



The story of Y 2024

« Water is the driving force
of all nature. »

Leonardo da Vinci

What are the conditions that characterise a truly classic vintage in Sauternes? With growing seasons increasingly marked by scorching temperatures and hydric deficits, one could almost forget that a blazing sun has not historically defined this region's mild, maritime climate – quite the contrary. “Of all the elements, the most important relationship in Sauternes is with water,” says Lorenzo Pasquini, CEO of Château d'Yquem. “Water is life. It is at the origin of the miracle of botrytis, yet it can also be the element that destroys vintages – it's a relationship of love and hate that is foundational here.” Sauternes is a region shaped, steeped and sublimated by water. The sedimentary soils of its slopes and valleys were formed by oceans and ancient rivers across millions of years, a history recalled in the fossilised oysters that vigneron pluck from their vineyards, and the mineral salinity that lingers beneath the sweetness of their wines. Riddled with underground springs and streams, Sauternes is bordered by the mighty Garonne and traversed by the cool Ciron. Gorged by frequent rains and shaded by the Landes forest, the Ciron's thermal confluence with the warmer Garonne creates thick morning fogs which blanket the vineyards – ideal conditions for noble rot, but also for vine disease.

At Château d'Yquem, the challenge to channel water – to mitigate the dangers it creates, and seize the opportunities it presents – has given rise to an ever-refining savoir-faire, centuries in the making. This ensemble of techniques and tactics was put to the test in 2024, a cool, rainy, profoundly challenging vintage for winemakers all across France. “The 2024 vintage forced us to return to the fundamentals of our craft,” says Lorenzo. “Ultimately, it also brought us back to the stylistic fundamentals of Yquem, by yielding a vintage of great classicism.” That term encapsulates Château d'Yquem's eponymous sweet wine in 2024, but equally it describes its dry white wine, Y, whose invigorating aromatics, with the floral freshness of a spring morning, are typical of the traditionally cooler vintages of Sauternes. In a year that saw many Bordeaux winemakers struggle to produce whites and reds alike, the success of Y 2024 is rooted in its unique nature as a dry white wine with the shadow of a Sauternes, a reference not only to its opulent style, but to the similar techniques used for its cultivation and harvesting methods devised by generations of vigneron grappling with the vicissitudes of water.

Back to the source



The harvest of 2023 concluded on an unseasonably balmy October day, bringing to an end the second of two of the hottest vintages in the history of Château d'Yquem. Barely a week later, Sauternes seemingly awoke from a fever dream, roused by a 25-day, 320-mm deluge - 1/3 of a typical year's total rainfall, in less than a month. "Nature has a way of always restoring balance," muses Thomas. "It's up to us, humans, to adapt and find our place within that equilibrium." Which was precisely the challenge of 2024, a year marked in many ways by pre-climate change meteorology, hearkening back to the classic vintages of the 1990s and 80s - cool, wet and complex.

The rains of autumn 2023 carried on into the winter of 2024, with February bringing mild temperatures and twice the precipitation of an average year. That trend intensified in March, with 150 mm of rainfall versus the average 60 mm. As spring-like temps began to arrive ahead of the season, it became evident that the waterlogged, relatively warm winter had yielded a crisis: test samples taken in the vineyards to evaluate the risk of downy mildew revealed the highest levels of fungal spores ever recorded in Sauternes. With the vineyards awakening in budburst two weeks ahead of schedule on the 17th of March, the team had no time to waste preparing for what was sure to be an arduous growing season. "It was a vintage that really tested our nerves from the start," says Thomas. "In the end, it's difficult times that bring us back to the basics, and remind us what we're capable of."

For estates like Château d'Yquem that reject the use of systemic chemical fungicides, the months of spring 2024, characterised by cool temperatures and frequent showers, would challenge their viticultural savvy and the efficiency of organic treatments. Preventing a mildew outbreak would require calculated vineyard management from the ground up.

