

Vosne-Romanée, October 21st, 2016

2016 Harvest report

2016: a year of extremes that cannot be compared to any other one.

The calm has returned to the Côte after the din of the harvest, the clicking of secateurs and the songs of the pickers. The vigneron lives in his winery where the grapes are turning into wine, rumbling at the beginning and then singing softly. The wineries become the theater where the great concert of the year is playing.

Outside, the vineyards are slowly changing colors as if at night a painter was putting a touch of red here, of purple here and of gold there to create a bright and changing picture that we discover every morning.

The devattings have hardly finished or are close to the end. The wines settle down little by little in their barrels, in the cellars where they are going to live for the 18 months that are so important before the bottling.

The time has come to look back and try to understand the stages of this incredible scenario that took us from the perspective of a total defeat in Spring to a victory that ranks 2016 among the most perfect vintages of these last years.

When a vigneron meets a colleague, how does their conversation begin : "if only the frost in Spring (and sometimes hail as well) had not taken away such a great part of the crop, what an extraordinary vintage we would have got!"

In Spring the vigneron was like Ulysses in the Odyssey when the fury of Poseidon almost made his boat founder in the storm, but fortunately the gods were not all against him and a loving goddess saved him...

The season had not started very well. The winter was very mild without any of these periods of frost or snow that usually clean up the remaining bad miasma of the past year.

As a result, the budbreak was early and took place during a mild and humid weather that lasted during the whole Spring and even until mid-July. 516 mm of rain fell on the village of Vosne-Romanée between January and May! exceeding the total rainfall that had been recorded in the legendary year of 1910 when the harvest was almost totally lost. We were giving up hope that rain would ever stop !

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In this context, with so few days without rain, it was very difficult to organize the necessary ploughing and the phytosanitary treatments. We had to take advantage of the short "windows" of dry weather and we knew that, if we missed them, we would be invaded by grass. Above all it was necessary to protect the vineyards from the development of mildew as it was reaching a level that we had never experienced before.

In the Spring we counted around 35 cycles or "repiquages" of mildew while usually there are very few or even none as in 2015.

At the same time, as if nature had wanted to make us fall from Charybde into Scylla, at the end of April the North wind blew the clouds away and brought the sun which we were all expecting. But in fact it brought three days of strong morning frost and it was with sadness that we found early on the morning of April 27 that our vineyards of Montrachet, Bâtard-Montrachet, Echezeaux and Grands-Echezeaux had been devastated by frost. In the following days the young shoots became black, dry and began to fall. Fortunately the Romanée-Conti, La Tâche, Richebourg, Romanée-St-Vivant and Corton were little or not at all affected by the frost.

The fear of mildew did not decrease. We were obliged to multiply treatments. This fight lasted until mid-july. It was led with total dedication and without any break (on week-ends if necessary) by Nicolas Jacob and his team, and always within our biodynamic practices, using only the two authorized products: copper, in small quantity, and sulphur.

Remaining faithful to the biologic options that we have chosen for more than 30 years now has the consequence of a loss in quantity, since the crop cannot be protected as much as with chemical products, but the gain in quality resulting from the concentration of the elements that constitute the grapes is far superior to the loss.

These conditions were of course not very favorable at the period of flowering. This started on June 9th, which was rather late compared to previous years, but above all it was spread out until June 25th, which made us fear an uneven ripening. This finally did not occur thanks to the heat which finally arrived.

And then, from July 15th, rain stopped and summer weather set in until the harvest and even after.

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This dry and hot weather lasted thanks to its best ally, the North wind that kept on blowing almost all the time. Some days were hot, close to scorching, but the danger of real drought that was becoming apparent through some burnt berries that had been the most exposed to the sun was averted by the short rainstorm episodes around August 15th, then by two beneficial rains that arrived at the right time, in early September for the first one and from September 16th to 18th for the second one, only a few days before the harvest.

Rains provided relief to some of the vineyards whose ripening was beginning to be blocked by drought. They also caused the swelling of berries and a good balance between the increase of sugars and the phenolic maturity of stalks, pips and skins...

These ideal conditions also enabled the vineyards to recover after the Spring attacks. Those that had been affected by frost produced new shoots, allowing us to have wood to prune for next year and the hope of a normal crop in 2017.

The vigneron found himself believing in miracles when he remembered the state of the vineyards in late April, after the frost !

