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Written by

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2019: hot stuff

**FREE FOR ALL 2019 BORDEAUX 2019 BURGUNDY 2019 GERMANY 2019
ITALY 2019 SPAIN 2019**

A version of this survey of the 2019 northern-hemisphere vintage is published by the Financial Times.

All over the northern hemisphere wineries are at their busiest. The 2019 harvest has delivered, or is in the process of delivering, this year's crop of grapes which are being fermented into wine.

Wine tasters can be in no doubt of the effects of climate change. A range of 2018 Loire Sauvignons tasted recently were pleasantly round and fruity but had little of the searing acidity and fresh green fruit flavours that we used to associate with the likes of Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé. It's too early to have a complete picture of 2018 red wines – many of them are still maturing in tank, oak or concrete – but it seems reasonable to assume that they will bear witness to Europe's hot, dry 2018 summer. So what of 2019? Will it prove to be a great '9' like 2009, 1989, 1959 and 1949?

Being the world's biggest fine-wine region, Bordeaux tends to set the reputation of each vintage, sometimes inaccurately. As in virtually all of Europe's wine regions, the 2019 vintage in Bordeaux was again marked by a hot, dry summer. Spring and early summer on the other hand were unusually cool and wet, delaying the growing season and prejudicing the size of the harvest because of changeable weather during the crucial vine flowering period. The notably hot, dry summer months did not make up the time (the ripening process can cease and vines shut down when subjected to extreme water stress) so that many vigneronns did not start the main red wine harvest until the autumn equinox approached.

Unlike Burgundy, Bordeaux produced a decent quantity of white wine grapes but the main concern with the reds was that the prolonged dry summer left the grapes short of juice so that the crop is likely to be considerably smaller than in 2018, although probably bigger than the frost-shrunk 2017 vintage. Mouton's technical director Philippe Dhalluin told me that his young-vine Merlots, picked in mid September, notched up 15.5% alcohol, but he was confident that the old vines would yield less aggressively potent wines. The small, thick-skinned grapes will need very careful handling in the cellar if they are not to produce overly tannic wines, but in this era of global warming Bordeaux winemakers already have plenty of experience in this respect. And the grapes are generally healthier than after the mildew attacks of 2018. Some vigneron report skins and pips much less ripe than the juice.

Burgundy has also been picking exceptionally small grapes, Chardonnay as well as Pinot. 86-year-old Robert Drouhin of Beaune négociant Joseph Drouhin reports that he has never seen such a small white wine crop, and this extends the length of the Burgundy region, from Chablis to the Mâconnais, parts of which suffered spring frosts. In the Côte de Beaune, the drought-shrunk Pinots ripened ahead of Chardonnay this year. In the Côte de Nuits a north wind in the week before the equinox concentrated the grapes even further. This was not helpful and speeded up the harvest, although some Burgundians, like their Bordeaux counterparts, feel the 2019s may have more energy than the 2018s.

Earlier in the season some Burgundy vigneron, threatened by powdery mildew, had thinned the vine canopy to aerate the bunches, leaving some of them fatally exposed to the sunburn that is becoming an increasingly serious viticultural problem worldwide, even in Germany, which not long ago had difficulty ripening grapes at all.

Southern France famously bore the brunt of Europe's most dramatic heat spikes this summer, although at least for vine growers these were relieved by occasional welcome storms. Caryl Panman of Ch Rives-Blanques in Limoux in the hills of the Languedoc reported, 'it's been awfully hot at times, and then suddenly quite cool, with unexpected sprinklings of snow on the Pyrenees. Altogether rather odd.' Though this is not nearly as odd as what has been going on south of the Pyrenees.

Spain went from one extreme to another last month. After a torrid summer when an unirrigated wine region such as Priorat in the hills inland from Barcelona lost up to half of all grapes in some Carignan vineyards due to the frazzling heat (see picture top right), and wildfires from the Canary Islands to the Gredos mountains west of

Madrid raged dangerously close to vineyards, exceptionally heavy September rains have dashed hopes of a great vintage in many parts of Spain. Alicante saw two years' worth of rain in a few days. Flash floods claimed several lives.

Spain's principal fine-wine region Rioja has been particularly badly affected. Here they were expecting an exceptionally good vintage until the arrival of torrential, prolonged, oddly warm, almost tropical rains just before harvest, diluting the juice, swelling the grapes, and leaving them prone to nasty pests and diseases. Many vineyards became too muddy to access. Heavy rains from Galicia in the far north west to the notoriously arid plains of La Mancha in central Spain have prejudiced what looked to be particularly healthy grapes in 2019.

In Italy they are also expecting a much smaller crop, 15% less according to official estimates, than last year, thanks to the cool, wet, late spring and poor flowering. And here too leaf plucking, in this case to accelerate ripening, resulted in gridded grapes. The delayed harvest dates mean that those in cooler, higher areas such as Chianti Classico have been hoping that they can pick their reduced volumes of particularly healthy, small grapes before autumn rains set in.

In Germany the rains have been little, often and revitalising, and growers are hoping for a vintage that may be even better than the one produced by the hot, dry summer of 2018. After some July heat spikes, temperatures have been more moderate with usefully fresh, aroma-preserving nights from August on. But the Riesling grape ripens relatively slowly and late so I write simply hoping that this benign weather has persisted for the late September and early October harvest.

As for California, the other major force in northern-hemisphere wine production, spring was unusually cool here, and so was summer relative to the norm, with only one heat spike. So the harvest is a little later than usual but hopes are high for quality. Oregon to the north seems to be living up to its reputation for grey skies and rain – quite a contrast to the unusually hot growing seasons experienced here recently.

So there is all to play for as far as 2019 quality goes, but the reduction in quantity will only accentuate what I perceive worldwide as a general increase in wine prices.

Strongly recommended 2019s

These wines were all harvested much earlier in the year in the southern hemisphere and are the sort of wines – unoaked whites – that are bottled early. Some are still on

the water.

Marchigüe, Los Camachos Sauvignon Blanc 2019 Curicó Costa

£9.95 Corney & Barrow

Lysa Verdelho 2019 Stellenbosch

£19.99 Handford, also Wright Wine Co of Skipton and Wine Reserve of Cobham

Saurwein, Chi Riesling 2019 Elgin

£24 Swig

Grosset, Springvale Riesling 2019 Clare Valley

£29 OzWines.co.uk, St Swithins Wine Shippers

Tesselaarsdal Chardonnay 2019 Hemel-en-Aarde Ridge

£29.95 Swig

Grosset, Polish Hill Riesling 2019 Clare Valley

£38 Philglas & Swiggot, OzWines.co.uk

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Written by

Michael Schmidt

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