintage. However, this year, Verzenay seems to be the least promising. These harvests are going to play a crucial role in the success of the vintage.

'Here, things were looking pretty good,' observed Johann Merle, Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon's vineyard steward, 'and even better during the harvest than on the Côte des Blancs. But the September rains brought rot. After the summer dryness, the vine absorbed the water and the grapes expanded with the superabundant water to the point where their skins split, and then Botrytis rot quickly followed. This phenomenon didn't take place in the other sectors, because the grape clusters there were smaller and more aerated.'

Johann and Mickael invite us to share their delicious meal in the small dining room. There's a bottle of Brut Premier on the table, and Johann wants to use the Louis Roederer application on his iPhone to read all the available information on the label's data matrix code, but there's no mobile connection.

I ask them what can be done to overcome the difficulties in the sector.

'Already, three weeks ago, we pruned the excess stems that grew over the summer. This helped to give the grape clusters some room and aerate them. That had a pretty good effect.'

I ask Mickael if he feels stressed by all the responsibility he bears.

'I wouldn't say I'm stressed, but I do feel highly motivated, and I pass that attitude on to the teams. The main thing is to master the selection and sorting process—it needs to be right but not extreme. And the sorting criteria are different on each plot. You have to know how to cut the right parts off the clusters and keep the good parts. Some pickers get carried away and put everything in the bucket—but you can't do that. That's where good management comes in and the supervisors and porters play a vital role. You have to know *what* and *how* to select. But, we've got a good team of 90 people, and most of them are old hands and know the job inside out.'

Johann adds: 'Here, at Verzenay, when the independent growers (growers who sell their grapes to Louis Roederer) deliver their produce, things get a bit more complicated. We'll have to measure the sugar content of each and every pallet.'



‘I put these grapes in my basket. These grapes must never be picked’: on the table lie grape clusters and instructions for new pickers that illustrate the art of sorting and selecting the right grapes.

Sadia Haby, the wine press accountant, is listening to our conversation; it will be her responsibility to accept or reject the pallets and handle the situation as tactfully as possible. ‘What happens if the independent grower’s grapes haven’t attained the right sugar content?’ ‘Then we won’t accept their goods. Once, at Aj, 36 pallets (20,000 kg) were turned away. The grower eventually found another buyer ... situations like the current one underline the importance of an early harvest. With all the rot that’s spreading, it’s going to be pretty tough for those who haven’t yet started the harvest in the Verzenay sector.’ ‘So, what’s stopping them?’ ‘The sugar content isn’t high enough.’

We meet a young Brazilian woman, Manuela Webber-Witt, who’s spent a year at Verzenay studying biodynamic cultivation. She’s a student at the University of Geisenheim, in Germany, which is known for its research on silica.



Manuela Webber-Witt

Back in the vineyard, we encounter Claude Nourry, the supervisor.

‘We’ve already completed two plots this morning, but we had to do a lot of sorting. This afternoon is turning out to be much better. This is my 35th harvest and it’s a very good one this year. The other growers only start on the 7th, in five days’ time ...



Claude Nourry

He’s right : I can see that the vineyards adjoining the Louis Roederer plot are completely inactive—there’s not a single winegrower to be seen in the neighbouring plots.

‘We were granted a derogation to start the harvest because the grapes were ripe. Even Frédéric Rouzaud used to be a picker in my team. I also started out as a picker; then I worked as a porter, a loader, and presser. I’ve been a supervisor since 1984. I recruit the pickers in the Pas-de-Calais region; it’s an excellent team and plenty of old hands come back each year.

That said, this year the late harvests have prevented some people from returning. The students, for example, can’t make it here so late in the year.’

‘How do you go about recruiting your pickers?’

‘People come to the house—it works by word of mouth; we don’t advertise for staff. I like to see for myself how motivated the candidates are.’

He heads back to the vines and shouts out:

‘Keep an eye out! Even if they’re much better you’ll still need to sort them.’

I talk to two ladies: Marie-Joseph Gallet (her 4th harvest) and Thérèse Penin (9th harvest) are both retired. The question’s always the same, ‘How’s it going?’

‘Couldn’t be better, the sun’s out! We get stuck in on the first day, so it’s perfect. Harvesting’s a difficult job, but we always like to come back each year. And the vineyard supervisors are very polite and easy to get on with. I was struck by how polite they are. It’s completely opposite to my experience of working in a factory. They’re not only well-mannered—they’re really considerate!’



Marie-Joseph Gallet and Thérèse Penin



Annick Bouvet and Melanie Letoffe



Emilie Schots and Jimmy Ledez



Cathy Prebion, Steven Prebion, and Jimmy Ledez

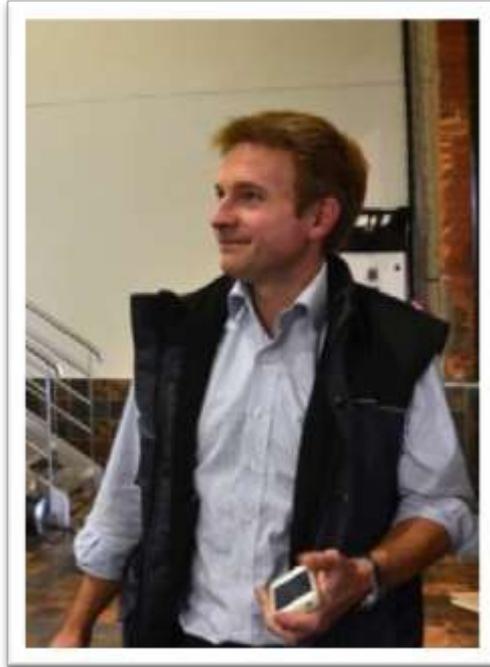
We head back to Reims, to the winery, where the grapes are selected for the Rosé: the Pinot Noir grapes, which we saw being gathered at Cumières and Bonottes that very morning. A vibrating sorting table moves the grape clusters towards the eight grape-pickers, who sort them before they are loaded into the de-stemmer, which separates the stems from the grapes. A final sorting process is carried out by two people at the vertical conveyor belt that takes the grapes to the fermenting tank.

