

SOCIÉTÉ CIVILE
DU
DOMAINE DE LA ROMANÉE-CONTI

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2014 Harvest Report

Each year, once the harvest is over, it seems important for us to try to describe some of the significant events around which the vintage has taken shape.

How could we fail to mention first the splendor of the mosaic of “climats”, this work of art that stretches out in front of us in the autumnal sun? During this short and magic moment, the vineyards, relieved of their fruit, dazzle us with the splendid beauty of the leaves that have turned in a few days to sumptuous shades of gold and copper, as if they wanted to recognize the attention and the care they received throughout the year.

The villages of the Côte are buzzing with activity. In the wineries the “vignerons” are busy with the fermenting vats. Everywhere opulent honeyed scents emanate from the streets and houses announcing the birth of a great vintage.

Yet, the boisterous, mischievous and quick-tempered gods that govern us had not an easy season in store for us... This play, full of twists and turns, can be divided into three acts: After a damp and exceptionally mild winter, which made the first work of the soil difficult, spring was one of the most beautiful and dry we have known for a long time.

The vineyards benefited from outstanding climatic conditions and grew in peace. Very rarely have we seen such healthy leaves and such a balanced growth of the vines. Diseases were nearly absent and the phytosanitary treatments were kept to the minimum.

Flowering was extremely early, quite spread out due to the cold nights, but complete.

We observed “millerandage” especially in the older vineyards, but almost no “coulure” this year.

This first luminous act ended on June 28th, when very violent storms brought hail to a great part of the area and caused devastating damage in some places like Beaune, Pommard and Volnay. Vosne-Romanée or the Chassagne and Puligny sectors were not so much affected. Immediately after those storms, a short heat wave resulted in “scalding” phenomena in the vineyards: the berries that were the most exposed to the burning sun “roasted” and dried. Many of them fell by themselves, but it was necessary to eliminate the remaining berries during the harvest. This light natural thinning was finally not a problem in this year of abundant yields.

From July, the second act of this play brought all that a “vigneron” does not want: out of season cold, a significant lack of sun, much rain (more than 100mm in July), humidity and traces of botrytis as soon as early August.

In addition, as the work of the soil was stopped from August 1st, when “veraison” started, the grass benefited from these favorable conditions to develop in the vineyards and became difficult to control.

Happily, the advance gained by the vineyards in the springtime, although slower in July and August, allowed the grapes to reach reasonable maturity in late August, despite the fact that the “veraison” process lasted the whole month of August. This had the effect of accentuating the differences of maturity between the berries as we had already noticed at flowering time.

Everything was ready for the third act that, from late August, totally reversed the imposed direction of the two preceding months.

Such was the situation in September, when arrived all the best a “vigneron” can wish for his vineyards: North wind, dry and sunny weather, moderate heat... the maturation accelerated and almost exploded as the vineyards were making the most of the water reserves accumulated in July and August. The Chardonnays, especially, progressed very rapidly. The Pinots were not so rapid and that is the reason why, before setting the harvest dates, it was necessary to take into account the unusual cold of July and August and to be patient. We had to wait much more than 100 days after the flowering to be able to taste the fine and concentrated aromas of the grapes that prove their full maturity.

The last anger of the gods: a storm, fortunately with no hail or heavy rains, hit Burgundy on September 19th. We witnessed a rare phenomenon occurring only a few times in a century: the outstanding resistance of the grapes. After that stormy episode, we were aware of it as never before. We feared an explosion of botrytis the next morning, as the storm brought hot and humid conditions, but there was in fact no attack of rot neither in the Chardonnays nor in the Pinots. This can certainly be explained by the thickness of the grape skins, which were strengthened by the difficult climatic conditions the vineyards had to face, but also by other factors, more mysterious and not easy to analyze. Our “climats” have their own logic and secrets!

The vineyards could make the most of the wonderful windy, dry and sunny week that followed, allowing the grapes to concentrate and fully ripen.

This makes us understand that the unravelling of the play, i.e. the adventure that we have lived for 6 or 7 months during the vegetative cycle of the vineyards, is unpredictable, whether for the best or for the worst.

Rainy episodes, for instance, that worry the “vigneron” when they happen, may in fact be a delight for the vineyards as they will use the water reserves to accelerate the photosynthesis process and the full maturity of the grapes.

An attack of botrytis can bring the worst, in other words an explosion of the mushroom that can be very rapid in favorable conditions, but also help the vineyards to ripen more easily and completely thanks to the reduction in quantity that it will cause. As a result, the grapes will be of better quality.

In the same way this year, the excessive growth of grass that was the consequence of rainy conditions and that we feared not to be able to control, acted as a buffer that regulated the water supply to the vineyards and certainly played a part in their resistance to botrytis. The same is true of course when conditions are favorable. The vineyards never forget anything. So, it is obvious that the exceptional spring had an essential influence on the health of the vineyards throughout the growing season, on their resistance and on the quality of maturity at the end of the season.

We started the harvest on September 16th on a beautiful hot day and stopped them on the afternoon of the 19th because of the storm. We started again on the 20th, accompanied, until the end, by perfect harvest weather: luminous, dry and temperate.

The vineyards were harvested in the following order:

Corton: September 16

La Tâche: September 17, 18 & 19

Richebourg: September 20 & 21

Romanée-Conti: September 19 (morning)

Romanée-St-Vivant: September 21, 22 & 23

Grands-Echezeaux: September 23 & 24

Echezeaux: September 24, 25 & 26

Montrachet: September 22

As always our team of around 80 pickers, all with consummate experience in selective picking, worked attentively, brilliantly directed by our vineyard manager Nicolas Jacob. They eliminated the dried botrytis of August, the berries that had been hit by hail in late June or the "scalded" ones that were dried as well, leaving aside the large berries that were not ripe enough - these would be picked in a later second passage, as we are used to doing. The grapes that filed past on the sorting table were of wonderful structure, color and taste. In addition, we rediscovered what we had not seen since 2009: a good quantity, one of those which give smiles to the "vigneron" and the amateur!

The Montrachet area had also been lightly hailed at the end of June. At the harvest, the hailed berries had dried and most of them had fallen. On September 15th, the grapes could be considered as ripe, but they were so healthy, that we preferred to wait a little longer. On September 22nd, the grapes that we harvested were golden-colored, in perfect sanitary condition and ripe. The sugar levels and acidity were in perfect balance. This was a moment of great intensity! We were alone; there was nobody around us, but the crows! In regards to quantity, it is also satisfactory.

The general consensus is that 2014 should produce great white wines in Burgundy.

Vinifications are in progress under the calm and careful supervision of Bernard Noblet and his team. They take place in tranquility, even though there are many more vats this year, more than we have had since 2009. The rises in temperature are harmonious and the color of the red wines stands out. The first devattings show these dark red colors that are always the sign of great maturity. The balance, notably in what concerns the acidity, is excellent. It is of course too early to give a definitive opinion. We have to wait until the malo-lactic fermentations are over, but we are very optimistic about the future quality of the 2014 vintage.

Once again, the new adventure that we lived in 2014 proves that it is through difficult seasons with "ups and downs" that our Burgundian vines, the Pinot Noir and the Chardonnay, produce wines of the highest quality. The "vigneron" has to manage the anguish and anxiety that are usual.

Never more than this year have the two great rules of the game been confirmed: risk-taking is obligatory and what we can call "luck", but which may simply be the smile that the vineyards give to the respectful and loving "vigneron".

October 14th, 2014