

This is the story of a vintage year in two parts: a totally extraordinary, excessive first half that gradually tempered into a gentle, more typically Atlantic and erratic second half. It is the story of a year which, until high summer, was charged with universal enthusiasm but which then continued into a very variable ending, some a truly great ending, others just a very good one. Here is how it began:

### **Winter 2014/2015**

The hot, rain-starved 2014 harvest period had left the vineyard in urgent need of winter rainfall, if it was to withstand any of the summer drought conditions so frequent in recent years. The autumn of 2014 had been the driest and hottest of the last 115 years. So the 120mm of November rains couldn't have been more welcome. But this was to be the end of any real replenishment as December became worryingly dry again (less than half the normal rainfall for the month) and January - February nothing exceptional. Later nobody could quite understand how, during the five months of severe drought that were to follow as from March, the vine resisted at all after such a shortage of winter rainfall. Maybe part of the answer was that we had entered the season with a good stock of moisture deep down in the soil from the relatively wet previous two years.

Apart from water, the other essential winter requirement was frost, to enable the vines to stay properly dormant and to kill off pests. The autumn heat proceeded to persist well into November but then at last the frosts started to appear, sixteen freezing nights over December - January, even more outside of town, nothing excessive, never below -5°C, but perfect for getting the pruning done while the sap was down and for keeping the bugs at bay.

### **Spring 2015 and an on-time perfect budding**

These very welcome February frosts were to be the last of the season (apart from the odd mild harmless one 5<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup>-26<sup>th</sup> March out in the country). Without them, the budding would certainly have started there and then. The warm daytime temperatures of March then became dangerously high, but the cold nights quickly put paid to the vines' zeal and the few swellings that were noticeable in some warmer sites around the middle of the month were promptly arrested by the frigid northerlies of 22<sup>nd</sup>-26<sup>th</sup>. Bordeaux had been lucky: in the world as a whole, March was the hottest since 1880 and the Arctic lost 1.2 million square km of ice cover.

The first few days of April stayed cool but the vine was getting impatient. Its wood was strong and healthy and it was raring to go. Maybe the fact that it hadn't been fatigued by the previous four relatively low yields had something to do with it and this also could partly explain why it coped with such extreme heat during the drought that was to come. So, when the weather suddenly warmed up on 6<sup>th</sup> April, quickly crescendoing into the high 20s, there occurred the most amazingly rapid bud-burst, whites and reds, Merlots and Cabernets, all in unison. Thankyou, the strongest, longest and broadest spring anticyclone on record, stretching from Atlanta to Ankara and from Timbuktu to Tromso The shoots grew quickly, up to 4-5 cm on some Margaux Merlots as soon as 17<sup>th</sup>. The embryo bunches immediately looked big and there were a lot of them. With the added help of some good rainfall during the last 10 days of April, the foliage galloped ahead and it became clear we were now off to an early start after all.

### **Early summer and a speedy flowering**

May continued very dry (April had seen a 70% rainfall deficit and May would be almost 60%) and also very hot as the foliage continued to grow solidly, often reaching the top

wire by 10<sup>th</sup> May or so. The vine was now ready to flower but got slightly delayed by the cooler nights from 14<sup>th</sup>-23<sup>rd</sup>. Then, with the very regular warmth of the next 10 days, 10-12°C every night and 21-24°C every day, it blossomed into the fastest, most efficient flowering possible, this being perhaps the most important stage on the way to a quality vintage. Then the heat suddenly escalated in the first few days of June, culminating in an amazing 35°1 on 4<sup>th</sup>. Such a sudden burst of heat just as the flowering was concluding could have meant casualties in the form of aborted grape-set, but it came just after the main part of the job had been done, timed perfectly to accelerate the end of the process by efficiently expelling the “caps” and, over the ensuing gently warm following week and with some beneficial rain the week after, the bunches started to look robust and well-formed. As each year, there was talk here and there of just a little coulure, and later in some areas “windows” became visible in the bunch spread, especially on the Right Bank – but it didn’t matter too much because the “sortie” had been so big.

