



## 2015: Tale of a Non-Standard Vintage

### *Episode#1: Bud Spencer vs. Wim Wenders*

Along any new vintage comes the buzz that soon goes viral on the Web.

Buzz-makers try to write history before any grape has even been harvested, and in this matter 2015 has started in the best of ways, with a controversy.

On the one hand, you have those who have read the vintage out of their Lalique crystal glasses, raving about 2015 as another iconic vintage like '47, or even '59!

As far as I am concerned, back in '47 I was still on orbit so way too far to talk about it.

As for the '59 vintage, I was curled up and cosy inside my mother's womb, who had the courage to wait until the end of the harvest to give birth. So from the amniotic sac I remember neither what the weather was like nor the taste of the grapes.

And while later on I was lucky enough to taste some bottles of these great vintages, to be honest I could not really say whether 2015 is made of the same shoots.

On the other hand, doomsayers reckon that 2015 will be a 'bulldozer' vintage overpowered by heat and alcohol.

Using the movie metaphor dear to Angelo Gaja -who likes to compare his wines to John Wayne and Marcello Mastroianni-, we could say that assessing the quality of a wine only based on potential alcohol is like reducing cinema to a huge spaghetti western by Bud Spencer. Kiss goodbye to Wim Wenders' refined and subtle movies! And what about auteur cinema?

All this amounts to assessing the value of a man based on his weight, does it? Let's just say I won't go there.

### *Episode#2: Air, Fire & Miraculous Water*

However, the vintage's figures are here that freeze my brains, just like a November fog imperils the last hopes for good weather.

Even though, contrary to what one might think, 2015 has been a very wet year with 703mm (27.68") of rain from November 2014 to October 2015 – which is a lot compared to an average 562.2mm (22.13") in the past thirty-six years -, reality is much more intricate.

In fact, as vines were in full growth from May 3 to August 10, we had only 43.5mm (1.78") of rain, meaning dreadful drought during such a crucial period for the plants.

At 13.95°C (57.11°F), the average annual temperature literally skyrocketed by almost 2°C (3.60°F) from the 2014 peak at 12.08°C (53.74°F). Let's just say this was previously unseen!

An examination of average temperatures by decades also revealed a steady rise by 0.5°C (0.90°F) per decade from 1980 to today.

The average temperatures were respectively 10.04°C (50.07°F), in the 1980's, 10.58°C (51.04°F) in the 1990's, and 11.11°C (52.00°F) from 2000 to 2010. In the recent years from 2010 to 2015, local warming speeded up with a rise by 0.5°C (0.90°F) within the past six years and an average 11.61°C (52.90°F).

I'll eat my buddy -and soon useless, whatever happens- hat if this is not runaway climate change!

As per my vintage classification according to the four elements, in which I studied the past vintages all the way back to 1980, 2015 is therefore a one-off and the very first Air / fire vintage so far, that is with a Hot and wet character.

Figures show that this vintage could have been a disaster. However, as is often the case with Nature, an unexpected weather event changed everything.

Indeed, this long-lasting drought was flanked by two miraculous rains, respectively on the weekend of May 2 with 76mm (2.99") and on August 10 with 59mm (2.32").

Safe to say these 2 rains literally saved 2015 and even enabled us to dream of '47 or '59, which just goes to show that dreams too hang by a thin thread -of water-!

### ***Episode#3: The X Factor***

But all this would not have been enough without another factor, I mean the immeasurable energy of men and women who, all year round, have worked in the fields taking care of vines, restoring their balance and fine-tuning them through accurate and careful gestures.

The vintner is like a sun for the vines. And human labour will never be valued enough in making each year a success.

Proof of that is that in 2015 at *Domaine Ostertag*, we used loads of camomile and yarrow and cow dung compost and cactus extract teas, respectively, in a strive to both mitigate the damage from the burning sun and help vines deal with water management.

We ploughed and harrowed the soil so that it dried into a crust, which helped prevent evaporation. We also rolled the seedlings to flatten them and thus soothe sun exposure. Definitely, the sky is the limit in a vintner's mind!

Like the vines, we too suffered from drought and heat; we helped vines bear their grapes; we assisted them throughout the season; and, we really experienced the vintage from deep within, from the sap's point of view.

Because beyond the earth & sky's basic energies, far beyond the soil and climate, the energy of men and women who shape the vines is to be found.

And this energy is vital. This is the X factor, challenging all known values. You can't explain it, at least not with 2 plus 2 equals 4. We're talking here of the green thumb, and in 2015 the X factor prevailed since it enabled the vines to return from their long spell in the wilderness.

#### ***Episode#4: Harvest Chapter#36***

Harvest started on September 10, that is two days after the bottling of the 2014's.

