



Château d'Yquem

2011 VINTAGE

GROWING SEASON

After a fairly mild, but very dry winter, the 2011 growing season got off to a flying start due to unseasonably warm temperatures: March was 1.4°C warmer than usual, April was the warmest in 115 years (along with 1922), and May set an absolute record (3.7°C above average)!

From the 15th of March to the 26th of May, 70 out of 73 days were warmer than average, which led to flowering in mid-May i.e. three weeks ahead of the usual date. Thus, from a very early stage, everything pointed towards an early vintage whatever the rest of the growing season was like. The only fly in the ointment was a hail storm on the 25th of April. However, this affected only a small part of Yquem's vineyards and occurred at a time when the vines are particularly resistant to hail.

Fortunately, the summer of 2011 attenuated the effect of exuberant springtime temperatures. June and July were only slightly warmer than average and even included a 17-day cold spell, from the 13th to the 29th of July!

The extreme drought at the beginning of the growing season was compensated by about 30% more rain than usual over the three summer months. This was beneficial to vegetation, avoided excessive water stress, and ensured sufficient nutrition to grapes that were ripening well ahead of time.

Fine weather returned in early August, marking the beginning of a new warm period. This was remarkably even and long-lasting. From 30 July until 18 October, 63 days out of 81 were warmer than average! Precipitation was also 30% less than usual in September and October.

This warm weather, but without a real heat wave (maximum temperatures practically did not budge from 15 April to 15 October), naturally led to a very early harvest, and we began picking grapes to make 2011 "Y" on the 17th of August, the earliest recorded date at Yquem.

It is important to point out that, despite the exceptionally warm growing season, a temperate month of July miraculously retained the freshness and acidity essential to producing great white wines.

THE HARVEST

The grapes for "Y" were picked (one bunch per vine) in the best plots on the 17th, 19th, 22nd, 23rd, 29th, and 30th of August, all days without rain.

After showers on the 24th, 25th, and 26th of August (total 27 mm), a first wave of noble rot appeared on perfectly ripe fruit. This tended to affect grapes in the centre of bunches, and raised fears of its transformation into sour rot on sandy plots due to heavy showers forecast for early September. However, Yquem was largely spared by the rain (and hail) that fell in the vicinity. In fact, the 29 mm of precipitation over 4 days (from the 2nd to the 5th of September) encouraged the development of *Botrytis cinerea* throughout the vineyard.

We began picking grapes with noble rot on the 6th of September (the 4th earliest harvest in the past 125 years, after 1893, 1960, and 1997). The first lots of Sauternes were harvested and pressed over two days. Pickers took advantage of their time in the vineyard to "clean" a few plots of grapes affected by sour rot.

The beautiful, warm (over 30°C) weather continued, so we left the grapes on the vines for 5 days to concentrate further, and did not start picking again until the 12th of September, at which time we harvested in every plot. These grapes combined freshness with sugar levels that were already very high.

Seeing as rain was forecast, we interrupted the harvest on 17/09. However, just 7 mm of rain fell, after which an anticyclone set in. We let water evaporate from the grapes and sugar levels rise for 4 days before going back to pick.

Timing was very delicate here because we did not want sugar levels to increase too quickly, and waiting much longer would have been detrimental to quality. However, close observation in the vineyard had convinced us that there were enough plots of less concentrated grapes to cope with a likely "explosion" of sugar levels in other plots with homogeneous botrytisation (all the grapes were at the *plein pourri* or fully rotten stage).

We picked superb grapes on the 21st, 22nd, and 23rd of September during a second pass which largely accounted for the quality the 2011 vintage at Yquem.

Since the beautiful weather persisted, we took another break on Saturday the 24th. This was necessary for the tired pickers and to respect French labour law. A new sprint began on Sunday the 25th, lasting until the 28th. This entailed harvesting grapes from Yquem's prestigious plots with clay soil. Although these were very sweet (22-23° potential alcohol), sugar levels were definitely within reason to achieve the balance of a great Sauternes thanks to the incorporation of a certain percentage of overripe, but unbotrytised grapes. The same method was used for the 3rd and 4th passes on the 3rd, 4th, and 5th of October after a new four-day break to find just the right equilibrium between botrytised and unbotrytised grapes.

The harvest ended very early, in keeping with the head start due to the outstandingly warm spring. Only two vintages (2003 and 1934) have finished earlier than this date since 1885.

ASSESSMENT

A **very intense, very quick** harvest picked over five weeks during **very warm** (4°C above average, and 5 days over 30°C) and **very dry** (10mm of rain in 35 days instead of the average 75mm) weather.

This vintage is especially interesting because Yquem's diverse terroirs made it possible to find just the right balance between alcohol, acidity, and sugar typical of great vintages. The extreme sweetness of the botrytised grapes meant that these needed to be blended with other, less rich grapes. The latter had the added advantage of featuring very worthwhile complementary aromas (varietal, fruity, floral, and aroma precursors) that increased the wine's aromatic complexity. The mainly clay soil on the butte section of Yquem's vineyard saved the 2011 vintage from the split berries that lead to the much-dreaded sour rot.

Another reason for the superb quality of this vintage is that fermentation was quick and trouble-free. The powerful aromas that pervaded the cellar will long be remembered by the men and women who work there.

Alcohol by volume 13,80% Vol - Residual sugar 144gr/L – PH : 3,85