

BODEGAS CASTRO MARTIN

Harvest Report 2011 – A stop-start summer harvest!

The winter of 2010/2011 was very wet, even by Galician standards. During January & February we experienced a few odd days of frost, but nothing out of the ordinary.

The most noticeable change to our normal weather pattern started in March, with the premature arrival of spring. A dry month, with temperatures reaching as high as 20°C (68°F). April was even warmer with temperatures pushing up to 30°C (86°F), and still it remained very dry.

This extended warm, dry period continued throughout May with temperatures averaging around 25°C (77°F), again without a drop of rain in sight. As a result, flowering in 2011 was extraordinarily early, starting around 10th May rather than at the end of the month as we would normally expect. Of course, in these dry, sunny conditions the flowering passed off perfectly. However, during the month of June our weather cycle started to change yet again. The daily temperatures dropped to an average of between 18 - 20°C. There were many overcast days, a little drizzle, but without any significant rainfall.

These slightly cooler temperatures continued throughout July with an average similar to June. It also proved to be dull and overcast, but it was not until 8th/9th July that we experienced the first two days of continuous rainfall. August remained the same, cool temperatures with a daytime average of only 23 -25°C. Very changeable, overcast days, some drizzle, but largely remaining doggedly dry.

Whilst it might appear that I have gone into a lot of detail about this year's weather, this is simply because it always has such a significant effect, and ultimately determines both the start date and quality of every harvest.

The original forecast that I made on our blog site towards the end of May suggested that we should start picking around 23rd August. This prediction was made with the commonly used calculation of 100 days between flowering and harvest, and I should tell you that I was not too far out.... After a very unsettled month, we

finally decided to start the 2011 campaign on 29th August, a bright, sunny day but with a modest temperature of only 21°C (70°F).

Not only did the weather dictate the start date of our harvest, but it soon became very clear that it would also dictate the quantity and style. The warm spring had encouraged vigorous growth in the vineyard, and despite some 'green harvesting' during the month of July, the yields were far greater than the vast majority people predicted. The cooler temperatures during July and August would also result in lower alcohol levels too. For the last few vintages we have seen an average degree of between 12° and 12,5°alc, whereas the early indications are that in 2011 it might be a little nearer to 11,5° or 12°alc. Only time will tell. In reality this slightly reduced degree is actually much nearer to the normal level of a traditional albariño from Salnés.



Nice shirt, wrong vintage!

With a team of nearly 60 pickers the grapes were very soon flowing into our cellars at an unprecedented rate and our two presses were struggling to keep pace. By the second day several tanks were already starting to fill, but as the day progressed, so the weather started to close in. By the mid-afternoon the clouds looked threatening and so we decided to call a halt to proceedings. Just as well, no sooner had we finished, than it started to rain – enough to penetrate the canopy and settle on the skins of the fruit. The forecast for the coming days did not bode well. Indeed, the next day was a complete washout, with no picking at all, and the day after that, which was drier and brighter, served only to dry the vineyards, but again with no fruit collected.

On the third day of harvest we were playing 'catch up', doing our very best to gather as much as we could. All went extremely well (thank goodness), and by the end of the day a huge quantity of fruit had passed through our doors. I should add at this point, that despite the poor weather, the grapes were perfectly clean and healthy with no trace of disease or rot in evidence.

The fourth morning confirmed yet again how inaccurate all the weather forecasts had been. No sooner had we opened our bedroom shutters, than the very fine rain started – not really enough to penetrate the canopy this time, but certainly enough to delay our start. The sun did however, soon break through, and a fresh breeze also helped to dry the fruit quickly. By mid-day we were out picking again, and as before, trying hard to make up for lost time. By the end of the day our grape reception was full, and the last grapes entered shortly before rain started to fall once again! With more heavy overnight rain, the next day was abandoned, which was probably just as well as Sunday is never the most popular day for working....



Skins and stalks after pressing - 'Bagazo' in Spanish

This stop-start vintage restarted again on Monday morning - we had achieved only 4 days of fruit gathering in the first week. These first 4 days had yielded huge quantities of grapes, and we knew then that records would certainly be broken. To counteract the effect of increased volumes we adjusted our presses by reducing both the time and amount of pressure used to squeeze the fruit. The less pressure we use, the better the juice (we avoid extracting many of the phenolic compounds from the pips and stalks).

The weather for the final 3 days of picking proved to be much more stable and a little more predictable than before – largely fine and sunny. The reason that we did not wait for this more settled period was quite simple.... acidity. We had to make a choice between waiting for a marginally better alcoholic degree or retaining our typical fresh acidity. Being the purists that we are, we opted to start early to retain more of the zesty acidity, which, after all, is a typical characteristic of our favourite grape variety.

At the end of the 7th day of harvesting, we realised that we still had one block of fruit that needed a little more time to mature. With the weather set fair we decided to wait.

After a few more days of sunshine, and our eyes fixed firmly on the sugar/acid balance, we finally gathered in the last of the 2011 fruit. With every single tank full almost to overflowing (we have to leave some space in each tank for fermentation), the curtain finally fell on this record breaking vintage.

Whilst no single day surpassed the busiest ever recorded in our bodega, the final total of kilos picked was the largest for more than a decade. It says something for our organisation that every the whole operation worked as smoothly as it did, and unlike previous vintages, we were not hindered by major breakdowns or incidents to impede our progress during the picking itself. (A brief failure of our cooling system occurred a day or two later, but then, that's another story!)

As always you can find a detailed day-by-day account of this year's harvest by visiting our blog on www.castromartin.com

Technical details of 2011 (all measurements at harvest):

Total kilos harvested: 231.185 kg
Potential alcohol: 11.85°
Total acidity: 8.05 gm/litre (tartaric)
pH: 3.10

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