

Back with a vendange: hopes for wine in 2009

Producers have fingers crossed for a bumper harvest that will bring the boost they need to ride out the recession. As the race begins to pull in the grapes before autumn, we speak to growers, pickers and tasters about what the massive operation involves – and what it means to them

By Simon Watkinson

TRADITIONAL GROWER

The Domaine Koeberlé-Kreyer is the largest wine-grower in Rodern in Alsace – a village renowned for its outstanding pinot noir.

Since 1760, the small, family-run estate has worked traditionally, harvesting the grapes by hand. Its current owner, Francis Koeberlé, has been working in the vineyards of Alsace since 1985. His wife, Marie Paule, is responsible for the sales operation.

Alsace wines range from a light and dry sylvaner to the rich and opulent gewurztraminer with its amazing floral nose. The vines yielding these nectars grow on gentle slopes and on flat terrain in medieval villages on the 75-mile Route du Vin, which meanders through the landscape.

Koeberlé's 10 hectares of vines produce 80,000 bottles of wine a year – 12,000 of which are pinot noir.

What is the secret of your award-winning wines?

Lots of hard work. To make very good wine you need very good grapes. It's not always easy to achieve as ultimately we depend on nature being kind to us. We are so tiny compared to its forces.

By pruning hard you'll get

'Just two minutes of hail can destroy everything'



TRADITIONAL: The Koeberlé family vineyard produces 12,000 bottles of pinot noir a year

better grapes with a higher sugar content. The granite soil here warms up very quickly and also gives out heat, so moisture is minimised. This is perfect for pinot noir, which is susceptible to rot.

How is the 2009 vintage looking?

At the moment the vines are

holding up extremely well and the grapes look very healthy. But it's far too early to predict the quality of the vintage. Winegrowers are at the mercy of nature, which always has the last say.

Last year's vintage was very fruity and typically Alsace, and the 2007 vintage was exceptional.

What are the benefits of a family-run business?

My parents help us out a lot during the year and their wealth of experience in wine-making brings precious advice.

My father also helps me with the manual winter pruning of 50,000 vines, which takes three months.

Will the business be passed down to your son?

We'll have to see. My 15-year-old son, Yanne, is doing really well at school now.

Winemaking is becoming less secure and increasingly difficult, due to the mountain of bureaucracy. Within a decade, all the smaller Alsace wine-growers could well be taken over by the larger producers.

What are your future plans for the vineyard?

I want to keep on improving the quality of my wines. There are lots of things we can do, for example in 2008 all of Rodern's winemakers decided that they would only use bio treatments on their vines.

What is the worst and best part of the job?

Bad weather is my biggest nightmare, especially heavy frosts in late spring and hail in the summer. Just two minutes of heavy hailstones can destroy everything. The strong euro is also a problem, as it makes my wine more expensive for my Danish and English clients.

But it is a real privilege to live and work in such beautiful surroundings. Welcoming my clients, discussing the different vintages and wine styles with them and seeing them really appreciate my wine makes it all worthwhile.

THE MODERN WAY

David Cowderoy moved to France in 2003 with his wife Jo and three teenage daughters. With 20 years of wine-making experience under his belt, he bought the Château La Bouscade in the Minervois hills of Languedoc a year later and has been producing a broad range of wines there ever since.

In a break with tradition, Cowderoy will be using machine harvesting this year to bring in the grapes from the 12 hectare estate. They are then hand-selected, fermented over months, bottled with elegant labels and shipped to a dozen different countries.

What are the benefits of machine harvesting?

We'd normally have a team of about eight pickers that we augment as and when needed. But a new generation of machine harvester has come on the market that will be a fantastic job.

It's also cheaper. Hand-picking costs about €1,200 per hectare, whereas a machine will do the same for €400.

'If we carry on like this it will be a good year for both whites and reds'



TAKE YOUR PICK: David and Jo Cowderoy are moving over to machine harvesting this year

How long does it take?

It depends on the variety. We started the Chardonnay around August 20, then we will attack the reds in the middle of September. The weather can do anything from here on. The window of harvest opportunity for something like sauvignon blanc can be as little as two days. When we get to the reds the window is greater.

How is the 2009 vintage looking?

We had far greater rain in spring and winter than we had in previous years. That's been a godsend.

Since then, the weather's been lovely. If we carry on it will be a good year for the whites and the reds.

2007 and 2008 were ridiculously small harvests. It was going to be financial doom for a lot of producers. So the



AWAITING: One of 300 vineyards in the C

water that's fallen has been very well-received.

Where are the wines sold?
We ship to Switzerland, England, the US, Belgium, Denmark, China, Japan, Singapore and Canada.

We've now moved over to screw caps on almost all of our wines to avoid spoilage. We still have some pockets of resistance. There are a few conservative markets such as the Chinese – and some English too – who do not like screw caps.