These same ideal conditions permitted the grapes to ripen very quickly. Once again, we realized how, at the end of the season in hot weather, our grape varieties could have an extremely rapid increase of potential sugar. At the same time we observed accumulations of anthocyanins and of tannins that were even superior to 2015.

Even though our analysis and tastings confirmed that the crop was already very ripe around September 15th, the outstanding sanitary condition of the grapes led us to take time and wait until the 22nd to harvest our Corton. Being situated in the Côte de Beaune these vineyards are always the first to ripen. We could also benefit from the last small rain.

On September 23rd, we began the harvest in Vosne-Romanee. The picking took place all along in beautiful weather until September 30th, when it ended in a festive atmosphere. The grapes were black, in perfect sanitary condition, full of juice and sugar, without any botytris for the second consecutive year, after 2015. No more fears! We could only hear the songs of the harvesters in the sun and the breathing of the earth that was warming up, while giving us joyfully the fruit that had been conceived.

Here are the harvest dates for each wine as well as the approximate yields:

Corton: September 22nd / 22hl/ha
Richebourg: September 23rd and 24th / 24hl/ha
Romanée-Conti: September 25th / 24hl/ha
La Tâche: September 24th and 25th / 31hl/ha
Romanée-St-Vivant: September 27th and 28th / 27hl/ha
Grands-Echezeaux: September 29th / 7hl/ha
Echezeaux: September 9th / 6hl/ha

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These yields are medium to normal in Romanée-Conti, La Tâche and Corton which were not affected by frost. They are somewhat inferior in Romanée-St-vivant and Richebourg where the northern part of each climat was slightly hit. They are from 6hl to 7hl/ha only in Grands-Echezeaux and Echezeux only, as could be expected, but finally these yields are rather a good surprise in comparison with the impression of absolute disaster we had in Spring. Moreover the few grapes we harvested were wonderful.

If Montrachet is not mentioned in the above list, it is because it was severely hit by frost. In the Spring we even thought we would have no crop at all. Eventually there were still a few grapes, but in tiny quantity. That is the reason why, with six other domaines owning half of the Montrachet vineyards situated in the village of Chassagne (the Montrachet of Puligny-Montrachet was not so badly damaged), we had the idea to launch what should be an interesting operation based on solidarity: the seven domaines (Amiot, Comte Lafon, Fleurot-Larose, Lamy-Pillot Leflaive, Petitjean and ourselves) brought what they had harvested to be vinified at Domaine Leflaive. Two casks should be obtained, i.e. about 600 bottles. Each domaine will get back the number of bottles equivalent to the weight of the grapes it brought. Our aim is to have a common label and to put a certain number of bottles in a charity auction.

2016 was a year with two opposite faces: the one we saw in Spring when nature wanted to lay the vigneron low - but the latter of course resisted - and the other one we saw in summer when, on the contrary, the sun remained until the end to bless the vineyards as if it had wanted to help the vigneron win a well deserved victory. We could sum up by saying that nature wanted to overwhelm the vineyards, but decided to spare the grapes that it let ripen in the best possible conditions.

The Burgundian miracle does exist and the vigneron will keep 2016 in mind for a long time... !

But once again we have to look as a whole at the growing season from the budbreak to the harvest We were desperate in Spring and cursed the hostile nature that was directing all its negative forces against us. But today, with the harvest « at home » in the winery, we have to consider that the reserves of water accumulated during this humid period permitted the vineyards to go through, without damage, this period when drought was threatening. We fought against mildew and it left its mark, but we can look at it as a positive factor with regards to the final quality since some 10% of natural thinning reduced the number of bunches of grapes and contributed to concentrate the elements that make the quality of the grapes.

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In the winery the grapes, that had just arrived from the vineyards, were perfectly healthy. Almost no sorting was necessary, only a very light destemming. The pre-fermentation maceration of a few days was obtained naturally and the vinifications took place peacefully under the devoted guidance of Bernard Noblet and his team who were attentive day and night. The colour of the juice was black on the very first days of the vatting. Aromas that developed during fermentation were exceptionally fine and generous. The fermentation temperatures allowed the balanced extractions that we were looking for. Vattings lasted around 20 days on average.

At the time of this writing, most of the wines have been devatted. They show exceptionally profound colors. Behind the primary aromas and spicy characters, we can already perceive the high quality of the grand cru in an outstanding vintage. In the mouth the balance between the fruit, the acidity and the tannins should lead them towards a rare combination of richness and finesse.
