

2017 is paying the price
of the 2016 drought



The truth about the very low-volume 2017 vintage

She manages over eighty properties across the South of France and knows her vineyards virtually like the back of her hand. Stéphanie Prabonnaud has worked with Jean Natoli, the renowned South of France consultant winemaker, since 1998. We asked her expert opinion on the highly controversial 2017 vintage.

By Sylvain Patard

Photographs: Courtesy of the estates

The 2017 vintage seems to be characterised by lack of juice or volume. Have you witnessed this across-the-board?

Yes, the shortfall in volume is not transient and this year has affected all parts of Languedoc, both the early-ripening areas and the hillside sites. The same is true in the southern Rhone Valley. It is very obvious for the Syrah and Merlot reds, where yields are frequently down 40 to 50%. It is more variable for the Grenache, depending on whether vines suffered from shatter or not. The Carignan is good. For the whites, the appellation Roussanne and Marsanne produced small amounts, like the Syrah. Again, the picture is more mixed for varieties like Sauvignon and Chardonnay, but volumes are still down.

What are the causes of the drop in volumes?

As you say, there is not just one factor but several causes which unfortunately have all brought volumes down. Firstly frost in some areas, which was severe in some cases such as the Hérault valley, particularly the Minervois and Ventoux in the Rhone. Then the consequences of the 2016 drought: flowers start to form the previous year in buds for the ongoing year. Drought conditions and poor mineral assimilation in the 2016 vintage led to low preliminary cluster formation in the buds. Consequently fruit set in spring 2017 was low – something that was particularly obvious in the Syrahs. Finally, lack of rain since June: even if water reserves were good at the end of winter and canopy development was better in 2017 than in 2016, the berries lost juice throughout the summer.

From a winemaking perspective, were grapes easy to crush in 2017? What were the average acidity, pH and alcohol levels?

Yes, fermentation was easier this year because the grapes were picked at lower sugar levels, even though ripeness was still very adequate. Although the crop is small and harvesting was early, the grapes were able to ripen harmoniously due to lack of water stress in the spring, without the concentration effects in the fruit that we witnessed in August 2016.

In terms of winemaking, extraction occurred quickly in the red wines, with colour and tannins settling after 8 to 10 days vatting. With the whites and rosés, the first grapes harvested at the end of August retained great total acidity levels. After the heatwave at the end of August, some of the later-ripening grape varieties – the Grenache rosé,



"The shortfall in volume is not transient and this year has affected all parts of Languedoc"



"I see this vintage as elegant"



André Drappier, soon 91, Michel and his son Hugo

Roussanne and Marsanne for instance – saw their acidities drop from the beginning of September. But despite this, there is wonderful aromatic vibrancy this year in the whites and rosés with some pretty successful thiol* profiles.

How are quality and the longevity of the vintage once in the bottle shaping up?

I see this vintage as elegant: the wines are ripe but show restraint. There is less of the overkill we saw in 2016, which was still a beautiful vintage. There will be fruit and substance to ensure ageability in the reds.

But what do the wine growers say?

Here are some extra comments from growers in different wine regions which confirm that 2017 will be a memorable vintage – one that, we hope, will go down in history even.

CHAMPAGNE DRAPPIER (URVILLE – AUBE)

The Drappiers are delighted to be harvesting some superb Pinots in Saint-Esprit, named after the Cistercian estates belonging to Clairvaux Abbey – several vineyards are still owned by the family. "This year's harvest is wonderful with some very promising, balanced acidity to sugar ratios. Admittedly, frost did affect our estate very badly last April but the season was extremely beautiful and produced a second generation of clusters that allowed our dear Pinot noir to make up some lost ground", explains Michel Drappier.

DOMAINE FIGUIÈRE: RECORD HARVEST DATES

In La Londe-des-Maures, three of Alain Combard's children have taken over and are successfully safeguarding their father's heritage. Magali handles global sales, Delphine administrative tasks and François vineyard management and winemaking.

Harvesting began on Sunday August 13, roughly 10 days earlier than the earliest harvest to date, and finished on Wednesday September 6 with some magnificent Mourvèdre. Juice settled twice as well as last year despite fairly high alcohol content, often around 13%. Fermentations of the first tanks showed some beautiful colour. "The year is



Delphine, Magali and François Combard



Pascal Guilbaud : "The forecast for half a crop has proven true"

proving to be promising from a quality perspective, despite the small crop due to shatter caused by an early spring followed by a cold snap during flowering".

GUILBAUD FRÈRES (MUSCADET – LOIRE VALLEY)

Pascal Guilbaud, the third generation at the helm of the estate created by his father and grand-father in 1927, is perpetuating the family's motto: "I couldn't imagine aiming for anything but quality. There isn't one but several terroirs here. I feel strongly about this because Muscadet is often a standardised wine. We produce Muscadets reflecting the individual terroirs, each with its own identity. Harvesting began on September 4 with Château de la Pingossière in Vallet and finished in mid-September, "the day we started picking in 2016", says Pascal Guilbaud. "The forecast for half a crop after the frost on April 25, 26 and 27 has proven true, but the grapes that were not affected by the frost stayed perfectly healthy. Minimum alcohol content of 12% and ideal levels of malic acid bode well for a top quality vintage". The wines will most certainly be matured on the lees, a technique that makes perfect sense in a company where nothing is rushed.

* Thiol profile refers to varietal aromas that are specific to each grape variety
Our selection of wines for 2018 starts on page 98