

Podere Guado al Melo

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The harvest is over: initial thoughts on the 2006 season

One of the most challenging aspects of producing premium-quality red wines is the unpredictable contribution that each season, with its own distinctive weather, can make to the sensory characteristics of the wine. This does not mean of course that the contribution of the winemaker is negligible; he must judge the complex relationships between must and cap (in managing the fermentation), for example, and must try to achieve, in the wine that is just being born, that synthesis between elegance and power that is the dream of every winemaker. The vintage, however, always succeeds in leaving its fingerprints on the wine, and no one vintage is ever like another. These considerations are particularly relevant to small wineries that utilise only their own estate grapes, and do not blend in wine bought in from other sources or adjust the juice with reverse osmosis concentrators.

In any case, recent years have not seen problems in achieving adequate sugar levels, at least in Italy; on the contrary, climate change (whatever the cause driving it) has made it very difficult to make wines below 12.0-12.5% alcohol. The true difficulties this year were those linked to periods of drought conditions and extreme high temperatures that alternated, during the ripening cycle, with heavy and prolonged rains. Component accumulation in the berry was hindered, the most important substances in the grape skin (aromas and pigment material) were diluted, and fungal attacks, such as botrytis, were widespread. Producing superb wines was quite difficult under these conditions. To tell the truth, though, these negative consequences were significantly lessened by the weather conditions that we ourselves experienced in the DOC Bolgheri zone. The good quality of the local wines over recent years is proof of this, as is, above all, their satisfactory expression of the various terroirs that make up the denomination.

Nonetheless, everything finally did go well this year.

Spring saw quite a bit of rain, thus rebuilding ground-water reserves that had dipped below normal in the last few years. The season was also quite cold, which extended the flowering phase and shortened fruit set, but cluster quality was enhanced. A hot, dry summer followed, encouraging the component accumulation process in the grapes. Luxuriant foliage contributed to this as well: we had not seen such quantity and efficiency for many years. Contrary to northern Italy's lower than normal temperatures in August, sunny skies and marine breezes in Bolgheri ensured a fine, gradual ripening process. As a matter of fact, wineries without irrigation systems, such as Guado al Melo, began scanning the skies with worried looks, waiting for some relief. Just when all hopes seemed fruitless, we received almost 200mm of rain in just one hour (as often happens in these seaside areas), a real record, since that is a third of our total annual rainfall. But the ground was able to absorb it well, and the vines drank it in as well, and after a few days the grapes again displayed a good component balance.

The harvesting of the various varieties began this year about 10 days later than average for the decade; this was favourable for maintaining high acidities and low pH in the must.

Merlot was the first to come in. A crisp, fresh mint characterised its sensory profile, as opposed to previous years, when ripe fruit preserve predominated.

Syrah, which will be part of the blend for Jassarte (along with the Caucasian varieties), ripened very slowly, which maximised the build-up of spicy aromatic components, with clove and cinnamon especially in evidence, and smooth, fine-grained tannins.

Cabernet sauvignon is the most important variety for our overall production, and its alcohol level of over 14% testifies to its perfect ripeness. In any case, cabernet never falls short of winemakers' expectations here in Bolgheri.

Cabernet franc and petit verdot showed excellent colour and aromatics.

The Caucasus varieties were harvested just a few days ago, rather late this year. Mugiuretuli and Saperavi in particular already exhibited intense fragrances of black pepper and spice as they were being drawn off, which they have never shown before.

Many wines are already in barriques to go through malolactic and mature in oak, and we are waiting with intense curiosity to see what nature has granted us. During that wait, we can certainly raise a toast to the 2004 vintage, bottled just a few weeks ago, and we await our wine-loving friends to visit us here in the cellar so that we can share with them the joy of tasting these wines.