

BODEGAS CASTRO MARTIN

2023 ~ The never ending harvest...

After a couple of dry winters in Galicia we really needed some significant amounts of water to make up for the shortfall. The first few months of winter 2022/23 did not disappoint.

The latter half of September, after our 2022 harvest was quite bright and warm, as was the first half of October. As October progressed so the rainfall increased and by the end of the month it had become quite stormy, with strong winds, thunderstorms and heavy rain.

The rainfall continued throughout November and December very much in the same vein, with heavy and torrential downpours for much of the time. Christmas Day and New Year's Day were both sodden, and it wasn't until the second half of January that the skies finally cleared.

The change in conditions was quite dramatic – from heavy grey skies to completely clear skies of brilliant blue. Of course, at this time of year, along with the clear skies come the cold temperatures, and at the end of January/early February we experienced about 10 consecutive days of frost. A feature of this cold period was the difference between the actual temperature and the 'perceived' temperature. Whilst the thermometer may have read as high as 15/16°C (59/60°F), the cold northerly winds created a chill factor of nearer to 6°C (43°F).

Apart from just a couple of wet days, this dry, sunny, but bitterly cold period continued into March, and it wasn't until the end of the first week before the rain started again. March itself was quite 'normal' in that it was changeable, with both periods of rain and periods of sun. Towards the end of the month we noticed the first signs of life in our vines as the buds started to push through.

The next couple of months continued changeable, although we did have a long, clear, sunny spell during May. The unusual thing about this sunshine was, however, the accompanying wind. A cold, fresh and persistent northerly wind that kept the perceived temperature at around 20°C (68°F) or below. Of course, these dry, sunny conditions did at least provide us with a healthy flowering.

Overall, the months of May and June were quite difficult, with sun, temperature and rainfall

rotating on almost an hourly basis. In early June we actually experienced occasions when the conditions alternated between rain and warm sun up to four times within the space of a day. As a result, the only real beneficiaries this year were the suppliers of vine treatments, as spraying our vineyards became, quite naturally, the preoccupation of every grape grower throughout Galicia.

It wasn't until the summer solstice on 21st June that we enjoyed a slight improvement. The rain dried up and the sun finally appeared, lasting through until mid-July. The temperatures during this period were not excessive, mostly topping out in the mid-20's C (75-80°F). The varying conditions during May and June also produced a considerable level of 'vine vigour', and consequently we had to work extremely hard thinning the thick canopy of leaves to enable sun to penetrate through to the bunches.



Grape reception slowly filling with fruit

The end of July and August were both comparatively dry and included several weeks of blue sky and warm temperatures, averaging perhaps somewhere between 25° and 30°C (77°- 86°F). However, these dry, sunny periods were also interspersed by odd days of cloud and occasional rain, although thankfully not enough to do any lasting damage. Nights were quite fresh and cool (unlike the rest of Spain that endured excessive temperatures for most of the summer).

In the final week or two before picking, yet again, we witnessed some wild swings of temperature, but even more worrying were the forecasts. After taking samples, we estimated that the harvest should start at the beginning of September, but unfortunately these dates also coincided perfectly with a predicted period of bad weather.

After much deliberation we finally started our harvest on Saturday 2nd September, even though we knew the weather would be largely unpredictable. The first few hours did not go well, but for reasons unrelated to weather. No sooner had we loaded our first press than it refused to work (despite a recent full service). The engineer was called. An hour or so later the second press was loaded – same result! In the end about an hour and a half was lost, by which point we were already starting to play catch up. On the plus side, despite these early setbacks, the first grape must from the presses was looking probably a little better than we had anticipated (considering all the weather issues).



The real heroes of our 2023 harvest

Apart from our problems with the weather (and equipment), probably our biggest single issue in 2023 was that of people, or to be more accurate, the lack of people. Attracting pickers, and more especially those of the right calibre, was extremely difficult to say the least. There was a real danger that hourly rates would be driven up, much in the same way as our grape prices were in 2022. Luckily, however, we have a loyal core of pickers, who, in the end, became the real heroes of our 2023 campaign, working tirelessly over a period of 12 days to gather in our fruit. (Normally our harvest would be 5-7 days).

During the first week of our harvest, we had one or two small sprinklings of rain during the day and then one or two more heavy showers during

the night – not really the most favourable conditions for our fruit. However, it was not until the second Saturday (8 days into the harvest) that we needed to suspend picking for 24 hours owing to rain. It had rained during the night and then continued through until mid-morning before eventually drying up.

Owing to the slow progress in our vineyards, the harvest slowly drew to a close after 12 long days of picking. Despite this slow tempo we were completely exhausted and breathed a collective sigh of relief when the last presses finally loaded!

In the meantime, work inside the bodega was well under way, a number of tanks had been seeded with fermentations progressing well even before the last grapes had been picked. Normally, during a six- or seven-day harvest, fermentations would not really start in earnest until most of the fruit was already gathered in.

I think it would be fair to say that this year's unpredictable, and sometimes fairly localised weather, has resulted in a greater variation between vineyard plots than we would normally expect to see. Individual plots are nearly always pressed and vinified separately and so hopefully, by the end of the fermentations, we will be able to discern these differences more clearly. This variation is made even more unusual because our grapes are sourced entirely from within the Salnés Valley, no more than 10km from the Bodega, and variations between plots are more often influenced by local soil types.

In 2023, after a somewhat unusual and difficult vintage, it will certainly be a year when the skill and experience of the winemaker comes to the fore. No doubt will need to monitor the progress of every individual tank quite closely.

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

Technical details of 2023 (Av. measurements at harvest):

Total kilos harvested: 180,700 kg
Potential alcohol: 12.7% alc/vol
Total acidity: 8.6 gm/litre (tartaric)
pH: 3.24

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