Meticulous pruning, maintaining cover crops between the rows to prevent puddles from forming, training the vines to prevent shoots from coming into contact with the soggy ground, thinning foliage to encourage the circulation of air through the vines, precise calibration of the sprayers - an ensemble of methods was needed to minimise risk and allow natural copper-based organic treatments to be effective. "The key," says Thomas, "is to use the right dose, at the right moment, on vines that have been prepared so as to be receptive." But given nature's constantly shifting rhythms in 2024, that meant the team would be constantly on their toes.

Following their premature budburst, the vine's growth cycle then slowed in the cool spring weather, with below-average temps lasting until early July. Flowering in May (sometimes over in a few days) would drag out over two weeks. Yet once complete, the sheer multitude of inflorescences the vines produced provided fresh motivation for the team, who would fight to bring to fruition this potential cornucopia of grape bunches. "All spring, we had our hearts in our mouths, waiting for the mildew to explode," Toni recalls. "And when summer finally came and the grapes were starting to mature without a single bunch having been lost to mildew, that's when we realised just how brilliantly the team had risen to the challenge."

In the end, the spread of the feared fungus was limited to some foliage in a few parcels until finally a summer heat wave in the second week of July brought relief. Overnight, mildew treatments were swapped for talc powder applications to protect the vines from the sun. The hot, dry conditions would last until late August - an ideal window for the grapes to fully complete their maturation, just in time for the harvest.

A timely harvest

“The harvest for Y began on Tuesday, the 20th of August,” noted Lorenzo in his journal. “At a time when the whole of Bordeaux was looking at us as if we were mad, we were happily harvesting our Sauvignon Blanc.”

The decision would prove fortuitous: after one productive week of picking, the summer sun was swallowed up by storm clouds and 100 mm of rain (more than three times the total for all July and August). The soaked vineyards would promptly explode with noble rot, effectively ending the 2024 season for Y. This strategically timed harvest was a fitting conclusion for Y in 2024, as a vintage defined by the vineyard team’s struggle with the Sauternes climate. Most white wines in Bordeaux are harvested 10-15 days later than Y. Why? First, at Château d’Yquem there are no separate parcels for a dry wine. The grapes for Y come from the same parcels used for Yquem – vines cultivated specifically to make noble rot Sauternes, with low yields and high exposition to sunlight, factors which accelerate maturation. Second, Y is harvested like a Sauternes, using the same *trie successive* system of selective harvesting, by which the harvesters will pick only one perfect bunch from each vine, leaving the rest to continue maturing. It’s a more labour-intensive approach, but which allows the team to select with precision a blend of grapes at varying degrees of ripeness, from just-ripe Sauvignon Blanc to provide a backbone of acidity, to ripe Sémillon with the first spots of noble rot to provide complexity and a touch of residual sugar.

So, on the 29th of August, the team completed the bulk of their harvest just before the storm arrived. “2024 was a vintage that demanded precision and risk-taking,” reflects Toni. “In these windows of opportunity that nature affords us, it is up to us to seize the moment.”

Around the 21st of September, the team would harvest a few last parcels of Sémillon amidst sporadic showers and rapidly advancing noble rot, finally bringing Y 2024 to a close with 85 barrels of Sauvignon and 25 barrels of Sémillon collected. Less than a week later, the team would launch the first *trie* for Château d’Yquem 2024, an exceptionally generous harvest that, like for Y, would nearly end in a watery disaster, but for the craft and cunning of a harvest team determined to make 2024 a vintage to celebrate.

A vintage of joy

Without question, for the team at Château d’Yquem, 2024 was a vintage destined to be won or lost in the vineyard, by *vignerons* versed in the subtleties of that element so abundant in Sauternes. “Here, water is at once our greatest ally, and potentially our worst enemy,” says Toni. “Our challenge is always to ensure it remains our friend – and that was the story of 2024.” This relationship of love and hate has played out over countless classic vintages at Château d’Yquem through the centuries, by generations of *vignerons* battling their region’s capricious climate. Sometimes these stormy years end in despair, like 2012, with a vintage lost. But then others end in celebration, like 2013, with a vintage of joy. So it was in 2024.

