

Cheval Blanc, October 1st 2018

AB With non-stop rain at the beginning of the cycle, followed by almost uninterrupted sunny dry weather up to the harvest, which of these extremes will come through more in the profile of the wines in 2018?

Pierre-Olivier Clouet A bit of both, I think. The scenario was almost perfect: plenty of rain during the growth cycle and lots of sunshine during the ripening to produce small berries and quality tannins. The result is that everything is good.

AB Sounds straightforward enough, but I remember there was some concern among growers in June that the soils were too wet to enable the desired beneficial water stress.



Pierre-Olivier Clouet Each property is different. At Cheval Blanc we get water deficit constraint every summer whether it rains a lot or not. It's never an issue for us. That's our terroir. The water constraint came quickly in 2018 and continued evenly throughout the ripening. Occasionally, we can get a bit too much. In fact, some of our young vines suffered a bit this year.

AB What happened there?

Pierre-Olivier Clouet They shut down a little bit because of the stress, and we had to wait a bit longer for them to complete the ripening process. Just a question of programming the picking dates in accordance.

AB How was the rest of the vineyard affected by these dry conditions?

Pierre-Olivier Clouet The rest of the vineyard ripened without any blocking. However, the vines in the driest areas were picked later than those planted in the cooler, more moist clay zones. Again, a question of appropriate scheduling of picking.

AB Did this long and drawn-out period of dry weather result in disappointing crop yields?

Pierre-Olivier Clouet In no way at all. In 2018 we are actually well above the usual yields of 40 hl/ha. Despite the bunches having very small berries by the time of the harvest, the potential crop size was a generous one and ensured excellent yields.

AB Producers around Bordeaux are appreciating the fine harvest weather conditions. Has Cheval Blanc once again stretched out the picking period, doing an “à la carte” harvest, as you like to call it?

Pierre-Olivier Clouet We started on 3 September: today we’re 1st October, and so far we’ve brought in exactly 58% of the crop, so we’re really taking our time this year. The vines and the grapes are impeccably healthy. There’s absolutely no risk of botrytis. We’re in a comfortable position and are picking the fruit only when it’s optimally ripe.

AB Some welcome rain eventually fell on the Bordeaux vineyard in early September. How much did you get at Cheval Blanc?

Pierre-Olivier Clouet 28mm. That’s all we got for the whole month of September. That’s very little compared with the average September figure of 90mm.

AB Did that little bit do the vines any good?

Pierre-Olivier Clouet It didn’t do enough to kick-start those young Merlot vines I mentioned before, but at least it meant that the health of the vines remained in brilliant condition. The September rainfall was anecdotal really. I’m not even sure that more rain would have made a difference. As I just said, the rest of the vineyard didn’t suffer and obviously didn’t need any more.

AB Have you now brought in all your Merlot?

Pierre-Olivier Clouet There are still 2 plots of Merlot to pick as well as 18 of Cabernet Franc and 2 of Cabernet Sauvignon.

AB Do you have any idea yet about which varieties will go into the First Wine? Last year you included a relatively high proportion of Cabernet Sauvignon...

Pierre-Olivier Clouet All three varieties will go into the First Wine. Obviously, it’s too early to say in what proportions, but what I can announce is that there will be a high proportion of First Wine in this vintage. Making a good quantity of First Wine is one of Cheval Blanc’s aims. It makes for more interesting wines, and this year the quality is very high, too.

AB Can you put a figure on this high proportion of First Wine?

Pierre-Olivier Clouet At least 60-70%. The Cheval Blanc vineyard is designed to make great wine, and a large proportion of it should go into the First Wine.

AB No idea then how much Cabernet Sauvignon will be in it?

Pierre-Olivier Clouet We won't be harvesting it till much later, so I can't answer that question yet.

AB How would you describe the profile of the juices you've tasted from vat? Is 2018 a "sunny" vintage like 2009, for example?

Pierre-Olivier Clouet Not really. It shares some of the characteristics of the 2016 -a vintage that was also influenced by the sun but with wines that were very fresh and taut. Of course, in a dry, sunny year like 2018, the Merlot degrees are over 14. Importantly, the pHs have stood up extremely well. On top of that there is lovely aromatic ripeness developing, and the balances are really good. All very promising.

AB How can one explain that in a sunny, warm year with a prolonged drought the wine has such freshness, tautness and aromatics?

Pierre-Olivier Clouet I can't explain it. It has happened in both 2016 and 2018. We can always try and explain these things, but in the end we don't really know. It just happens. There's a limit to what you can explain scientifically about vintages? Clearly, 150 years ago, the growers here knew what they were doing when they planted vines at our estate. They made the right choices. But then explaining why the wine has such and such a taste profile is beyond scientific explanations about the weather. It's a mystery that has much more to do with the soils, in my opinion.

AB We haven't mentioned the Cabernet Franc. How's it shaping up?

Pierre-Olivier Clouet So far, we've only picked 6 vats, and we're really happy with what we've got. I think the Franc is going to be the great success of the vintage. Lots of lovely freshness and quite low acidities. There's a lot to be excited about.