

Cheval Blanc, January 5th 2018

AB Although it's quite usual these days for Cheval Blanc to pick its grapes over a long period with what you call à la carte harvesting, 2017 must have been particularly long with two generations of grapes to bring in...

Pierre-Olivier Clouet We started on September 5th and only finished on 13th October. Yes, the harvesting period was particularly long, around 40 days.

AB It must have taken you a long time to eventually form a clear picture of the overall quality of the wine...



Pierre-Olivier Clouet The malo-lactics went quickly and smoothly. We've tasted all the lots, and today we have a very clear picture of the 2017 vintage.

AB How good was that second generation of fruit? Did it ripen fully?

Pierre-Olivier Clouet As we expected, it was a very small amount, but it produced very high quality wines. We were very happy with the quality, so much so that 75% of the lots coming from second generation fruit will go into the First Wine.

AB Wow, that must have taken you by surprise...

Pierre-Olivier Clouet Well, yes and no. We realised these lots were developing very favourably. Even when the grapes were ripening and we were tasting the berries we knew the second generation was well on track. We gradually detected the same aromatic profile in the second generation grapes that we normally find in the first generation fruit in these plots.

AB And did you vinify these grapes in the same way as you would have done the first generation fruit?

Pierre-Olivier Clouet Yes, although we had to ferment the berries in smaller one hectare to 1.5 hectare vats.

AB You therefore stuck to your principles of plot by plot vinification...

Pierre-Olivier Clouet Absolutely. And I believe that this was one of the keys to the success of this second generation 2017 crop. However small these lots were, we were able to select very strictly the plots that were worthy of going into Cheval Blanc.

AB Some were not of the standard required?

Pierre-Olivier Clouet Some, yes.

AB What did this new experience teach you?

Pierre-Olivier Clouet The importance of re-pruning straight after the frost. In each zone that we re-pruned, we left one row unpruned, just to see the difference in results. Unquestionably, the vines that were immediately re-pruned after the frost reacted better and produced better results.

AB In what way exactly?

Pierre-Olivier Clouet The re-pruned vines produced more grapes and the quality was more consistent.

AB After this re-pruning, did you manage the vine canopies any differently from those that were unaffected by frost?

Pierre-Olivier Clouet No, we treated them in exactly the same way.

AB With the same amount of foliage, for example?

Pierre-Olivier Clouet Yes. In fact, the small amount of grapes benefited from the higher proportion of foliage.

AB So what sort of Cheval Blanc can we expect in this vintage?

Pierre-Olivier Clouet Something rather special, I would say. Inevitably, the 2017 will be unique. First of all, because two generations of fruit will be in the blend, as I mentioned. Secondly, because in 2017 there will be an unusually high proportion of Cabernet Sauvignon in the First Wine.

AB Because your Cabernet Sauvignon survived the frosts?

Pierre-Olivier Clouet Yes, and its quality is excellent.

AB Do you already have an idea of how much Cabernet Sauvignon will go in?

Pierre-Olivier Clouet The proportion will most probably be 10%, which is unprecedented.

AB Two different 2017 crops, 10% Cabernet Sauvignon. What more can you throw in to make this vintage special?

Pierre-Olivier Clouet There's more actually! The frost mostly hit our clay terroir, which means that one facet of Cheval Blanc will therefore be missing compared with other vintages.

AB And how different will the two crop generations be in style?

Pierre-Olivier Clouet You have to consider that the first one was produced from a hot and dry vine cycle. Then the second generation ripened over a cold one. By including some of the second generation fruit in the final blend it will be like blending a hot vintage with a cold one! One of the profiles is rich, full and sun-drenched with black fruit aromatics, while the other is floral, red berry fruit with tight freshness and good acidity. We have all these elements to draw on.

AB There was a distinct feeling of pessimism around about the second generation fruit. Why, do you think?

Pierre-Olivier Clouet In times gone by, when spring frosts occurred, the view was that second generation fruit was acid and had thick-skinned berries. But that's because no-one took the trouble to bring those grapes to full maturity. Now, we were helped by the weather. The end of summer was beautiful, and we didn't get a drop of rain. And then you need to look at the timing. The veraison in our second generation fruit in 2017 took place on the same dates as our 2014 vintage first generation fruit! You could therefore imagine that in 2017 we're blending a hot vintage, something like 2011, with a cool vintage like 2014. That's an interesting prospect, I'm sure you would agree!

AB Even with favourable weather and early vine cycles, the odds were somewhat against getting a ripe second generation crop, much of which would go into the First Wine. And we're talking about a relatively small amount. Did you never think of giving up on it?

Pierre-Olivier Clouet That's all to Pierre Lurton's credit. He encouraged the team to keep on regardless of what the final result might be and even though most of the vineyard was free of frost damage.

AB What proportion of Cheval Blanc was hit?

Pierre-Olivier Clouet One third. When you look around we were lucky. But we were determined to make a great wine from the whole of the vineyard, not just the 70% that was spared. This meant that the work was colossal. Imagine marking 300,000 vines individually to indicate if the vine had been struck by frost or not.

AB That's what you call precision work!

Pierre-Olivier Clouet That was a feat in itself.

AB Although the 2017 is likely to resemble no other vintage for the reasons you just mentioned, I imagine that you have blended some of the lots in the lab and tasted them. What can you already say about the wine's character overall?

Pierre-Olivier Clouet I'd say it's going to be a fine classic Cheval Blanc. The lab analyses back that up. The alcoholic degree is moderate, as it usually is at Cheval Blanc. The acidities are normal. It's balanced. Watch this space...