



2012: Great dry whites and Other Digressions!

Here are my first looks at the 2012 vintage.

Although we had a hard time and long feared the worst in 2012, it ended up with rather positive results!

Well, crop was down by ca. 15% compared to a normal vintage, but very promising as regards quality.

In fact, loads of hen and chickens were to be found, which resulted in a skin/juice ratio sensibly higher than average allowing more intensity of taste in the wines. This aspect of the vintage reminds me of 2010.

Moreover, both vintages have very similar annual precipitations, respectively 504.5mm (19.86") in 2012 and 507.0mm (19.96") in 2010, so they are considered as dry years.

It might sound a paradox since everyone remembers how strong mildew was, due to the heavy rains but, because of climate change, the latter were chaotic and especially fell in May, June and July -the most critical time of the year for grape diseases-, with 60% of the annual precipitation during that period!

However, the 2012 winter and spring were so dry that this particular rain was a necessary evil, and without doubt far less harmful than endless drought!

But similarities stop there since, on a thermal point of view, 2012 really differs from 2010.

To date, 2010 remains the coldest vintage of the 2000's, with an average temp of 10.4°C (50.72°F), while 2012 is one of the hottest with 11.1°C (51.98°F), partly due to the mild winter and the heat in August.

Recently, I took a look at the vintage using the theory of the Four Elements.

You can now read the [full text](#) or a [summary](#) of my contribution on our website, which was first lectured at the *Académie Internationale du Vin* symposium in December 2012.

According to the Four Elements, 2012 has a Fire & Earth temperament, more dry than warm, while 2010, more dry than cold, is Earth & Fire, so just the opposite!

We cannot further assess the taste of these two temperaments yet, because in 2012 fermentations are much slower than usual, and we are even not sure about the bottling schedule.

These challenging fermentations revive the issue of making dry wines in Alsace.

Today, in Alsace, our main challenge is to make great dry whites from ripe grapes.

And “ripe grapes” it is, not harvested too early and/or chaptalized!

To me, grapes are ripe when their pips -or reproductive organs- are ready for offspring, since this is the very job of fruit in nature.

And fruit will not be ready to be cut off from their foster shoots until they reach their full reproductive capacity. Indeed, once reached, most fruit fall off.

Grapes will then be ripe when berries come off easily and pips are brown in colour and lignified and taste of sweet almond, so nothing to do with the ripeness governed by pure oenological prerequisites.

It is true, however, that grapes harvested too early are not a fermentation issue, and lead to a lower alcohol content than ripe ones!

Fermenting ripe grapes with the natural yeasts is a slow and demanding process!

Is it due to a slower kinetic of the natural yeasts compared to industrial ones?

In fact, natural fermentation relies on various yeasts acting one after another depending on the wine's alcohol content; on the other hand, one single cultured yeast, grown for its capacity to adapt to alcohol content, will be the kingpin of usually rushed yet less complex fermentation.

Or, does simply excess of natural sugar stretch fermentation over time?

The fact remains that ageing is now getting longer at the domaine, with for example the 2010 Zellberg Pinot Gris being bottled 2 years after harvest, and the 2011 Heissenberg Riesling still fermenting.

By doing so, we gradually dismiss the short ageing processes of our historic and cultural background (the Rhine Region), to the benefits of more Burgundy-like customs. And, while within that region wines from Alsace are often blamed for their sweetness compared to German wines, ageing length and fining processes are hardly ever mentioned, and even less are sulfites amounts!

However, all these have as much impact on the final assessment of a wine as residual sugar, all the more so when it comes to great wines!

Apparently, the debate is so biased towards the overwhelming sugar issue that the qualities of a wine seem to rely only on that!

We, the endless dry wine lovers, will never rely on figures but only on taste, whereby acidity, saltiness, flesh, texture and the feel on the palate, among others, combine to give a “dry/sweet” tessitura.

And only grapes with ripe pips lead to that global harmony, because ripe pips are the only way to show that ripeness is complete.

On the contrary, green pips simply mean that the grape is not ripe, with the vegetal character prevailing over the fruit. This will result in a green, acidic and hard-to-digest wine.

Still not convinced? Just eat unripe fruit and look at your body's usually bad reaction. You're having a hard time, aren't you?

It goes the same with a wine made from green grapes. Your body will definitely let you know about it, and, instead of boosting you, the wine will wear you out.

So listen to your body to assess a wine! It is always right.

Today, however, the plant will have to more concentrate sugars, due to global warming that boosts photosynthesis.

This is why wines are richer nowadays, hence more difficult fermentations!

For that reason, I claim that making great white wines is now a much more demanding art than making great reds!

Here, at Domaine Ostertag, white winemaking has become a never-ending marathon that requires long-term attention and efforts.

As a comparison, red winemaking will be more of an intensive sprint, starting with strenuous efforts and soon followed by a cooling-off and risk-free period.

With similar ageing times, great whites will demand more presence and follow-up than great reds!

Even so, great reds still remain more highly-rated than great whites. Well, in other respects, while sprinter Usain Bolt is a world star, no one has ever heard of marathon runner Stephen Kiprotich of Uganda, yet both are Olympics champions!

It seems like, these days, only speed matters while my whites are fermenting slower and slower!

But when it comes to wine, the main thing is not to be the fastest; on the opposite, the main thing is to reach one's own point of harmony.

As far as I am concerned, I long for dry wines with no taste of sweetness but delicious flesh and vibrant structures.

Usually, the balance is reached when, expressed in gr/l, the wine's residual sugars do not exceed 2gr of the total tartaric acidity.

So I am not looking for complete dryness at any cost, but rather a dry taste. Care and patience are crucial virtues in this quest.

While Alsace today probably produces some of the world's best dry whites, people still hardly understand it for many reasons, which are sometimes very obscure for Alsatian people.

Well, find me any region where environmental awareness is as much developed, where rigor is in the people's DNA, where any kinds of rocks on earth are to be found, and where wines so beautifully match today's cuisine?

So we have to let it know over and over again, because out here nothing is forever, and you never take things for granted, be it vine, wine or business.

Only remains the impassioned search for our ideal, and the foolish hope behind driving us.

André Ostertag, Vintner – January 2013