

AY, CHAMPAGNE, FRANCE - CHAMPAGNE BOLLINGER & AYALA

In many ways, the 2016 wine-growing year was similar to certain years of the 20th century.

The only big difference was a very mild – historically mild – winter, with the temperature in the month of December 2015 surpassing every record, whereas, in the last century, the other winters had often been marked by intense cold spells (such as the winter of 1947, when the temperature remained below freezing from 21 January to 3 March).

The beginning of the springtime of 2016 was then marked by a colder period which gave rise to a late bud burst in the Bollinger vineyards around 20 April. Despite these conditions, frost appeared at the end of April with major consequences for the Champagne vineyards: nearly 4,500 hectares were entirely destroyed. Half of the damage occurred in the Aube area alone. At Bollinger, the Pinot Noir vineyards were barely affected. The frost was particularly significant in our Champvoisy vineyards (80% of the losses) and Cuis vineyards (25% of losses), reminiscent of the frosts of 1975 or 1955.

The springtime of 2016 turned out to be very wet and not very sunny, setting a record high in terms of precipitation and a record low in terms of sunshine. This was exactly the opposite of 2015. This mediocre weather led to late, homogeneous blooming throughout the vineyards around 25 June and also brought on major flooding, much like it did in 1955, 1982 and 1988. Of course, this record rainfall, which lasted until the end of July, brought on a succession of diseases: peduncular rot, extremely aggressive mildew. Much more than it did in 1997, which was a reference year in recent Champagne history! The average damage in the Champagne region was estimated by the CIVC to be 15% of the yield potential. Checks made on the Bollinger vineyards revealed a reduction of (only) 5% of the yield potential. Proving that sustainable wine-growing techniques are compatible with effectiveness!

Bollinger's commitment to excluding the use of herbicides was also put to the test, but was maintained despite very difficult intervention conditions!

The weather made an about-face in early August. It became very dry and sometimes very hot, drying out all the patches of mildew and botrytis and even scorching some bunches here and there, much as in 1964 and 1947. The maturation process got off to a vigorous start and did not slow in September until after a bit of rain fell on the weekend of 10/11 September.

The Chardonnay, which usually begins maturing later than the black varieties, did not make up for lost time, and to everyone's surprise – since the vines had bloomed simultaneously – led to a very staggered harvest.

The first Meunier grapes were gathered around 13 September, while the Pinot Noir from Montagne de Reims only began on 19 September. At Bollinger, harvesting began on 17 September with the ripest vineyards in Aÿ, including the VVF. The Cuis vineyard in Chardonnay only began to be harvested on 27 September, when the harvest of Pinot Noir crus were already finished!

As expected, the yield was relatively low: approximately 9,000 kg/ha throughout the Bollinger vineyards; but the quality was perfect, with an average degree superior to 10, total acidity near 8 g/l, a pH around 3 and especially a perfectly healthy condition, which seems miraculous in view of the year's growing conditions!

From our point of view, at this stage, the great success of 2016 should be the Pinot Noirs of the Grand and Premiers crus of the Montagne de Reims and so much the better for us! (For example, the average degree at pressing for the Verzenay vineyard = 10.6°). It seems that the region's Chardonnays were mainly harvested too early – fortunately this was not the case for ours – and that their degrees were somewhat disappointing.

At Bollinger, the harvest of red wine grapes was made on 28 and 29 September... Two vats of Côte aux Enfants (including one comprising a full harvest), one vat of Aÿ, one of Verzenay and one of Louvois, all registered over 12°; that of the Côte aux Enfants even neared 13°.

At this stage, the year's events, analytical profiles, harvest dates and health conditions all resemble those of a beloved Bollinger vintage: 1988! Let us hope that the tastings to come will confirm this hunch and that the traditional Champagne saying, "août fait le moût" ("August determines the must") will prove true!

