

Traditional grape picking at the Château du Basty

Saturday, 23 August, first day of harvest at the Château du Basty at Lantignié (Rhône department). It is the moment of truth for this Beaujolais-Villages vintage, affected by frost and then by the extreme heatwave, which has caused harvesting to be 3 weeks earlier than anticipated. This has never happened in living memory.

Being an entirely family owned business, there isn't a shortage of hands. With 17 hectares of vines - mainly Gamay in the communes of Régnié and Lantignié and a parcel of Chardonnay - the domain is larger than the average size of those in the region. The little band of young harvesters is directly led by Gilles Perroud, the 16th generation of wine producers from one of the oldest properties in the Beaujolais (1482).

In the early 90's the harvesters sometimes encompassed 15 different nationalities. Europeans, Africans, Asians. The tightening of European regulations regarding foreign workers has since changed the deal and the atmosphere. This morning, it was mainly local university and high school students who left at 7am to go to the vines. Average age, 20. Break at 9 am with a bacon sandwich, lunch at 12.30 washed down with last year's Beaujolais, back to work from 2 until 5 pm. Eight hours of work paid at 44 euros net per day. Fed, housed, showered, declared: the minimum state wage topped up by overtime. It is the price for the quality of hand picking, the old fashioned way, in accordance with the tradition of wine producers who still house their wine harvesters.

It is extremely hot, calves are getting sunburnt, backs are sore, there are even a few fingers nipped by secateurs. However, the warmth of this family with 6 children – the main recruiters – keeps the porters and pickers eager. Two hectares are harvested on the first day. By the end of the morning, the big decrease in yield, largely due to extreme weather conditions, is confirmed, much in line with neighbouring vineyards where harvesting has already taken place.

With 35 hectolitres instead of 60 per hectare, the 2003 vintage will be 500 or 600 hectolitres instead of the usual 1000. Hopefully the quality of this “*extraordinary*” year will in some way compensate for the quantity required, taking stocks into account, to attain the annual turnover of 300, 000 euros.

With profitability in the region of 15% “*Far removed from the methods of the large cooperatives and producers, we look for market niches*, explains Gilles Perroud, who exports 70 % of his production. *In order to retain our margins and our specificity we maintain maximum control of picking, production, sales and marketing.*” Tradition all the way down the line at the Château du Basty where only 10 % of its harvest is sent to the local wine-merchant.

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