With the flowering over so quickly, more precise planning than usual could be made for the rest of the year’s vineyard work and for harvest dates. The little cool period just beforehand had put the programme back from early to normal, making it later than the record precocious 2011 but ahead of most recent vintages. Now there was the prospect of a September rather than October harvest, a further indicator of a top quality vintage.

### **The scorching drought of high summer**

The only snag at this point was the extreme heat and drought. June was turning into the fourth successive month of 50% rainfall deficit and of scorching temperatures: April and June were both a full 3.2°C above the mean normal temperature and both broke records for the number of sun hours, in the case of June, just as the sun is at its most powerful... which brings us to the point about “effeuillage”, the practice of cutting off the leaves around the bunches, first on the East side, then on the West side, in order to obtain direct sunlight on the grapes. Many had got half-way through this process, largely encouraged by temporarily cooler and damper conditions mid-month, then had to stop when the heat-wave quickly returned, in order to avoid scorching. Many had already decided against it, as it encourages extra sugar in the grapes and a certain jamminess in the wines, both of which many now consider to have been excessive in recent vintages. The debate continued inconclusively for the rest of the year but certainly on the driest soils, it was not of any help in de-stressing the vines.

The hottest day of the year was 29<sup>th</sup> June, unusually early for such a record, and was followed by almost as much extreme heat over the first 22 days of July, with 3 days over 35°C and 11 over 30°C. Up until now, the vine had withstood the pressure of drought and heat remarkably well. Its foliage had been bright and vigorous; even the roadside grass had remained all green. Could we dare hope for a repeat of 1961? But this was not to be: these 22 days were just too much, the foliage was often beginning to curl in the heat of the day and the roadsides started looking like savannah. The month ended up as the fourth hottest July in Aquitaine in 100 years. The vine, which had done so well until now, started to suffer, especially on the lighter soils, but only here and there as total shut-down, more generally as a sort of closing in on itself, ceasing to give priority to its reproduction in favour of its own survival. It was not a long moment, just three weeks, but it was enough to ensure that the grapes would remain very small and that they would prematurely thicken their skins. If these conditions were to continue, they could end up devoid of juice, many severely shrivelled, others half burnt. It was a very anxious moment. Until July, the heat and drought had been thought of as a very positive early-ripening influence; by mid July they were considered more as a negative and delaying and even possibly fatal influence.

### **Late summer's rains save the day**

It was precisely now, with the vines at the end of their tether and with the forest fires blazing in St Jean d'Ilac threatening the SW suburbs of Bordeaux, (but a mere nothing compared to what NW America was now experiencing) that the air started to change, the wind first going round and round in circles and then at last bringing some dampness from the ocean. All this quickly escalated into two violent coastal storms on 22<sup>nd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> July, which then convected into strong rains as they passed over the oven-baked land, providing up to 30mm inland, especially on the Right Bank. Our afore-mentioned strong anticyclone was starting to deflate, allowing depressionary tracks to come through for the first time in five months, and setting the stage for what would come to be termed "August 2015's rains of salvation". With 13 days over 30°C, August remained hot – the land takes time to cool down - but it brought four wonderful episodes of rain - eight in Sauternes (which would account for the very early first stage of botrytis this year). This August rainfall was unequally distributed: 90mm at the Mérignac Met Station, but up to 140mm on parts of the Right Bank, up to 100 in parts of the Médoc and Graves, and as little as 50 in parts of the Entre-Deux-Mers (contributing to the low yields and high alcohols of the EDM wines this year).

