



A Year in the Vineyard

WIn this story written in August 2007 Caroline Feely chronicles the all important work that takes place in the vineyard through the year.

Two years ago Seán & I were Dublin city-dwellers looking to change tack. Our long-held dream of an organic vineyard seemed out of reach until Chateau Haut Garrigue popped up on our computer screen. Despite years of saving and planning, including night classes in french and wine, it was like jumping out of an aeroplane without a parachute with two small daughters, Sophia and Elenna: just two years and five months respectively at the time. Seán, despite having one less finger than when he arrived now drives a tractor and wields pruning secateurs as confidently as he used to tap away on his Bloomberg at Bank of Ireland Asset Management. I have swapped computers on Merrion Square for concrete mixers. The two girls are fluent in french and adept at correcting our pronunciation.

Harvest

September is harvest time, exciting but also frightening. Most harvest days start before 5am and don't finish until midnight. We feel like we are inside a tornado. We are completely dependent on the weather and the messages from the grapes. To hear them we taste, we analyse and we walk the vineyard.

Based on their messages so far we are planning to start harvest 2007 around the 15th September with the sauvignon blanc, our earliest ripener. After the physical harvest the grape juice and its transformation will become our dictator. Each vat is like a baby needing its temperature and other vital statistics checked morning and evening. They require constant attention from cooling or heating to pumping over, for the reds, or lovingly stirring the lees, for the whites. It is the time when the most accidents occur on vineyards thanks to the long hours, the machinery involved and the potential killer carbon dioxide which is given off in the wine-making process. For almost two months we work all hours with no weekends. The days blur into one another.



Hillside parcel: an example of our oak signs, autumn mist and summer bounty

There is so much riding on this intense period. To get to this point we have put in a year of hard work in the vineyard. But why should you, a winemaker, care about the work in the vineyard? Because it is this work that ultimately defines the wine. As one vigneron put it when we visited him in the Loire in 1998, 'The wines are grown. I am not a wine maker. I merely help the grapes' transformation.'

Autumn and Winter

November is a time of rest for the vines. But it is no time for the viticulteur or winegrower to rest. Vineyard maintenance must be done, removing vines that were damaged during the year, repairing trellising and removing scrub oak, blackberries, ivy and other weeds that are too tough for the mechanical hoe. There is much manual work, good for keeping warm outdoors in rapidly cooling temperatures. The vines look a little dishevelled after their bounty has been harvested then they turn colour and become a show of autumn russet and gold.

The vineyard is an ever changing palette of colours and activities, a beautiful place where animals, insects, vines and other plants thrive. It is also a place where ravagers, creatures that destroy or damage vines, and disease can be found so vigilance is paramount particularly for organic growers. We strive to achieve harmony in the vineyard. That means encouraging a natural balance between ravagers and their natural predators rather than killing everything with a pass of insecticide. The only epidemic-level outbreaks of insects I have observed in our region have been on conventional farms where killing off one type of insect has resulted in a radical imbalance in another.

At this time we work the soil and lay down preparations to aid soil fertility. Being organic we have to navigate this area carefully as most of the agricultural suppliers around here say 'quoi?' when you mention 'biologique', organic in french. The timing is important as it gives the soil a chance to assimilate the compost or compost preparations over the winter.

December starts the three month pruning marathon. The vines look scraggly and dead, like bundles of twigs attached to vertical sticks or logs depending on the age of the vine. The vineyard is shrouded in hoar-frost and the odd sprinkle of snow. Seán takes his set of electric secateurs and tackles it undaunted. He prunes each of our 30,000 vines from their unruly state down to one or two neat and carefully selected canes that will be the bearers of next year's bounty. It is a skilled job requiring constant concentration and judgement both for the sake of the vines and for keeping fingers intact. Pruning is key to the health of the vine, to excellent grapes and hence to quality wine. It is at this point that the winemaker defines the gross potential yield of the vineyard parcel. Low yields are important to high-quality, evenly-ripened bunches. Of course mother nature can intervene in many ways in the ensuing months to reduce further the potential harvest via late-frost, hail or drought.

Pruning is a lonely job but one meets the odd stranger. Last year Seán came face to face with a massive wild boar. He blew several smoky breaths into the cold morning air then sauntered off without causing any trouble to Seán's relief. We regularly meet deer, hares and pheasant.



Garrigue parcel through the seasons: winter frost, spring shoots and summer bounty

In late March the buds swell and we rush to finish the tying down of the canes onto the trellis system. Once the buds develop there is a chance of damaging them so getting finished quickly is essential. But it is a fine balance. To minimise the damage caused by a late frost it is better not to tie down too soon.

Spring

The buds turn from hard little green nodules into pink lumps then fluffy pink leaves over a matter of days. It is stunning and quick and marks the transition from the relatively quiet start to the unbelievable speed and chaos of late spring. The vines can grow ten centimetres a day around this time. Unfortunately the weeds and grass develop at a similar pace.

We weed under the vine with a mechanical hoe instead of herbicide which is time-consuming but better for your health and also for ours. Between the vine rows we mow the natural grass, clover and wild oat cover to limit competition with the vines. Some farmers herbicide the entire vineyard to minimise labour required to manage the biodiversity between the rows. This, aside from the obvious health risks, creates serious soil erosion and turns the vineyard into a desert over time. Certain herbicides commonly used in vineyards have been found to be persistent through into finished wine*.

We also start the vital task of removing unwanted sucker shoots from the vine trunk. This is very important for quality as it allows the vine to focus on development of the shoots that will produce high quality grapes. In a conventionally farmed vineyard sucker-shoot removal is often taken care of with endemic chemical sprays and shoot selection on the head of the vine is ignored because it is too manually intensive and hence costly.

Mid-spring is typically the time to start treatments against fungi like mildew and oidium. For us, as organic farmers, we protect the vine before the risk rather than after- a preventative rather than curative ethos. This means that the vines must be sprayed with biodynamic preparations and / or with sulphur and copper before the rain to protect them.

Summer

Spring quickly cedes its place to summer. The days are gorgeous – long and hot. Sometimes too hot. In the heat wave temperatures reach 45 degrees in the courtyard. We work from 5.30am to 11am as it is too hot to be outside in the afternoon. Now we must trim the vines as well as continue the work started in spring. The grapes progress at a rapid rate. From tiny hard green peas to soft sweet grapes over a few weeks. We watch their progress carefully. In August there is little to be done in the vineyard save close observation and selective leaf removal. It is the moment to rest and gather strength before the harvest.

We touch our vines regularly. They are living things which respond better to care from a human than to the constant grind of machinery and showers of chemicals which are the order of the day for most conventional farmers. One biodynamic grower in Italy is convinced that playing classical music to his vines delivers better wines. We haven't started piping music into the vines yet, perhaps next year...

To order or to find out more about the Feelys, their wines or their gite, please visit www.wildearthvineyards.com or email caroline@wildearthvineyards.com.

* for example see YING G. and WILLIAMS B 1999 'Herbicide residues in grapes and wine'