

Vintage 2021: Europe's Return to Grace



© Getty Images | Frost, rather than heat, was the main opponent for French winemakers this year.

After years of baking temperatures and high sugars, **James Lawrence** welcomes a return to classic wine styles.

I was cock-a-hoop last week, when Charles Philipponnat heralded the return of a high-acid, 'classical' vintage in Champagne.

Finally, a growing season not exclusively defined by drought, prolonged heatwaves and sugar levels best left to Coca Cola. Frost was the principle enemy in 2021, not an excess of sunshine.

"After a difficult season, we're somewhat reassured: yields are higher than expected, and the grapes are quite ripe, with crisp acidity," say Charles Philipponnat.

"The acids are around 7.5 grams ... with relatively high malic acid proportions. So we may undertake a prolonged malolactic fermentation to avoid excessive tartness, except when the alcohol levels are above 11 percent and of course, in Clos des Goisses."

Remember Richard Geoffroy, Dom Pérignon's former chef de cave? He used to religiously insist that ripeness in Champagne was our friend, not enemy. But I know what I'd sooner be drinking: the racy and vibrant wines of 2013, as opposed to the soft and anodyne NV Champagnes that were produced in 2016. I want acidity in my Champagne, and bags of it. Otherwise, what is the point?

Unfortunately, Europe has been in a rather tempestuous mood of late. Champagne, Bordeaux, Burgundy, Tuscany and Piedmont have all "enjoyed" a succession of vintages generally characterized by low (ish) acidity, unwieldy alcohol and massive ripeness. The problem has become so acute that vineyards across Europe are switching their grape varieties around (often planting more Cabernet Franc in Bordeaux and Tuscany), to avoid producing alcoholic soup. The 2018 vintage in southern Europe would not have looked out of place in the Sahara. Drought was becoming ubiquitous.

(...)

Tuscan delight

Meanwhile, some of Tuscany's leading winemakers are in shock – a Chianti harvest not taking place during the annual August vacation. It's been a few years since that was the case.

"Vintage 2021 in Tuscany is a late one, characterized by a summer that has seen some seasonal sporadic rains in August and in the beginning of September. These conditions led to a slow and gradual ripening and the grapes are showing an elevated level of acidity; but it remains well balanced by the sugar content," observes Miria Bracali, winemaker at Cecchi.

However, not all parts of Italy have experienced a respite from intense heat and drought. Vincenzo Lo Mauro, director of Passopisciaro estate on Mount Etna in Sicily reports that "the region has experienced a very hot and dry summer, which has brought us to harvest the Chardonnay almost two weeks before than usual and a small yield".

The word on the street in Tuscany's Maremma region is not dissimilar.

"In Tuscany the vintage started much cooler, however, summer was beautiful, as it should be on the Tuscan coast. The problem, though, was the scarcity of rainfall (only three episodes from June to today). Therefore, I wouldn't feel like saying that the vintage in Tuscany was cooler than usual ... quite the contrary," says Ettore Rizzi, winemaker and agronomist at Fattoria Le Pupille.

The Burgundians are also in no mood to celebrate, high acidity or no high acidity. Yields in districts like the Côte de Beaune will be minuscule overall, with some growers facing up to 70 percent losses.

Nevertheless, most of Europe is optimistic about vintage 2021 being a "classical" one, as opposed to reflecting climatic conditions in Saudi Arabia. They regard it as a keeper – something to bequeath to their grandchildren. It is hard to imagine the alcoholic, soupy wines of (some) Right Bank Bordeaux châteaux that were produced in 2003, 2010, and 2018 aging all that well.

"According to my experience, a slow and gradual maturation may increase longevity. This is likely to happen in the coolest vintages that present no peak temperatures during the summer, with good thermal excursions in the night," says Miria Bracali.

"These are the perfect conditions which grant an excellent acidity, and which will be essential to have good freshness and longevity. We are experiencing a vintage with such characteristics; we just have to work hard and keep on waiting."

Reva's Gaia adds: "In my experience, the cold vintages on average evolve better and longer than the warm ones."

The first duty of a wine, claims Jancis Robinson MW, is to refresh. To enliven the palate and senses, leaving one salivating in anticipation of a second, third or twelfth glass. The high alcohol, "baked" vintages of recent years seem to have forgotten that mission statement, notable exceptions apart. Flabby, amorphous vintages have their place, just not in your wine glass.

So hurrah – Europe got its acid mojo back in 2021. It may be the start of better things to come, or a terse pause before the return of heatwave summers and 16 percent alcohol. But even a brief respite is better than nothing at all. After 18 months of Covid, I'll take what I can get.