It also coincided with the "véraison", which quickly became the most even and earliest since 2009 and was easily concluded by the weekend of 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> August under the influence of these re-invigorating showers...but only re-invigorating to a point, because, as a result of the preceding drought, the vine was already ceasing to foliate, taking in this nourishment for itself and leaving its grapes to concentrate on their own. This premature halt in the growth of the foliage and the nourishment of the bunches was possibly the biggest factor explaining the extreme health of the crop at the end, allowing most harvesters to wait calmly and unhurried for the optimum picking time for each parcel and variety, even when conditions were not perfect. Indeed, apart from a few Sémillons that got fragile at the end of August and a few Merlots that took on too much water in September, there was hardly an ounce of grey rot to be seen all year. Oidium and mildew were a real danger early on, as they love the spring sunlight, but were usually brought well under control, even in the bio vineyards, and black rot's first appearance for several years sometimes went unnoticed. But, generally, the bunches ended up so healthy that there would be little need to rush to harvest.

### **Autumn's erratic rainfall shuffles the cards**

The harvest started during the week of 24<sup>th</sup> August with the earliest dry whites in Sauternes and Pessac-Léognan. Apart from light showers on 31<sup>st</sup>, they enjoyed perfect sunny conditions and suddenly much cooler temperatures, maxima in the 20s and minima in the teens. In addition, the diurnal / nocturnal shift was ideally high, often 15°C between night and day temperatures, providing good acid retention and nice freshness in these quite strongly constituted wines. The spritely but powerful Sauvignons were quite clearly the leaders over the softer-styled Sémillons, which had not reacted so well to the August moisture. The whites of the cooler soils of the Bordeaux appellation were harvested quickly towards the end of this period, getting caught at the end under the mid-September rains, but they were so concentrated it didn't matter too much; also the white vineyards are situated precisely in the places of lowest September rainfall.

The sunshine had now run out. On 10<sup>th</sup> September, a depression was announced for 12<sup>th</sup>, followed by two days of wet "ciel de traine" and culminating in torrential rain for ex-tropical-storm Henry's visit on 16<sup>th</sup> and damp conditions continuing for a further week beyond that. If this forecast were correct, it would be a serious setback to the vintage but curiously very few people rushed out to pick their Merlots. Most unusually, everyone just calmly re-scheduled their picking dates to later. Normally September rain accelerates the

harvest dates (1999, 2006); this time it delayed them. Growers could sense the grapes' resistance and didn't need to hurry, and, since the vine was no longer feeding them, they didn't swell very much.

The forecast was correct for the dates, but incorrect for the volumes of rainfall, which ended up being much greater over the initial period of 12<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> September than for the remains of Henry on 16<sup>th</sup>. In addition, the geographical distribution of this rain was wildly erratic, at its heaviest in the Northern Médoc, heavy in Blaye, only 40mm or so in Pessac-Léognan, Margaux and Sauternes, and varying from almost 0 to 40mm on the Right Bank. Apart from the perennial panickers at the lower end who had ripped through their harvest as from the week of 7<sup>th</sup>, the Merlots generally started at the tail end of the showers, around 18<sup>th</sup> September, starting as usual with the young vines and those that had been weakened in areas of greater rainfall. Then, with the return of sunny days and cold nights 20<sup>th</sup> September -1<sup>st</sup> October, almost all the rest of the Merlots were picked, at leisure, each parcel constantly being re-scheduled to take advantage of each's maximum ripeness, wherever possible always delaying rather than advancing the programme. The great majority of the top estates picked their Merlots over the last 4 days of the month, in perfect conditions. However, some had to wait further into October for full ripeness, including a dwindling group of partisans of over-ripeness.

It was now time for the Cabernets, Francs on the Right Bank, Sauvignons on the Left. This year, these were all picked simultaneously, and, with the return of the fine weather and northerly cool winds from 8<sup>th</sup> October, they could be concluded once again at leisurely pace. The weekend nights of 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> October brought heavy rain, once again especially on the Médoc which motivated the Left Bank to accelerate more than the Right Bank. But nobody seemed worried by the catastrophic forecast of 30mm for 12<sup>th</sup> and they were right...it never materialised.

