

BODEGAS CASTRO MARTIN

Harvest Report – 2017 - Almost perfect?

In the period between mid-June 2016 and mid-October 2016, we had very little rain at all. Probably the equivalent of about six or seven days during the entire four month period (which includes the night that we started to pick our 2016 fruit). The rain, grey skies and cooler temperatures that we normally associate with a Galician winter didn't arrive until mid-October, finally signalling the end to our hot dry, summer.

However, this 'winter' rain did not persist as the region experienced continued periods of dry, sunny weather. A few clear nights during the month of January did bring a little ground frost, but nothing more, and apart from a week or two of rain in early February the winter of 2016/2017 remained stubbornly dry. Temperatures in February and March often reached as high as 20/23°C (70/75°F), really too high for our vineyards at this time of year.

In stark contrast, during the third week of March, the Salnes Valley was hit by freak weather – hail, sleet and snow. Fortunately this was short-lived and did no lasting damage to our vines. It did however, lead to a period of slightly cooler temperatures, but still precious little precipitation. At the end of April temperatures dropped even further with daytime temperatures of around 15/16°C (59-61°F), but once again, remaining largely dry.

Our spring weather continued to be unsettled and unpredictable, but despite these changeable conditions the flowering passed off in mid-May without any notable complication (which with hindsight proved to be quite fortunate). During the latter part of the month our area was hit by stormy weather – days of rain and thunder, but within a very short time the dryer conditions returned, and even with only limited sunshine the freshly watered vines enjoyed a period of vigorous growth.

By early July, things had settled down a little, and certainly the first part of the month was hot and dry with temperatures hitting the 30°C mark (the upper 80's°F). At this juncture the significant factor was simply that, by Galician standards, rainfall during the first half of the year had been significantly below the 'norm'.

The end of July and the whole of August was something of a 'mixed bag'. Some dry, sunny days, a few overcast days, a few days of drizzle, no excessive heat, nor excessive rainfall. Generally very difficult to predict.

The start of September continued where August left off, but by now our fruit was almost mature and ready to be collected.



Taken from the rear of the bodega, in this photo you can just about see our proximity to the Atlantic Ocean

On Monday 4th September we planned to start – but with one slight complication – cloud and drizzle. Naturally we abandoned this idea, and re-scheduled for the following morning. The next day was grey, heavy and overcast, but with no moisture and a positive forecast on the horizon, we decided to gamble (as we are often obliged to do), and started our 2017 campaign.

Our team of 60 pickers were soon swarming around our Castrelo vineyard, and within an hour or two the first grapes of the new vintage arrived at the door of the bodega. Once the fruit had passed its initial 'immigration' checks – acidity, pH, sugar and general state of health, we were anxious to press them in order that we could sample our first real grape must (juice) of the year. Quite apart from the analysis there is a lot that can be gleaned from this first taste.

At this point in time the colour of the must is simply an indication of how clean the grapes are when they are pressed – it is not light green or even pale yellow as you might expect, but is nearly always a pale shade of grey-brown (not very appealing to the eye). The colour is usually determined by the weather in the days leading up to the harvest, often because of dust! If the colour is lighter and relatively clean this can be

an indication of rain prior to harvest (when any dust on the grape skins has simply been washed away). The must can be darker in years with no rain, when there can be a little more dust adhered to the skins. This is not however, as disgusting as it sounds, and is not really detected on the palate. The 'cold settling' period after pressing is when all this unwanted material sinks to the bottom of the tank, and the clean juice can then be 'racked-off' from on top.

And so, our first taste was, well.... impressive. Our first impression was that the must of 2017 is quite thick, viscous and concentrated. It has a lovely sweet, floral character (typical of albariño), but most importantly, despite the high sugar content, it still has a good level of acidity – indeed, almost too good to be true.

At the end of our first day we had already completed several pressings, and filled our first few tanks with this delicious juice. Our teams both in the vineyard and in the bodega, are now so well drilled that the flow throughout the day was constant but perfectly controlled. Of course, we carefully calculate the kilos that we will pick in any one day in order to prevent having unpressed fruit piled up to the rafters. This is achieved by literally allocating the number of empty cases that we distribute, and then simply multiplying this number by 18-20kg per basket (the average case content).



"The beast" – our new pump – strong enough to suck paint off the walls, but also very good for 'pumping over' during fermentation.

After the initial rainfall on the day prior to starting, the weather was actually very kind to

us for the remainder of the week. Not a day was lost and the flow of fruit continued without pause, as, systematically, one-by-one, we filled our tanks with fresh, fruity, concentrated grape must. I have to add that our control of kilos picked each day worked superbly – just enough coming in – just enough to keep the presses busy – and not so much that our team was overwhelmed at any moment. This really makes a difference, and makes the whole harvest far less dramatic, and hopefully, just a little less stressful.

I can say it now (because I am not tempting fate), but this year's harvest was extremely uneventful – no major traumas, and after 7 uninterrupted days of picking, our tanks were full of the most wonderful albariño must. Pretty much the winemaker's dream!

In summary, I would say that 2017 was quite a strange vintage, in that there is often a close link between a hot, dry summer and a quality harvest (and to an extent that theory remains unchanged). However, the Galician summer of 2017 could hardly be described as hot, and so the most accurate summary would probably be "changeable and unpredictable". It was merely by good fortune that we enjoyed the weather that we really needed at some of the critical moments of the growing season - the flowering period being just one example. 2017 (to date) will probably be remembered as yet another dry year overall, following on from the extremely dry summer of 2016 (but without the excessive heat). However, it is quite surprising to think that such inconsistent conditions could produce what we believe should be an outstanding albariño. All we have to do now is make it!

You can find a more detailed day-by-day account of this year's harvest by visiting either Bodegas Castro Martin on Facebook, or our blog page on www.castromartin.com

Technical details of 2017 (all measurements at harvest):

Total kilos harvested: 215,559 kg
Potential alcohol: 12.5% alc/vol
Total acidity: 8.7 gm/litre (tartaric)
pH: 3.02

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