

Sucking Grapes

opinions against tunnel vision

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THE 2006 VINTAGE IN CHIANTI CLASSICO

Posted by walter

2006 vintage in Chianti Classico is considered as a very great vintage indeed, rivalling 1999 and 2001. Michael Schmelzer, who tends his vineyards following biodynamic principles, gives some in depth information on the growing season of that year, while Sebastiano Capponi sent me the first reports on the 2007 growing cycle from Greve in Chianti. Although the Chianti Classico Consortium doesn't seem to be alarmed by the phenomenon of climate change, especially Sebastiano's observations paint quite a different picture, and may show that viticulture appears to be the barometer of climatic change, to quote Jancis Robinson. THE 2006 VINTAGE by Michael Schmelzer, Monte Bernardi, Panzano.

The 2006 vintage was very special from start to finish - our expectations are high for the wines now in the Cantina. Spring growth took place in warmer and drier conditions than in the previous two years, with average temperatures during the day reaching 25C (77F) in May. Temperatures in June and July averaged between 30-35C (86-95F), relatively hot, but differing from a vintage like 2003, with cool nights and temperatures dropping more than 10C (18F), allowing the vines to recuperate and prepare for another days work!

As we approached veraison (the onset of grape ripening, when berries change from green to red), the bunches looked extremely healthy; we passed through the early disease pressure periods unscathed, with the bunches large, loose and plentiful. The intensity of the July sun had produced thick, healthy skins that made us confident that we could endure a lot if the season changed for the worse - which never happened. The hotter early season also resulted in a nicely balanced canopy with little excess vegetation and lateral shoots.

At green pruning, in early August, we reduced our crop load by 30-50%, depending on the vineyard, and in the last six weeks we removed laterals and poorly productive leaves to reduce all negative inputs and give the best conditions for ripening. By early September, we recorded sugar levels equivalent to those we would normally expect in the 3rd or 4th week of the month! Acidity and tannins, however, were not equally advanced, so we continued to wait and monitor the grapes physiological ripeness. A steady two day rain in mid September gave well-needed dilution of sugar levels and one extra week to ripen tannins and lower acidity.

In the end, the decision to pick was based on tannin ripeness and acidity putting us in the vineyards the first week of October - a week earlier than usual - with wines reaching 14%. Despite the high potential alcohols, the wines are incredibly aromatic, with no signs of cooked fruit character; acidity is high, but balanced, giving the wines a great age-ability. The difference between this vintage and the 2004 vintage is that the wines have more tannins and more complexity!

As soon as the vines switched gears towards fruit production (at veraison) Mother Nature brought us cooler temperatures, favoring aromatic fruit production. At the end of July/early August there

was a true shift in the weather; as the sun began its move towards the southern hemisphere, it drew down arctic air masses. This cool weather persisted for the rest of the vintage. These were perfect conditions for both ripening fruit and creating intense aromatics, with average daytime temperatures of 25-27C (77-81 F) during the last six weeks of the growing season (thought to be the ideal temperature range for maximum production of anthocyanins and aromatics).

THE VINEYARD

In winter 2005 we began preparing for the 2006 growing season by planting a mix of cover crops (wheat, barley, lupins, and fava); using cover crops gives a twofold benefit: primarily we get deep soil penetration with the roots of the plants that physically break up the compaction we created the previous year by passing through the vineyards with our machinery. Secondly we get a large amount of organic material that helps improve our overall soil structure.

In spring 2006, we planted our first new vineyard - a special parcel divided into two terraces and rich in Galestro (friable shale). The upper terrace receives more sun than perhaps any other vineyard on the property and was planted to three traditional Sangiovese clones, selected for their ability to produce a classic Sangiovese.

BIODYNAMICS

This year was our second year applying the biodynamic 500 preparation to our property, and although we just have begun our journey we have already seen more upright shoots at the beginning of the 2006 season – indicating a sort of potency that we hadn't seen before, and which gave us several advantages in working the vineyard.