By the time the rain returned on 27<sup>th</sup>, the whole harvest was finished, the final Cabs and Sauternes in perfect cool and sunny conditions around 20<sup>th</sup>-22<sup>nd</sup>.

### **The wines**

The dry whites, harvested in the most perfect conditions possible, after invigorating August rainfall and during the brilliantly sunny coolness of end August / early September, have an extraordinary fresh and grapey appeal, enhanced by the generally greater proportion of Sauvignon in the blends, after the Sémillons had reacted less well to the wet August. They are well-concentrated, having yielded less volume than the reds of the same estates, are absolutely pure and have similar refreshing acidity to the very spritely '07s and '12s. The objective was also, in line with the times, to reduce the new oak influence below that of those two vintages.

The reds range from OK to very good to outstanding, depending on a whole pile of factors, not least of which being the amount of mid-September and early October rain and how the grapes reacted to it; also how stressed they got in June-July. It is a very complex picture, but generally speaking, Left Bank Merlots are lighter, less fleshy and solid than their Right Bank counterparts, Left Bank Cabernets gain in intensity from North to South, meaning that Margaux and Pessac-Léognan did very well, Right Bank Merlots range from a more delicate style on the thinner cooler soils to an extremely impressive dark, thick, powerful style on the St Emilion Côte and parts of the plateau, especially in the micro areas of lesser rainfall.

Largely due to the regularity of the flowering and véraison, there were few wide variations of ripeness dates from each estate's norm. Because the condition of most Merlot grapes allowed them the luxury to do so, some growers spun out their picking, but virtually all the top Pomerol Merlots were ready in the same last four days of September and virtually all the top Médoc Cabs were picked in the first 8 days of October. In addition, with the possible

exception of some very prolific young-vine Merlots, yields were all about in the same range of 40-50 ho/ha (which was more than could be hoped for in July!). As a result of all this regularity, the wines are beginning to show a real vintage identity, however light or full they may be. This identity lies first in their naturally quite high alcohol levels, then in their aromatic complexity and in the silkiness of their suave tannins. It was puzzling at first that such small, thick-skinned grapes could take so long to deliver their tannins during fermentation. Maybe the skins had hardened so early in the cycle that they didn't tanninise at the usual rate after the véraison, especially during the shock of the wet August after all those months of drought. At the time there were many allusions to the burgundy style, beautifully ripe and velvety but not tremendously extractable, and the press wines generally didn't add much either. In addition, there was a general tendency towards very gentle extractions, in order to preserve all the potential features of the vintage's finesse.

At first, the acidities were thought to be too low, but they caught up naturally during vinification and the pHs ended up more balanced than the similarly hot vintages of '90, '03 and '09.

### **Sauternes**

This was a dream vintage for Sauternes. The origin of its quality is to be found in the extra very localised June and August rainfall which precipitated a very early start to the botrytis process. Most estates picked in a series of four "tries", each time with the botrytis set in motion by four patches of wet weather and each perfectly concentrated into "rôti" stage by four subsequent perfect sunny, dry and cool days. For each, pickers were spared the tedious task of weeding out the bad rot, because there just wasn't any and nobody had to pick in the rain either. So everything came in beautifully pure and fine. Sometimes the sugar levels got too high and had to be calmed down by the addition of golden un-botrytised grapes, but generally they were in the magic window of 20-22° potential throughout and there was a most unusual evenness between the different lots.

The first trie, in some vineyards as early as the weekend of 5<sup>th</sup> September, occasionally contained a few shrivelled grapes, but thereafter it was full botrytis all the way. The body of the harvest came in during the second and third tries of the first two weeks of October and for once the final tries during the week of 19<sup>th</sup> October were just as pure and fine. One or two carried on into the first days of November and even that late obtained the same kind of rich purity.

