

Vintage 2008.....This was a big one – right across the country, no question about that. It will turn out to be quite the prophetic year I would suggest – a harbinger for sure. Our own industry becoming gigantic and somewhat bloated was somewhat sadly in concert with the start of financial turmoil that the rest of the world saw later this year, and in some strange ways analogous as well - Well some of it, anyway -

This was a vintage that will sort out the players for sure.

It will do this on two fronts – quality and size.

As a season it started rather benignly enough, enough snow to keep the ski bunnies happy, however not too much to cause too many additional frost risks. After the now obligatory frost scares in the vineyard the region as a whole escaped our danger period unscathed. Our own vineyards came away into budburst right on cue and gave us relatively even growth patterns.

Weather over the tail end of spring was warm, little rain and indeed few windy days over what is normally our most blustery months of oct/nov. The vines, having carried over plenty of reserves from the previous vintage's small crop, grew exceptionally well over this time.

Flowering was early – early December for our Lowburn and Bannockburn vineyards and then late dec/early jan for our gibbston vines. More so it was over and done with very quickly in settled warm weather. This resulted in very good set, with continued strong growth the berries also divided their cells in double quick time – which all pointed to lots of bunches – all with plenty of berries – and all potentially bigger than average.

The weather was still good – not hugely hot but sunny and warm.

As a region, and in many cases across the country – growers rejoiced at the sight of a potential bumper crop. At this point often forgetting that we were only 2/3 way through summer and that good wine and good grapes are, funnily enough, inextricably linked.

There were two tales that followed in Central Otago, and indeed New Zealand, as a general rule. There were those who were growing grapes and those who were growing wine.

As wine drinkers our job will be to sort out which producers were which – and believe me you will need to do exactly that. I have a feeling that the best wines will definitely come from those who own or actively manage their own vineyards or have that sort of relationship where wine is grown in the vineyards.

For summer was indeed not quite as hot or dry as people believed – heat units were in fact average, and whilst rainfall was on the low side – the vines weren't that stressed, and had plenty of reserves. There were a lot of people who didn't see it that way – they thought the summer was brilliant, crops would ripen, that it was actually super dry and hot - so they pumped on the water, left the crop on and waited for the big pay day.

Well – the summer stopped being that hot – it went (or perhaps already was) decidedly average – warm days, cool nights, autumn came a little earlier – again no surprise as Easter was early – and the season didn't quite pan out to be the super, big, hot, easy as you like vintage. What a surprise.

So there were one of two scenarios that panned out – You treated the vines with a little more caution, cropped thinned as normal, didn't feed/water the vines a lot and in the end brought in fruit that whilst certainly on the heavy side – read larger bunches than the last couple of years, was also ripe. So in pure number terms the bunches were – approx 140 grams as opposed to 45 grams in 2007 or around 90 odd in 2006. These however were reflective of a vintage where if management and principles had stayed the same then the fruit was good,

Or

There were those who had massive crops – and got caught out by their own vines inability to ripen such big crops, cooler weather setting in, or rain coming and your fruit was uneven, dilute, green, yet to fully ripen etc etc.

Needless to say – all the wines will be reflective of the approach taken, and in a year where everyone has a lot of fruit in their winery I know I am glad we took the former.

As an example in one of our vineyards we cut our own irrigation by nearly 2/3 from the previous year. We cropped at a healthy 7 tonnes per ha and the fruit was ripe and even across the board. This pattern, to one degree or another, was followed across most of our vineyards.

& what of the wines – what are they like ?

Oh yes – we have good wine for sure – how good we are yet to see.

What we can pick at this early stage, as I write this at the tail end of winter, is that we have wines that have charm and grace – they are not blockbusters. These wines have lovely fruit characters, yet tend to be more precise and fine rather than weighty and big. Certainly there is some power however it is understated rather than knock your socks off.

We have just bottled the first of our wines – our Rieslings – all have good precision, clarity of flavour, all have balance and also some nice depth. Again, not powerhouse wines but wines with some substance nevertheless. If I was to compare with a vintage I would say rather like 2003 with a touch of the 2004 primary fruit thrown in or if you can remember that far back, 1998.

It is an exciting time for us, after years of never having enough wine – finally we are realizing our potential with our vineyards. If in the cellar the reds continue to mature as well as they appear to be doing, and the whites show as well as we think, then all the wines will start to deliver on that promise.

Fingers crossed.