



The Story of Y 2023

“Luck is when preparation
meets opportunity.”

Seneca the Younger

Where does the story of a truly great vintage begin? Is it when the vines are at last heavy with grapes and the harvest commences, while the vigneronns pray for just one week sans natural calamity to reap the fruits of their labours? Or perhaps it starts with budbreak, when the vines first awaken under a warm spring sun with a burst of fresh green life? Or maybe everything begins with the first replenishing rains of January, while the vineyard is still in its winter sleep? But what if, sometimes, the story of a vintage can't be reduced to 12 months of meteorology? “Great vintages are not simply the result of a year of ideal climatic conditions,” says Lorenzo Pasquini, Château d'Yquem's estate director. “A great vintage is born of a meeting between great conditions and a team that is ready, armed with the right vision and experiences.” That is the story of 2023 – an historic vintage at Château d'Yquem, whose success was won through trials faced before the year even began.

The 2023 vintage is the culmination of three remarkable years for Château d'Yquem – a trio of vintages that saw a conjuncture of climatic conditions which pushed the team to its limits, forcing them to find new solutions in the vineyard and the cellar to preserve the pillars of style that constitute Yquem's foundations. In the end, each year was both unique in its blend of obstacles and exceptional for the wines produced. This is emphatically the case for Château d'Yquem's eponymous sweet wine, whose 2021, 2022 and 2023 vintages form a trilogy that represents a milestone in the estate's history. But these years were equally consequential for Y, Château d'Yquem's dry white wine, as a period which tested the estate's capacity to continue producing dry white wines of balance and freshness – the calling cards of Y. In this respect, Y 2023 is a vintage of hope for the future, crafted by a team which drew lessons from each year of this trilogy, proving themselves ready and able to continue crafting this compelling, parallel expression of the Yquem terroir.

The Year of Plenitude

At first glance, a review of the meteorology in 2023 at Château d'Yquem reads like a vigneron's nightmare – tropical humidity, unexpected deluges and a severe threat of mildew, but also record temperatures and scorching periods of drought. And yet with hindsight, the team recalls a very different year. “I would call it the vintage of plenitude,” muses Toni El Khawand, Château d'Yquem's cellar master. “We had water when we needed it, heat when we needed it – we had everything we could have asked for.” The year left Lorenzo Pasquini with a similar sentiment. “Maybe the word is serendipity – a sense of things coming together.” For Thomas Robert, Château d'Yquem's vineyard manager, the feeling of 2023 was one of *déjà vu*. “What I took from 2023 was the realisation that 2022 had already taught us everything we needed to make it a success.” In fact, lessons learned in both the historic hothouse vintage of 2022 and the cool, wet vintage of 2021 would be put to use in 2023, as a vintage which challenged the team throughout the growing season before yielding one of the most abundant harvests in memory.

After a January and February with little precipitation, Yquem's vineyards emerged from winter in 2023 with a hydric deficit. That would change soon after the first buds appeared in late March, when a light rain began to fall in early April that seemed to return every other day into late June, bringing 184 mm in all. Meanwhile, spring temperatures soared, starting a trend that would last all year, with hotter than normal temps almost daily from mid-March to mid-October. Flowering would thus take place on the 25th of May amidst essentially tropical conditions, as would fruit set soon afterwards. Such

generous heat and water made for a growing paradise – for the vines, but also for mildew. It would take a tenacious and sagacious team to manage both the constantly evolving architecture of the vines and the constant threat from the fungus. “It was an arduous year for our vignerons,” recalls Toni El Khawand. “It was a race against the clock all spring to manage the growth and treat the vines to stay a step ahead of the disease. No sooner had they reached the end of a parcel than they needed to start over again, because the vines had grown so much in the meantime.” Determined not to fall behind, Thomas Robert and his team of vignerons never missed a day – even the weekend in June when Thomas had to wake up at dawn the morning after his wedding celebration to prepare another round of organic treatments.

Their sacrifices paid off. When the rains finally stopped in June, the estate emerged from this tropical spring with negligible losses and a superabundance of healthy young grapes ready to ripen in the summer sun – and they would. From 22 June to 12 August the estate would see barely 30 mm of rain. As temperatures continued to rise through the summer, the vineyard team would soon reinstate the *modus operandi* they developed during the heatwaves of 2022, adapting their schedule to work in the early morning hours and avoid the sweltering afternoons and employing new techniques to protect the vines from the blistering sun, such as applications of white talc powder as a natural leaf sunblock. Under such conditions, the grapes matured at light speed, and by early August the estate was preparing for

Harvesting Histor-Y... Again

On the morning of Saturday, the 12th of August, the team launched the second earliest harvest in Château d'Yquem's history. But while the record setting harvest of 2022 (the 9th of August) had initially been clouded by anxiety over lab results showing grapes with unusually low acid, the team had no apprehensions this time. "What we finally realized in 2022," recalls Thomas Robert, "is that despite what levels the analysis shows, the reality in tasting the grapes is that they can still be fresh and perfectly balanced." A lab test may quantify sugar and acid, but only a palate detects the more elusive elements that create a sensation of balance, from elegant bitter notes to the salty minerality imparted by a multiplex terroir. And as the 2023 harvest began, the berries the team sampled were reassuring indeed. "I remember tasting the berries of a parcel of young vines just west of the chateau and being struck by their dense, fleshy texture, their flavours of grapefruit and passionfruit, and thinking it was going to make a very fine lot for Y," says Toni El Khawand. "Later, when it was fermenting, it filled the cellar with aromas of fresh exotic fruit – it was so lovely you wanted to put your nose in the vat!"

