



NEWSLETTER

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Vintage is coming and the Baume's getting high

Well, well, dear pluckers, a revelation. A test of the Chardonnay grapes today produced a Baume reading (sugar level) of 13 – very high and we would normally be rushing out to order picking bins. However, the juice is green so we shall stay put for the time being.

It raises a couple of interesting questions that we haven't confronted before, namely: why is this so? And is it good, bad or indifferent for Vintage?

But he digresses

It has been, as most people know, a very dry year – locals rate this as the worst drought ever (one pedant says 1902 was worse but since he is not a day over 78 he has little credibility. This was the same local to whom a wine judge tried to explain what makes good wine. "This one tastes a little raw at the moment but put it down for 10 years and you'll be rewarded," said the judge. "Mate," replied the local, "at my age I don't even buy green tomatoes.") The present drought began about three years ago. It hit crisis point during spring. Many fruit and vegetable farms have no water at all in their dams.

Our water supply copes but there really is no substitute for rain. Normally we would give the vines three or four hours of water a week (24 – 32 litres) up to and including veraison, the point at which cells in the berries stop dividing and begin expanding. This year we have been giving them seven hours plus per week up to and through veraison and we are only now cutting down to two or three hours a week. That indicates how low soil moisture levels are.

Reduced yield and small berries

The upshot has been reduced yield and smaller berries (we think we will average about 3 tonnes per acre this year). Combined with unusually hot weather until a week ago, this prompted sugar levels to shoot ahead of ripeness (ripeness produces flavour). Hence the figure of 13 Baume with grapes still green and a pH figure of 3.43. So, does it matter? My initial assumption was that we would have to pick soon but winemaker Rod Macpherson counselled against this.

"It is overcast and cool," he reasoned. "Let us try for another fortnight to get the ripeness right and we will cope with higher sugar levels during fermentation by using a less efficient strain of yeast." Very clever, but what if it rains? Or what if the weather turns hot again? "Well, then we may need to compromise, matey." So, the correct Taoist response is "mu", meaning the question is too big for the answer (or is that the answer is too big for the question? It's a long time since I read Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance).

Why Vintage equals high blood pressure

So, we wait. And once more, dear reader, you may perceive how Vintage annually contrives to make us nervous wrecks. It always comes down to these last few weeks. Potentially, this is an excellent year – almost as good as 2002. If dry, cool weather continues then we shall be blessed, but hard rain will break both drought and Vintage. On balance I would settle for drought-breaking rain: a short-term problem producing long-term gain.

We tested the French Colombard also today: 11.55 Baume and 3.12 pH – at least two or three weeks to go. We put bird netting on the Shiraz only a week ago; it is through veraison but not yet worth testing. So far it looks wonderful with big bollocky bunches and lots of flavour. The older Cabernet Sauvignon block is also travelling well although the younger one is not as good. It has been a difficult season for young vines. We shall separate the two at ferment.

Pluckers of the world unite

So, prospective pluckers, it is not quite time to start engines but you could check the tyres. My guess at this stage is that we will be looking at Tuesday week, February 18, to pick the Chardonnay. This is one month earlier than the date on which we picked it last year; good old Mother Nature. Anyone interested in picking can drop me an email. It will be at the usual usurious rates. Well, we eat well sleep well and the company is magnificent.

'til then, troops.

John Arlidge

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