

The 2014 Vintage
By Olivier Bernard

2014: the great vintage of the Indian summer

Starting on the 27th of August, **60 days of beautiful weather** dramatically changed the course of the 2014 growing season, ripening the grapes week after week **to reach complete maturity in all varieties**. **Rich, fruity grapes with very good acidity**, the heritage of a rather cool summer, account for **the great success of the 2014 vintage!**

Further to an early spring and a fairly low number of buds, **a temperate, sunny, and wet summer set in and lasted until late August**. This weather naturally tended to slow down ripening. Such unusual conditions called for meticulous, **constant work in the vineyard** to protect the vines and help them to produce the best possible grapes.

Fortunately, **summerlike weather** arrived in the last days in August and lasted... **until the end of October**. The radiant sunshine was accompanied by dry wind that helped to concentrate the grapes, whereas cool evening temperatures refined the tannin.

All grape varieties attained **new records of maturity**, including Cabernet Sauvignon, which was picked in prime condition, mostly during the second week of October.

Yields were reasonable. Our wines display great colour, fruit, richness, concentration, and freshness. The quality of this vintage is due to two main factors: **a less-than-perfect summer** that guaranteed freshness and **an Indian summer of historic proportions** conducive to ripeness and concentration, as well as wonderful balance... In short, 2014 benefited from two summers in a row to produce a great vintage!!!

2014 Bordeaux Vintage Report: l'Union des Grands Crus
by Bill Blatch

Back in July, Olivier Bernard asked me if I would like to draw up a vintage report on behalf of the Union des Grands Crus, I have been producing my own little report on the harvest for many years now, but this would be different: much earlier and also from the point of view of the Grands Crus, using the members' own impressions. I immediately accepted such an authentic approach with pleasure. The following is therefore the story of the vintage as I witnessed it through many conversations and visits as the vintage unfolded. It is an extraordinary story, beginning extremely auspiciously, then creating serious concerns during the summer, before concluding with a glorious end of season and some well-earned very good wines.

Bill Blatch, 11th November 2014

A beneficial winter

It all started with the second wettest winter in 50 years and the warmest in 24 years.

Such high winter rainfall and temperatures were extremely welcome, setting up the year ahead for a well-nourished and early cycle.

The precipitation was twice the norm for January and one-and-a-half times for February. After three very dry years which had accounted for some very small yields, it was ideal for replenishing water tables that would provide the vine with everything it needed for the dry spring ahead.

The warmth was to be of even greater importance than the rainfall, encouraging the vine to make a very early start. This would give it a comfortable advance, indispensable for the summer slow-down that was to come. During the winter, it froze only 8 times rather than the usual 26, all in November and December and thereafter not at all, with temperatures 3°8 over the norm in January and 2°3 in February. The pruning programme was thus relatively unaffected by frost, so everyone could prune at will

A very promising spring

Spring kicked off with a flourish when the daytime temperature shot up on 7th March to 20-21°, a full 6° above the norm. Such warmth after such a mild winter would have inevitably provoked an immediate budding right then if it hadn't been for the cold night-time temperatures that followed. So it wasn't until the end of this period mid-month that the budding really started, still a full two weeks ahead of the norm, and 2 days ahead of the exceptionally early 1990 and 2011.

Such an early start to the season was most welcome, increasing the chance of early ripening and early harvest, historically giving the best shot at top quality wines. It also made them nervous because of the increased frost risk, but in the end, apart from a few isolated bits of frost damage in some low-lying parts of the vineyards, primarily in Graves and Sauternes, the rest of March and the whole of April remained safely above 5°.

In fact April turned out not only very warm but also very dry, especially mid-month, and this temporarily slowed down the vine's growth. It was however quickly restored during the subsequent showers and by the end of April, we had not lost any time and most of the vineyard managers were already laboriously cutting out the excess buds and "entrecoeurs", in spite of the low yield that was expected at this time, surely a consequence of the bad weather in June 2013 for the "initiation florale".

May became a cool damp month, with a strong spike of heat in the middle, just before the flowering was to start. Such variable conditions are never conducive to effective flowering and they accounted for some "coulure" and "millerandage" especially on the earliest Merlots and Sémillons. However, thereafter members reported that the main body of the crop flowered fast and efficiently during the very hot first half of June, with several days well over 30°, also with excellent air circulation. This was all very positive as the budding's two-week advance had been maintained at completion of the flowering, confirming the prospect of an early harvest.

