

BODEGAS CASTRO MARTIN

Harvest Report 2019

The warm, late summer that saved our 2018 harvest continued throughout September, virtually until the end of October. It wasn't until early November that temperatures dropped, and the rain started. The first fortnight of the month saw some really torrential rain and strong winds – it seemed like winter had finally arrived.

This cool, damp, typically Galician weather continued until the end of the year, but temperatures remained well above freezing – many trees and plants that would normally fall dormant, were still active and blooming.

It wasn't until the beginning of January that we witnessed our first winter frost. The cloudless days gave us abundant sunshine, but these clear skies and airflow from the North meant that on several nights the temperature dipped below freezing.

After some rain at the beginning of the month, the latter half of February was unseasonably warm with temperatures hitting 20°C (68°F) or more, nearly every day. This triggered a race against time to complete pruning as quickly as possible, as some vines were already showing the first signs of life.

This dry, warm, sunny weather continued throughout March and did not change until the very beginning of April. Daytime temperatures dropped to single figures, with nights hovering just above freezing. As the vines were already quite advanced this was quite an anxious time. Indeed, April was changeable, with days of sun and days of rain – very unpredictable.

May and June continued much in the same vein. Days of sunshine but with temperatures remaining stubbornly cool. Cloudy days, but not producing a great deal of rainfall. Flowering at the end of May/beginning of June passed off reasonable smoothly. Conditions were not necessarily ideal for flowering, but at least there was no rain. However, we did experience one large storm (named Miguel) in early June, that dumped a fair amount of rain on our region, but this whole event lasted no more than 24 hours, until relatively dry weather returned.

Towards the end of June most of Europe was hit by a period of freak weather. In some parts of France, the thermometer hit 46°C (115°F) and lasted for some days. For some odd reason Galicia escaped these extreme temperatures, and our next period of warmer weather did not arrive until the middle of July.

The latter half of July, and most of August, remained largely dry and warm, but the unusual feature of this period was the contrast between daytime and night-time temperatures. Even on the hotter days (above 30°C), the nights and early mornings were distinctly chilly (possibly owing to our proximity to the Atlantic Ocean). August was not hot, and as such, we did not experience too many days reaching 30°C – remaining stubbornly in the mid-20's (75°-80°F).

As we moved towards the beginning of September, so we started to collect and analyse grapes samples from our many different vineyard locations. Although sugar levels were quite high so was the acidity, but little did we know that this was soon about to change!

During the first week of September, as harvest time approached, the weather remained fine and temperatures suddenly started to climb. This burst of heat obviously served to accelerate the maturity of the fruit meaning that by 12th September our vineyards had already reached the optimum moment for picking.

The forecast at this time, was for dry, hot, sunny weather, and as we opened our shutters on the first day, it was exactly as predicted. Wall-to-wall deep blue skies and unbroken sunshine. Our team of pickers set to work, and as always, within the first couple of hours, the first grapes of 2019 had started to roll in.



The very first grapes of 2019 await the presses

Typically, our albariño always arrives in small tightly packed bunches, and this year was to be no exception. Despite the berries being slightly smaller, the entirety of our fruit was ripe and healthy. I have no doubt that the small bunches were as a direct result of there being little rainfall during the summer, but also, as there had been no excessive heat, the skins of the berries were not too thick and the extraction of juice was not too difficult – in other words, we could release the juice from the bunches without exerting excessive pressure during the pressing cycle.



The tightly packed, but healthy bunches of 2019

We very soon realised that it was not the yield of juice from the bunches that was going to be an issue in 2019, but rather the kilos of fruit picked from each hectare that would be diminished. Despite making our best forecast of the quantity we might gather, it appeared that we had probably over-estimated and the actual quantity would be significantly less.

Unfortunately, in a small denomination such as Rias Baixas, where many wine cellars still rely quite heavily on grape suppliers, this can have a negative effect. As the shortage becomes apparent, many bodegas (and more especially the larger producers), start to scramble around in an attempt to procure more fruit. This additional pressure on supply can, quite understandably, push the price of grapes higher than they would normally be (even if a price has already been agreed before harvest). Grape contracts are ‘flimsy’ at best, and sometimes not worth the paper they’re written on!

The picking itself, and work in the bodega was actually quite uneventful this year. Thankfully there were no major technical issues or machinery failures, and so apart from being rather slow (owing to the small volumes), there is not too much to report on this side of our operation. Of course, it does help that during the

busy periods, our experienced team are now very well drilled and can handle these peaks of activity without flinching. In addition to this, our new case washing machine (purchased last year) really started to pay its way – ensuring that every case was spotlessly clean before it was re-used and sent out to receive its next load.

After one week of picking, in almost perfect conditions, the work was complete, and the last grapes were safely gathered in. I say ‘almost’ perfect conditions not because of rain, but rather because of excessive heat. On Friday 13th, our unfortunate picking team had to endure temperatures of around 35°C (95°F). In these circumstances the only thing that we could do was to ensure that they were constantly supplied with cold, fresh water. Our grape reception was also uncomfortably hot, but naturally this was totally out of our control.

Once the grapes were pressed and the juice was finally in tank, we were able to taste and make a better assessment of what the vintage might give us. Of course, we will not know the definitive quality of our wine until fermentation is complete, but even so, we are still usually able to make a reasonably accurate prediction based on our experience of many past vintages

Certainly, there will be some similarities with the 2018 vintage, again as the result of a late burst of summer heat. The grape must be ripe and very concentrated, sugar levels indicating that we will probably have an alcohol content of between 12.5% and 13%. Similarly, to last year we also have the correct level of acidity, that will help to balance the wine. It might not be the most typical vintage, but it should still be very good.

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 2019 (all measurements at harvest):

Total kilos harvested: 151,229 kg

Potential alcohol: 12.8% alc/vol

Total acidity: 9.5 gm/litre (tartaric)

pH: 3.15

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