The style of these wines is of course very rich, but, with a few notable exceptions, less absolutely sweet than the more "spherical" '05s or the very powerful '09s: very generally, the average sweetness for the crus classés of the '15s ended up at around 130g/l rather than 140-150 for the '09s. But their main feature is the great definition of fine, fresh fruit, even more so than in '07 and '11 but a little less dense than the latter. They are softer and have slightly less acidity than the '14s. They will be lovely in their youth but have low volatiles and are not combining sulphur, so are expected to age very well.

Yields were well above the average of the last 5 years, most crus classés well above 15 ho/ha, some over 20. There had not been that many grapes on the vines (it had been a small "sortie"), but then nothing needed to be discarded.

### **Conclusion**

Even before the 2014s had been made, people were saying that a vintage ending in a 5 was destined to be great: '05, '95, '85, '75, '45. During the whole year, the 2015s were almost willed along into being great, and in June, even greater than great, after four consecutive months of heat and drought, an early bud-burst and an efficient flowering had seemed to set it on that path to greatness. But what happened next had some consequences that caused

considerable regional variation: July the fifth month of drought and, for some, a month too many; August the suddenly wet month, and above all September and early October the fickle months of rain in some places and not in others. Quite clearly some really great wines have been made, but by no means everywhere.

Yet, lighter or richer, the vintage seems to have a hallmark style. Every vintage is unique, but it is customary, and sometimes useful, to draw comparisons to others. Even though such an exercise is very difficult this time due to so much variation, here is an attempt:

If the most important feature of this vintage is the extreme drought and heat from March to July, then meteorologically, the closest previous vintages are '85, '89, '95 and '06. Of these, 1985 and 1989 seem the closest. They both had extreme summer heat – although not quite the same extreme drought conditions. Nevertheless there seems to be a great resemblance in style to these two vintages, whilst 1995 and 2006 had a very similar summer to 2015 but a much wetter September that accelerated the harvest into a much harder style. During early summer's exuberant optimism, besides the '61s, the three recent vintages that were the most often evoked were the '05s, 09s and '10s. Later, such allusions ceased except in the very few most favoured sites.

In general, all growers are extremely pleased with their wines, some exceptionally so. Quite clearly 2015 is by far the most satisfactory of the last five vintages and, in line with the times, and contrary to the year's weather, the wines are beautiful rather than excessive.

### **Appendix 1: The year's monthly rainfall and temperatures**

	<u>Rainfall</u> 2015	<u>Normal</u> Rainfall	<u>Temp °C in relation</u> <u>to normal</u>	<u>Sun hours 2015</u>
<u>Winter</u>	mm	mm		
11/14	120	88	+ 4.2°	
12/14	54	107	+ 0.5°	
01/15	93	101	+ 0.9°	
02/15	80	85	- 0.6°	
03/15	38	77	+1.5°	
<b>Total</b>	<b>385</b>	<b>458</b>	<b>+ 1.3°</b>	
<u>Spring</u>				
04/10	<b>26</b>	70	+ <b>3.2°</b>	197 h
05/10	<b>33</b>	78	+ 1.8°	201 h
06/10	<b>44</b>	56	+ <b>3.2°</b>	<b>301 h</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>103</b>	204	+ 2.7°	699 h
<u>Summer</u>				
07/10	35	46	+ <b>2.9°</b>	<b>281 h</b>
08/10	<b>90*</b>	58	+ 2.2°	252 h
<b>Total</b>	125	104	+ 2.6°	513 h
<u>Autumn</u>				
09/10	<b>40*</b>	68	- 0.4°	209 h
10/10	<b>52*</b>	74	- 0.1°	169 h
<b>Total</b>	87	142	- 0.3°	378 h
<b>Total</b>	<b>630 mm</b>	<b>928 mm</b>		