The only negative consequence of such a hot April and damp May was a very vigorous oidium and especially mildew pressure, which would stay with us right to the end. It required extreme vigilance, especially as many Grand Cru estates are now partially or totally organic or biodynamic and are required to economise on sprayings. Preventative rather than curative treatments did the job best but a fast reaction time and immediate availability of machinery and personnel were essential and needed to be programmed efficiently into the other laborious vineyard work of canopy topping and constant topsoil or grass control. There was much debate about the use of contact or systemic treatments, both very expensive. The mildew seemed only to attack the younger upper leaves and so could also be largely eliminated by canopy management. But it became a long and costly battle but successful in that no-one reported it getting directly to the bunches, so even in those patches of vineyard where it occurred, it only affected the top leaves, not the grapes. Overall, with constant effort, and very precise timing of treatments, members managed it well, as in 2000, enabling their vines' foliage to perform perfectly right to the end.

Summer, the big disappointment

The reaction of many members during such dangerous conditions was to do the first de-leafing as soon as possible in order to provide better air circulation for the clusters, in spite of their great length this year. A sudden spike of 31°5 heat on 21st June that would be followed by a more severe spike of 35°3 on 17th July, (the hottest day of the year) caused occasional blistering of such exposed tender bunches, but members later said that this early de-leafing was clearly a totally correct decision, allowing the great majority of the bunches to take maximum advantage of such a fabulous June.

We were not to know that these final days of June were to be the last of the summer until September. July saw a meagre three days over 30° and August none at all, when normally we would have expected at least 13 over these two months. So July got itself a bad reputation with holiday-makers visiting us now.

Twice in June, we had watched the weather get violent, with terrible hail damage in the Northern Médoc on the night of 8th and very heavy rain further inland on 22nd-23rd June. July would witness two more extreme but very local events, on 19th and 25th, the first wrecking the Saint Emilion jazz festival and causing some hail damage on properties in the eastern part of the appellation, the second causing flooding and mud-slides at our three southern Graves properties. But, in spite of their newsworthiness, these were all isolated events and in the end it wasn't the July temperature and rainfall figures that were at all excessive: they ended up just about on average. It was just a dull, damp month, with small showers, little and often, on 16 of the 31 days, and with a 12% deficiency of sun hours. Those of us who have lawns saw them remain green all summer long. We have had many July's like this in the past: 1997, 1998 and 2004 sprung to members' minds at this time. But in each case, August made up for it. As for each of these vintages, it was now that the vine started to give priority to its foliage rather than to its grape ripening function, and this just as the *véraison* was starting.

Consequently, the colour-change got spun out well into August. The very beginning of *véraison* on some isolated grapes was first noted by some Pessac-Léognan and Pomerol members in the middle of July. The heat of such a fine June had preserved the 2-week advance of the budding and flowering and by July's final week, the *véraison* had begun everywhere. It seemed to go well at first, but then got delayed partly because there was still plenty of moisture in the soil at a time when hydric stress would have been more appropriate for effective ripening of the grapes, and partly because of the coolness of August. Some mentioned also that the warm nights and the cool days of July did not provide sufficient daily temperature shift. So there were fears at this time that the harvest would also become too spun out to ripen properly and to stay healthy if the weather were to remain cool or get wet in the autumn. August turned into another grey month, reported at the time as a wet month but in fact it was cold rather than wet, a whole 2° below the average for the temperature and 85% of normal sun hours. It was only slightly wetter than usual but all the rainfall came from extremely localised storms and the Médoc remained almost totally dry. At this time members in most areas noticed that the grapes were swelling significantly, that the mildew and oidium pressure showed no signs of abating, and above all, that we had now lost the two-week advance we had enjoyed at the

beginning, because the wet conditions had caused a potassium and magnesium deficiency in the soil. This could of course be corrected but they feared the worst if this weather were to continue. In addition, they started to realise that this would no longer be an early harvest; more importantly that there was now a great disparity of ripeness amongst the bunches. There followed an early and extremely painstaking second thinning-out of all laggard bunches, often accompanied simultaneously by a second de-leafing in order to further aerate the harvest. And, as if this was not enough, at the end of the month, in many parts of the Bordeaux vineyard, there was a widespread virulent attack of leafhoppers ("cicadelles") that required immediate attention. All this summer work was very painstaking, on everyone's high density vines but it was considered totally necessary and was performed without hesitation and at enormous expense. The fight would be long, but everyone knew that whatever they did, an exceptionally fine autumn would be needed for the harvest to come good.

