



DR. LOOSEN

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The extreme 2010 vintage: “A complete contradiction.”

Harvest notes from Ernst Loosen, owner; Dr. Loosen & J.L. Wolf

BERNKASTEL/MOSEL, GERMANY — The 2010 harvest was unlike any we’ve ever seen before. It was marked by dramatic swings in the weather and a fitful growing season that led to a wildly unusual result. Never before have we seen a vintage that combined high ripeness, high acidity, high levels of botrytis *and* extremely low yields. The whole thing was a complete contradiction.

Last year, we talked about the “new normal” — the recent trend toward earlier and earlier starts to the growing season, apparently due to global climate change. In 2010, however, we had a very cold winter that seemed to be putting us back to the old days. But then our spring was warmer than usual, so we ended up with an average bud break — back to the “old normal” of the 1990s. In May, it turned cold again, which delayed the flowering by a couple of weeks — back to the historical average — but also caused a very poor fruit set. This was the first factor leading toward a very low crop, especially in the best sites, which normally flower the earliest. Cooler sites — those higher up the slope or in side valleys — started to flower later, when the weather had improved a bit, and had a much better fruit set. So the historically inferior sites often fared better than our “first growth” sites. Let the contradictions begin!

By June, the vineyards were several weeks behind recent averages, but then it got hot and they quickly caught up, making a remarkable turnaround in just a few weeks. By the beginning of August, everything was looking better again: somewhat lower than average yields, but still a promising crop. Then the roller-coaster weather took another dive, turning quite cool again, with a lot of rain. This slowed the ripening and kept the acidity very high.

Extremely heavy rain in late September brought on extensive botrytis. When the rain finally stopped, the dehydrating effect of all this botrytis was a triple-whammy: it caused must weights to rise, acidity levels to rise, and the harvest yield to drop even further. October, fortunately, was mostly dry and cold, which help to slow down ripening and contain the spread of botrytis, while allowing the acidity to drop at least a little bit.

At J.L. Wolf, in the Pfalz, we started the harvest on September 26 and picked everything in less than two weeks. But there wasn’t all that much to pick, because the yield in this region was extremely low — down as much as 50 percent. In the Mosel, harvest began on October 11, with an average yield that was 40 percent lower than normal. Here, too, we had to work fast to get Kabinett grapes in before the must weights got too high. Ideally, we look for a maximum of 83° Oechsle (20 Brix) for Kabinett, but in this vintage we had to push our upper limit to 85° Oechsle (20.5 Brix).

What really astonished me was the paradoxical difference between our top sites and what we usually consider to be lesser vineyards. Normally it’s the warmer first-growth vineyards that give us the concentration and purity we want for our best wines. But this year, the lesser sites often did better, because their cooler microclimates delayed the flowering until after the weather had improved in the spring. And when the onslaught of botrytis hit in September, the less-ripe fruit on these vines wasn’t as vulnerable to mold infection. It was crazy. Some of the cleanest, healthiest fruit we saw this year was from a colleague’s minor vineyard with neglected, unpruned vines and a heavier crop load, while our impeccably well-tended grand cru sites suffered from poor fruit set and heavy botrytis, resulting in drastically reduced yields.

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Still, our single-vineyard sites produced some brilliant wines, especially the higher-Prädikat botrytis wines. It was another labor-intensive harvest, with a lot of work to separate the healthy fruit from the botrytis fruit, and then to further select for Auslese, Beerenauslese and Trockenbeerenauslese. With these high-octane sweet wines, the extreme acidity of the vintage shines through like a beacon. The very low yields gave us enormous extract in the wines, so they are extraordinarily dense and concentrated. In the single-vineyard sites, we produced all Prädikats, except for Eiswein. Because the crop was so small, we decided not to gamble on the chance of a freeze, and picked our Eiswein parcels along with the rest during the main harvest.



During picking, healthy grapes (left bucket) are separated from the botrytis-affected fruit. Further selection is done for partially affected Auslese (red bucket), half-shriveled BA (white cup on the left) and fully shriveled TBA grapes.

This is what we call a winemaker's vintage. You really have to know what you're doing in the cellar to cope with a year like 2010. We had high must weights, as in 2006, but with twice the acidity! It's going to take some loving care in the cellar to help these wines find their balance. But I think we're up to the task, and the numerous cask samples we've tasted have gorgeous depth and concentration. I'm looking forward to reporting back to you about the finished wines.

Vineyard reorganization in Wehlen

An interesting side note to the 2010 harvest is the vineyard reorganization ("Flurbereinigung") that is now fully underway in the village of Wehlen. This is a complicated process, years in the making, to address the problem of vineyard fragmentation that resulted from Napoleon's egalitarian inheritance laws. The Napoleonic Code instituted equal inheritance rights for all of a wine estate's heirs, regardless of gender or age. As you can imagine, after 200 years in a heavily Catholic area with lots of kids, a wine estate's vineyards were divided into smaller and smaller pieces.

It was the same for us. Our six hectares (15 acres) of vines in Wehlener Sonnenuhr were broken up into 186 individual parcels, all of them varying in size and configuration, and some containing only 10 or 15 vines. It was an absolute nightmare (and quite costly) just to move the harvest crew from one parcel to another. At the end of the 2010 harvest, however, the reassigned parcels were announced after many years of political negotiations and horse trading among the growers. Our six hectares are now down to just nine parcels. It's a most welcome improvement.

— Ernst Loosen



During a recent visit to the Mosel, Master Sommelier Michael Jordan helps Ernst Loosen show the tattered pre-reorganization property map of the Wehlener Sonnenuhr vineyard. The map identifies each of the 186 parcels previously owned by Dr. Loosen.



The new parcel map, after the reorganization, shows the blocks now owned by Dr. Loosen (highlighted in green). The estate's parcels in Wehlener Sonnenuhr are now larger and more contiguous, which will greatly improve efficiency in working this vineyard.

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