The year was particularly uplifting for Thomas Robert, who oversaw Yquem’s organic certification in 2022 at a time when naysayers claim that organic viticulture is incompatible with Bordeaux’s oceanic climate. In rainy 2024, the Yquem vineyard team lost not a single grape bunch to mildew, while using little more than four kilos of copper treatments per hectare in total – an amount many estates might use in a year with only light mildew pressure. “In 2024, we proved that even in difficult years, it is possible in Bordeaux to farm organically without extravagant quantities of copper and without losing any harvest,” beams Thomas. “All that is required is hard work and precision.”

Could it be that, in Sauternes, the hardest years yield the sweetest wines? “In the end, 2024 will be remembered as a vintage of joy,” says Lorenzo. “Not because it was an easy vintage, but because, even though it was difficult, we still managed to achieve our ultimate goal – creating a wine that moves you, that brings a smile to your lips.”



The shadow of Yquem

While the noble rot wines of Sauternes have enjoyed renown for centuries, only in recent years have the region's dry white cuvées emerged from obscurity. Yet the style is not a recent development. Many estates here have produced a dry wine for years, and the best have always distinguished themselves from other fine whites of Bordeaux as wines that speak the language of Sauternes. That was the vision of the late Marquis de Lur Saluces when he created Y in 1959. Mulling over the last bunches remaining after the harvest for Yquem, he was inspired to create a new, dry interpretation of the terroir of Sauternes. A rare wine (never more than 30,000 bottles produced), initially it wasn't even made every year. By the turn of the 21st century, Y had evolved into an annual wine marked by greater freshness, following the decision to begin the harvest each year with a special selection of grapes for Y. Thus, as Lorenzo Pasquini explains, even a wine lover who never tasted one of the region's sweet wines can discover in Y the distinctive universe of Sauternes – the pleasing bitter notes, the salinity, even a touch of residual sugar, though experienced as textural richness rather than sweetness. “For us, Y is a parallel expression of the Yquem terroir,” he says. “With Y, we are trying to combine the light of a white wine with the shadow of a Sauternes – to marry the aromatic freshness and acidity of a dry white with the complexity and voluptuousness of Yquem.”

The freshness of Y extends beyond its aromas, as a wilfully contemporary interpretation of Yquem's terroir, ever-evolving to reflect the passions of the Yquem team and the specificities of the vintage. The blend may change from year to year, showcasing the grape variety which shone brightest, as Sauvignon Blanc (70%) does in Y 2024 with its delicate perfume of white flowers and aromatic herbs. If there's a golden thread across vintages, it's a desire to create wines that embrace their origins – wines that encapsulate this region's microclimate, that express the briny salinity of Yquem's Tertiary-era clays, that reflect the complexity of Sémillon spotted with castamé, the local expression for nascent botrytis. Wines, as Lorenzo puts it, that never hide their accent as they “speak to us of Sauternes”.

Y 2024

Ageing:	12 months in oak barrels 1/3 new oak and 2/3 barrels previously used for Yquem
Blend:	70 % Sauvignon Blanc, 30% Sémillon

Tasting notes from the technical team

After a string of ripe, remarkable vintages, in 2024 Toni El Khawand, cellar master of Château d'Yquem, discovered an Y that stands apart not for its power, but for its finesse. “As you swirl a glass of Y 2024, the wine opens with a bouquet quite unlike recent vintages, almost pastoral in character, evolving into aromatic herbs such as chervil and thyme, but also citrus notes – lemon zest, grapefruit – which, combined with those lively herbal aromas, rise together to the nose in the most refreshing way. Behind these aromas are very refined floral notes of delicate white flowers, such as lily of the valley and lemon blossom. This is not a powerful wine, it doesn't impose itself. Instead, everything is gentle and subtle and quite complex, as you pass from flowers to citrus fruits to aromatic herbs. All of this is very well integrated, leading seamlessly into a palate without the great density of Y 2022 or Y 2023, but which remains very fresh and lively, even as it delicately coats the palate and lingers there. For me, it's a wine that evokes the countryside, as if you were strolling through a field in early spring, when the flowers are just starting to bloom – very delicate aromas, yet very much present, which for me is the nature of finesse.”