An incredible, glorious autumn

How could we have possibly hoped for the turn-around that was to happen? Towards the end of August, the high pressure systems that had been so weak in July and August ballooned over Europe, chasing away the Atlantic – and our – depressions and enabling our weather to change at long last. The long-range forecasts became suddenly more confident as we cruised into the longest Indian summer of all time: from the end of August until the last day of October, the sun shone almost permanently, the endless succession of hot, dry days only alleviated by several isolated and very local but violent thundery days, especially on 5th, 17th-18th and 25th September and by some very light night-time showers during the period 4th-16th October only really noticeable on the morning of steady rain on 9th. This felt like high summer at last and the figures now confirm that feeling: at 26°8, September's average maximum temperature was a whole 9% more than August's and 3% more than July's; and at 265 sun hours, September was 27% sunnier than August and 9% sunnier than July; and at 22 mm, September was 3.6 times drier than August and 2.3 times drier than July. It was also the third driest September of the last 100 years, after 1921 and 1985, and the third hottest after 1921 and 1961.

After a full week of this weather change, the dry white harvest could start. The earliest estates harvested 3rd-8th September, most just in the cool of the mornings, before the day's heat (27-31°), and in totally dry conditions, the Sémillons, unusually early this year, right behind the Sauvignons. Most estates harvested 9th-16th September again under hot (26-30°) and totally dry ideal conditions. The heavy storms over the town of Bordeaux on 17th and 18th September were no more than light showers in members' white wine producing areas, so the remainder could continue harvesting at their leisure right up to 25th-26th September also in totally dry but slightly cooler conditions (21-28°). Immediately, there was a general feeling that these dry whites had more than fulfilled their mandate. All talk was of the aromas, the freshness and also the power. These dry white members were the very first to smile after all that August doubting.

Meanwhile, the Merlots had been losing no time to catch up on ripening. The summer had perhaps been more detrimental to growers' mood than to the vine's own performance, which, provided it had received constant attention, had been less dormant than it had appeared during these two difficult months and it now seemed ready to accelerate, some going from 10° to 13°5 potential in just these first three weeks of September.

Apart from a few very early young-vine pickings, the Merlots could wait out the rain of 17th-18th and start on Monday 22nd September under radiant skies. For once, those who could afford to wait were not in too much of a hurry to pick their Merlots: there wasn't an ounce of grey rot nor any danger of it under such dry conditions, especially in the by now arid Médoc (although Margaux and the southern Médoc were actually very happy to have their vineyard revived by the local 5th September rain, even at the expense of some hail). Consequently, harvesting could be put back again and again, and these extra days put the finishing touches to the ripening, allowing the tannins to fine down and soften. First off was Pomerol, quickly followed by Pessac-Léognan then, for once, the Médoc generally preceding Saint-Emilion where Merlot harvesting lasted for a record whole month, from 22nd September right up to 20th October. This lateness of the Saint-Emilion Merlots was apparently due to its particular soil structure, the cooler limestone soils pushing back ripening, and the heavier clays requiring more recovery time than elsewhere after the local mid-month showers and the isolated storm of 25th. Each member's philosophy of total ripeness was also certainly a factor. It didn't really matter as all options were possible under such fine conditions. On the other hand, with the Médoc's continuing drought, the Left Bank Merlots were mostly finished by early October. Certainly the quite recent parcel mapping of each member's vineyard played a major role in deciding the order of picking so that each was at maximum ripeness. The grapes of each parcel were tasted and analysed daily in order to assess the optimum picking moment. And even after all these attentions, the complex sorting tables, often two or even three, plus sometimes an optical one too, could put the finishing touches to the absolute regularity of the harvest. Everywhere there was satisfaction at the frank red-fruit aromas of these Merlots, some lighter (often from the heavier clay soils), some much more concentrated (often from the more filtering soils) but all of great purity.

Then there was a gap while we awaited the Cabernets. Many members reported that the Cabernet adores this kind of Indian summer harvest with its very long hang-time and slow ripening cycle. For we had gone from a two-week early budding to a one-week-late harvest, a full 3 week extra hang time. As for the Merlots, the Left Bank generally harvested first, most finishing by Friday 12th October, some pushing on into the following week, again in very leisurely fashion whereas the Right Bank Cabernet Francs were a week later, most finishing on 17th October, some continuing almost into November. Apart from the steady rain of the morning of 9th October, the occasional showers across the whole region from 4th to 16th October were very light and had no effect on the harvest. There was still no sign of deterioration of the grapes in the form of rot, only, as in 1986, of some wrinkled skins, so, as for the Merlots, they could be picked at will. The Cabernets, Franc as well as Sauvignon, appeared smaller, more concentrated and fleshier than the bigger Merlot grapes, again especially those from the more gravelly or more filtering soils.