## Appendix 2: Diary of the 2015 vintage's harvest

<u>Date</u>	<u>Temp°C</u>	<u>Weather</u>	<u>Rainfall in mm</u>	<u>Harvesting dates</u>
<u>August</u> (Norm 14°2 – 25°6)				<u>Dry whites</u>
25 T	13-26°	s		I (P-L)
26 W	17-29°	s		I
27 Th	18-32°	s/c		I
28 F	19-32°	s		I
29 S	21-34°	s		I
30 Su	21-34°	s		I
31 M	22-30°	s/sh	2	I
<u>September</u> (Norm:12°5 - 23°7)				
01 T	18-24°	s/c		I
02 W	12-25°	s		I
03 Th	15-23°	s		I
04 F	9-22°	s		I
05 S	10-22°	s		I
06 Su	8-23°	s		I
07 M	11-23°	s		I (EdM)
08 T	11-25°	s		I
09 W	11-28°	s		I
10 Th	16-26°	s/c		I
11 F	14-27°	s		I
12 S	17-22°	r	9-50*	I
13 Su	15-22°	r	9-40*	I
14 M	14-19°	r	5-30*	I
15 T	13-21°	sh	4	I
16 W	18-28°	c/s		I
17 Th	15-21°	c/sh	2	I (+ early LB)
18 F	12-21°	s/sh	3	I
19 S	13-20°	s/c/sh	1	I
20 Su	8-23°	s		I
21 M	9-24°	s/sh	1	I (+ early RB)
22 T	14-19°	sh	4	I
23 W	10-19°	c/s		I
24 Th	7-20°	s		I
25 F	13-21°	s/c		I (GV LB/RB)
26 S	11-22°	s		I
27 Su	8-22°	s		I
28 M	11-24°	s		I
29 T	9-22°	s		I
30 W	14-24°	s		I
<u>October</u> (Norm: 9°1 - 18°9)				<u>Cabernet-Sauv&amp;Franc</u>
01 Th	11-22°	s		I
02 F	4-17°	c/sh	1	I

03 S	10-16°	r/c/r	20-30*			<b>I</b>	
04 Su	9-18°	s/sh	1-10*			<b>I</b>	
05 M	14-26°	c/sh	1*		I	<b>I</b>	<b>I</b>
06 T	17-22°	c/sh	1		I	<b>I</b>	<b>I</b>
07 W	13-20°	sh/s	3		I	<b>I</b>	<b>I</b>
08 Th	8-20°	s			I	<b>I</b>	<b>I</b>
09 F	7-19°	s			I	<b>I</b>	<b>I</b>
10 S	7-21°	s			I	<b>I</b>	
11 Su	10-21°	s/c				<b>I</b>	
12 M	12-16°	c			I		<b>I</b>
13 T	10-16°	s			I		<b>I</b>
14 W	5-12°	s				<b>I</b>	<b>I</b>
15 Th	4-16°	s/c				<b>I</b>	<b>I</b>
16 F	2-13°	s	Frosts		I		<b>I</b>
17 S	4-16°	s					<b>I</b>
18 Su	11-15°	sh/c					<b>I</b>
19 M	9-19°	s/c				<b>I</b>	<b>I</b>
20 T	8-17°	s				<b>I</b>	<b>I</b>
21 W	8-17°	f/s					<b>I</b>
22 Th	10-16°	c					<b>I</b>
23 F	13-18°	c/s					<b>I</b>

Figures are as at the Met Station in Mérignac.

Regional variations marked by \*

Bold type = the main days of harvesting

c=cloud f=fog sh=showers LB=Left Bank RB=Right Bank P-L=Pessac-Leognan  
s=sunshine r=rain GV=GrandsVins

And now, here's to the 2016s, the year of the biggest El Nino event of all times, so far typically delivering a record mild winter and deluges of rain, making the vines ready for an early start. After that, since it is supposed to recede by May, it will probably not have that much influence over the rest of the year, so, apart from the steady rise in the temperature each year, nothing can really be forecast at this stage. More later.

Bill Blatch, Bordeaux, February 2016