One of the sorters proudly declares:
'*We're* the ones who picked them!'

It's an excellent idea to employ the very same workers who picked the grapes from the vines to sort them in the Reims winery —it perfectly illustrates the importance of carrying out the initial selection process in the field.



Grégoire Fauconnet, the winery manager outlines the process: 'We're going to start the pre-fermentation maceration. The grapes are left in the fermenting tank for a few days. We'll extract the juice, once it has attained its colour and aromatic intensity. Then the Chardonnay (30% to 50%) is added, and we can begin the fermentation phase.'



Grégoire Fauconnet

While it is authorised in Champagne to create rosé by blending red wine and white wine, that's out of the question for Louis Roederer. This process occurs very early on, only a few days after the harvest: the red and white juices (before fermentation) are blended. This is the secret behind the superlative quality and balance of Louis Roederer's Rosé.

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So, what will the 2013 vintage be like? *Potentially*, a fabulous vintage, perhaps on a par with 1988. *Perhaps* ... the real battle will be won or lost at Verzenay. We'll be able to declare victory or defeat in ten days, after the harvests. Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon, the Cellar Master — a typically prudent countryman — will be reluctant to reach any hasty conclusions, but we will have some intimation of the harvest's success.



Epilogue – The Pisserenards Miracle.

Ten days later, on the Saturday evening following the report you've just read, I call Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon. He's driving back from the Montagne de Reims and is heading to the wine storehouses. He knows that I'm dying to find out how the battle went. But, creators are rarely known to commit themselves before the work's completed.

'So, how did it go?'

'Well, the battle of Verzenay took place ... under the sun, that's for sure. Did we win? We don't know yet; it'll take a while before we can be sure. Some of the harvest's been excellent, and some of it fairly standard. We'll see what happens in several weeks' time after the fermentation process.'

'And at Aÿ and Avize?'

'Excellent. Not everything, but generally very satisfactory.'

Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon also tells me what his colleagues (he's in regular contact with the other Cellar Masters) think of the harvests:

'They're very happy with the quality after a tough 2013; they're also pleased with the aromas after the fermentation process. It's clear that this year is going to be a real winegrower's vintage. There's a marked difference between those who've successfully tended to their vines and those who haven't. It'll also be a wine producer's vintage: at Louis Roederer we know how to "cultivate" the wine in the cellars, plot by plot, as though it were a form of haute couture. This is facilitated by plot cultivation (1) and a long history of cellar expertise.

It goes without saying that we cultivate our vines with greatest of care at Louis Roederer. But we're equally conscientious about how our wines develop in the cellars. That's why I'm not keen on terms like "winemaker", because at Louis Roederer we actually *cultivate* our wines. As with the work in the vineyards, this cellar expertise comprises a whole range of details,

actions, care, and even intuition. The work in the autumn and winter will culminate in the tasting of the light wines in March, and then we'll finally discover if our quest for quality in 2013 has been successful—we'll find out if 2013, despite all the difficulties, has produced a truly great vintage.'

Just when I think that Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon has finished, he lets me in on a surprising bit of information:

'There's been a miracle this year: for the first time, we've been able to use an indigenous yeast (2) extracted from the well-established Pisserenards (3) plot, in the Montagne de Reims, at Verzenay. And we've had excellent results in intensity and aromatic purity—it's been truly impressive! The yeast has helped to ferment the wine produced from the very same Pisserenards plot and from other plots; when the storehouse staff saw the fermentation process begin and they tasted the juice ... you should've seen how pleased they were! And how proud! They really were very proud! This is the fourth yeast we've created in-house and used over the last ten years. The first ever was in the Montagne de Reims. It was so pure and delicate—we'd never seen anything like it.



The indigenous Pisserenards yeast

We'll only know in spring 2014 whether 2013 has produced a great vintage. In any case, the miraculous purity of the Pisserenards yeast has ensured that 2013 will go down as a landmark year for the Louis Roederer champagne House, in its ongoing quest to produce a great vintage.

1. 'Plot cultivation' involves the separate vinification of each vine plot , without mixing the juices before the blending of the light wines after the wine tasting in March. This enables the Cellar Master to choose from hundreds of different wines to create the subtlest of blends and attain a perfect equilibrium.
2. The yeast is added to the juice directly after the grapes have been gathered and pressed, in order to trigger the fermentation process. It is generally acquired from specialized companies that offer a whole range of yeasts of varying characteristics. But Louis Roederer has been developing in-house yeasts (called indigenous yeast) over the last ten years; the yeast originates from the estate's vineyards .
3. The Pisserenards plot was the first to be bought by Louis Roederer in 1845 (the House was founded in 1776); the acquisition of this land inaugurated Louis Roederer's policy of cultivating their own vines. This process took many years: instead of buying grapes for their wine, the House patiently acquired the best Grand Cru plots. Producing an indigenous yeast from this histo ric plot is highly symbolic, and the yeast's excellent results are ample reward for many decades of hard work and devotion.