Harvesting was only just underway when a 75-mm downpour on 15 August brought picking to a halt. Though the team was initially perturbed by the interruption, this kind of brief interlude of cooling rain amidst the heatwaves proved providential for the vintage. Four days later, the harvest recommenced, continuing through August amidst sweltering temperatures, including a daily record of 39.8° C on 23 August. "The reason 2023 ticks all the boxes," says Lorenzo Pasquini, "is because you had high temperatures with the right amount of rain to mitigate them, which allowed us to preserve a sense of freshness in the wine – and because we had not only great grapes but great botrytis." Indeed, the rains of 15 August would not only replenish the vine's reservoirs to be able to complete their maturation without excessive hydric stress, they would also awaken the botrytis cinerea in the vineyards. Thus, when another period of showers came in early September, the contaminated vineyards throughout the estate exploded simultaneously with the magical fungus. And so in late September 2023, the beginning of the harvest for Yquem would coincide with the final day of harvesting for Y – a selection of lightly botrytised Sémillon grapes to sublimate the 2023 blend with the complex aromas of noble rot.

Good Things Come in Threes

For the team at Château d'Yquem, the story of the 2023 vintage is also the tale of a trilogy. Three years that saw Lorenzo, Toni and Thomas grapple with existential questions, asking how they could preserve the stylistic signature of Yquem in a changing climate. "These three vintages of 2021, 2022 and 2023 tested us, encouraged us to be creative, to learn to anticipate and to better manage the different natural phenomena that we may be faced with in the years to come," reflects Toni El Khawand. "They helped us lay the foundations of an approach which is better adapted to the era we are entering."

We see that approach in the vineyard, where the team has found new ways to boost vine resilience in the face of climate change, adopting organic viticulture, planting cover crops between the rows and using novel treatments like talc powder leaf sunblock. We see it in the cellar, from the strategy of harvesting Y at unusually early dates to preserve balance and aromatics, to the acquisition in 2023 of a more powerful, six-bar wine press to better handle the high-volume, fast-paced harvests that increasingly result from autumn heat-waves. For Toni, the 2023 vintage shows they've chosen the right path, and "that even in a year with extreme conditions, we can still draw out the nuance and subtlety which define the wines of Yquem."

In the words of Lorenzo Pasquini, "2023 was one of those rare vintages when everything came together. The right climatic conditions, a previous vintage which provided keys to solving new challenges, and a team that was united in their sense of direction and purpose." And that may just make Y 2023 the best of the trilogy – a vintage with the freshness of 2021, the power of 2022, and something else entirely: a taste of serendipity.



Light and Shadow

Y was born in 1959 when the late Marquis de Lur Saluces was inspired to create something new from the last bunches remaining after the harvest for Yquem – a dry white wine from the Sauternes terroir. A rare wine (never more than 30,000 bottles produced), initially it wasn't even made every year. Yet many of those early vintages, like 1964 and '66, were powerful wines that have aged extraordinarily well, developing rich oxidative aromas. 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 – a single bunch from each of the best vines grown for Château d'Yquem, the Sauvignon Blanc bringing its citrusy, lavender freshness, and the Sémillon providing the complex aromas of ripe grapes with a hint of noble rot. 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."

Light and shadow... Y 2023 may be the most natural expression of that exquisite balance to date: in 2023, the amount of Sémillon in the Y blend was raised for the first time to an equal 50% alongside Sauvignon Blanc. It's a recognition of how remarkably well Sémillon, a grape variety indigenous to this region, has fared during these hot Sauternes summers, and of the delicious harmony it creates with noble Sauvignon Blanc in this ever-evolving, decidedly contemporary interpretation of Château d'Yquem's terroir.

Y 2023

Ageing : 12 months in oak barrels
 1/3 new oak and
 2/3 barrels previously used for Yquem

Blend: 50 % sauvignon, 50% sémillon

Comments the technical team

A sun-kissed vintage cooled by just enough rain, Y 2023 is a wine of "power, subtlety and freshness", says Toni El Khawand, cellar master of Château d'Yquem. "To describe Y 2023, I must begin with this intriguing mix of fruity and vegetal aromas – it reminds me of citrus leaf, sage or verbena, for both the greenness of the leaf and its underlying aromatic power. Next comes this subtle fruit character, like a crisp pear or white peach, followed by floral aromas such as peony and wild rose. There's a lingering scent of lily-of-the valley and finally a delicate, chalk-like aroma, which all together makes for a very elegant wine. I find Y 2023 to be a very complex vintage, not intensely aromatic like Y 2021 or 2022, but full of subtleties that draw us in, bit by bit, until we find ourselves deep in their contemplation. On the palate, we discover flavours of kumquat and yellow grapefruit, and these lovely bitter notes which impart so much length, doubtless from the Sauvignon Blanc. It's a wine that boasts freshness and structure, with a finish characterized by a velvety chalkiness, almost unctuous, imparting a density to the wine that is rather remarkable."