Meanwhile, down in Sauternes, the relentlessly dry conditions of September prevented all but a few individual grapes from botrytising and necessitated a 1988-style series of tiny fastidious pickings until the showers of the week of 6th October provided hope for a more substantial onrush of botrytis. As in 1997, in September there had been a big attack of acid rot due in part to perforation by wine-flies (including the newcomer *Drosophila suzukii*), necessitating a big “nettoyage” (negative harvest), but also allowing, as early as 10th September, a small harvest of individual botrytis grapes plus a few good “passerillé” (raisined) ones too. Simultaneously, a large crop of excellent ripe but unbotrytised grapes was picked for their dry white wines. None of the September showers fell on Sauternes: the Sauternais would have loved to have had that Pomerol storm of 17th-18th September or that Graves storm of 29th-30th. So the harvest continued in drought conditions, grape by grape, as each individually botrytised, a painstaking, laborious and costly exercise that accounted for no more than a few hectos per day and that lasted right up until at last it rained on 9th October

This rain unleashed a widespread botrytis boom and a much more serious wave of harvesting could start during the unusually hot 27° days that followed. The beautiful dry days of 20th-26th October, with their much colder nights, often down to 4 or 5°, saw the biggest part of the harvest, uniformly at 20-22° potential, and of total purity - providing utmost care was taken to eliminate acid rot, which had again taken hold and which was to account for much of the final diminished yield, generally 8-10 ho/ha. Most finished by 26th October, some in cooler areas such as Fargues, into the first days of November.

September ended with 265 sun hours – the norm is 182 - and with an absolute record of just 22 mm of rainfall; October at a whopping 194 sun hours and a mere 42 mm of rainfall. These figures are the met station in Méridnac. In the Médoc, it was even less, coming also after a much drier summer than elsewhere. It was totally exceptional and beats all the other driest autumns of this century:

2014	Sept-Oct	63 mm	Sept alone	22 mm
2009		83 mm		49 mm
2005		111 mm		56 mm
2010		117 mm		24 mm

The red wines

Since such a glorious autumn allowed for both maximum ripening and also maximum concentration, alcohol levels are naturally high, generally 13°5-14°5 for the Merlots, and 12°5-13°5, sometimes more, for the Cabernets. Yet the cool summer weather and the prolonged functioning of the vines’ foliage have determined the style of the wines with their low pHs and at first high acidities, coming

from the low summer temperatures and from the prolonged functioning of the vines' foliage. The wines will therefore give a sensation of power but also of great freshness. Much of the musts' acidity was malic, so the wines lost total acidity during the malo-lactics, and anyway always have a tendency to lose tartaric. So the very interesting power and softer tones are now taking over, leaving only the low pH's to account for the freshness of style. The tannin levels of certain Merlots are moderate on account of the difficult véraison, but are showing a soft velvety character and are of excellent quality on account of all the pushing-back of picking dates. This permitted more or less "saignées" (bleeding) without risking overstructuring, principally on those Merlots where compensation of grape-size was necessary. There is generally extreme satisfaction with the Cabernets, Francs as well as Sauvignons. They are less variable than the Merlots and often show great density and tannic structure together with profound aromas. Yields are generally satisfactory on the Left Bank, in the 40s ho/ha, slightly less satisfactory on the Right Bank.

It is well known that vintages can never be identical, but harvest-time inevitably brings back to us memories of previous experiences which quite naturally evoke comparisons to other recent vintages. Back in September, the 2014's combination of power and freshness at first made members think of 2001, similarly the result of an indifferent summer and a magnificent, if cooler, autumn. But, as the harvest continued, and especially now that we can assess the superb Cabernets more clearly, these 2014s generally have considerably more power and riper tannins than that. Some, especially in the more dominant Cabernet-Sauvignon areas, and on certain later-harvested Right Bank Merlots, mention 1996, 2006, 2000, and in some cases even 2005, because of their more solidly integrated tannins. Occasionally, there is even just a little something of 2010 in this vintage when the depth of power combines with such freshness.

The dry white wines

The Pessac-Léognan members consider this to be a great dry white Bordeaux vintage. Such optimal harvesting conditions after such a cool summer were very beneficial to the Bordeaux style of dry white wines, which requires a certain florality and acid balance as well as power and fullness. These 2014s combine both perfectly. It is a vintage of finesse and sprightliness, but with considerable power, the Sauvignons regularly measuring 14° and more. Yields are generally low.

Sauternes

As for the dry whites and the reds, the combination of power and acidity is set to put 2014 Sauternes on a very high level. Both parts of the harvest have produced remarkably similar musts in terms of residual sugar, in spite of the great differences between the tiny pickings of September and the more

massive ones of October. In the wines, the differences will be found in the acidities, very strong in the September picks, less in the October ones, and the assemblage of both will nevertheless make for very lively wines, almost to the level of the 2001s. There is also a big difference of style between the two, the first very fresh and fruit-driven, the second much more complex, and it is this complexity running through the purity which will certainly make this a great vintage.

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