No time for me to either take a breather or look at the bigger picture and enjoy what had been done so far... Here I was, thrown into the next vintage with a new page to write: Chapter#36 of the *Great Cellar Book*, a lifetime's work.

While 2003 was the earliest harvest in the past thirty-six years, with grapes being picked as early as September 1, 2015 is one-of-a-kind, too, with harvest nearly complete and all dry wines in the cellar by late September.

The Pinot Gris were harvested between September 10-11. Since the Pinots really like heat, they were the first to be ripe. And I definitely wanted to avoid having heavy wines. On the opposite, I like my Pinots to be dry and fat, perfectly in line with the modern style we have always been standing for.

The Pinot Blancs & Pinot Noirs followed suit between September 15-16. Never had I seen grapes so healthy, which is very promising for the future.

The Sylvaners were picked between September 18-19. They were awesome, rich of course, yet as well-balanced as keepers usually are. Do not freak out, they will drink beautifully in their youth. I insist on that...

The Rieslings fearing heatwaves, they were a puzzling challenge for us this year. We harvested at full speed during the week of September 21-26. That week was particularly demanding but we managed to pick perfectly ripe grapes, as I guess from this tiny little patch of *Muenchberg vieilles vignes* (old vines) we harvested on September 30 -i.e. four days later- with already over 15% alcohol. As a result, this will be a totally different wine from the other Rieslings.

Finally, the Gewurztraminers were the only grapes picked in October. They are as rich as they can be, but without botrytis. It was not a botrytis year.

And since our vines are particularly rot-proof, which shows how well-balanced our plant material is, they build a shield that is unbreakable for any kind of rot, the good and the bad alike!

In the end, all grapes without exception combined faultless beauty with a pure taste hardly ever obtained; 2015 has all the trappings of 'a sound mind in a sound body,' to quote famous poet Juvenal.

A nice surprise came from the Rieslings. Thanks to an October-like range of temperatures in September, they benefited alternately from cold at night and heat during the day, which is the prerequisite for them to achieve perfect maturity.

First and foremost, 2015 has shown that when you take mindful care of your vines, they in turn outdo themselves and overcome unfriendly circumstances, in order to bring their grapes to the highest level of quality.

## *Episode#5: Sustainable Legacy*

The estate's very first wine was made by my father back in 1966, and I took over from him in 1980.

So my father did 14 vintages, while I've done thirty-six and still counting. 2015 will above all be remembered in the estate's history as the fiftieth vintage.

However, beyond this 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, 2015 is also my son Arthur's first vintage busy in the cellar. He has been working with us since September 1.

Passing down a family business to one's son is a moving moment in the history of an estate as well as in the life of a father. It reminds me of the 4 x 100 meters relay whereby the decisive moment is the passing on of the baton. It should be carried out over a number of strides, with the two runners being in perfect sync with one another.

The same goes for viticulture: Tuning up is the key to a smooth handing over. You have to sync the youngster's burst of energy with the rolling gait of the wise man; and to accept the fact that his new relaxed behaviour stretches the limits of your wisdom.

I've long been the bottle agitator, the token 'terroirist', and the tasting killjoy. Being brought to the other side of the mirror is weird. This is a brand-new situation for me, that helps me better understand the kind of patience my father demonstrated when I was Arthur's age.

In French, we talk about '*transmission*'. '*Transmission*' is a balancing act. You give and let go, while still being present; assist but not compel; keep your ego quiet and have your routine shaken up.

The word '*transmission*' derives from Latin '*transmissio*' which means 'sending across'. Thus '*transmission*' is really like learning to detach. It teaches you a good lesson about life and is a path to yourself, sort of.

Oddly enough, the life of a man is similar to that of a wine: the latter combines skills and ageing, just like the former is made of a mind ingrained in a body, and both form a whole irreversibly shaped through time.

And while vines enable us to open to the world out there, and to point ourselves out within the universe of the infinitely big and the infinitesimally small, wines help us understand our inner chemistry, changes and biology, thus revealing to us our own transience.

Accepting our own transience is a work on ourselves that helps us age better.

And while *ageing beautifully* is the preserve of great wines, those deeply rooted in the soil and linked to the sky and transcended by the vintner's art, *aging better* is another kind of art, namely the art of detachment. It implies to pass on one's knowledge as well as soft and hard skills. This is a wonderful way to go beyond one's own transience, and to last.

As a consequence, 2015 stands out -and always will- at *Domaine Ostertag* because, along with Arthur, Boris and Thomas represent a generation ready to take over what my father and my mother started, back in 1966.

It is now our duty, with them, to turn all these words into wines able to go beyond speeches and to fill your sharp senses with wonder!

André Ostertag, Vintner.  
Epfing, November 8, 2015.