



Balm

Even in biblical times, the secretions of the balm tree and of various other shrubs were well known and highly regarded. Their importance at the time as a particularly precious medication for the relief of pain and for the achievement or relaxation and tranquility has continued up to the present day, and is found even now in familiar expressions, such as “balm for the soul“. The 2015 vintage year in Siefersheim and in particular the harvesting season in autumn can, in this sense, also be described as balm. The explanation for this opinion is the topic of this letter.



For a period of almost two weeks in late September and early October each morning started off like this. A brilliant blue sky, cool, fresh air and not a single cloud far and wide. That created a festive atmosphere even as we started off into the harvest. We will still describe in more detail further on just how exceptional the effect of this period was.

There are vintages in viticulture that one has to earn from nature literally by sweat and tears. Conditions during the harvest and even before then are so difficult on the path to the stated goal of obtaining optimally ripe grapes that one has to endure a very high level of risk, and is occasionally in danger of totally losing some batches of grapes totally. This is what happened in the past two wine vintages, 2013 and 2014. Painful production losses and an autumn atmosphere that is anything but romantic leave scars on the winemaker's mind in such years, and really remain fixed in one's memory. The great solace of such vintages is often that, counter to one's expectations, they are often very positively received, and in some fields can produce absolutely top-flight quality. Unlike the situation in the previous two vintages, the 2015 vintage provided a soothing **balm** for the wounds inflicted in the previous harvest seasons.

The 2015 vintage began, and that must be stated quite clearly at the outset, in rather an average way. A winter that was normal and fairly mild for this latitude was really only ended at a fairly late stage, with the first days of spring being experienced in Mid-April. While the sun came out quite frequently in March, with very friendly weather accompanying us in the final stages of our pruning and tying programme, the mean daily temperatures only rarely exceeded 8°C.

The friendly, frequently sunny weather continued through April, and the temperatures started to rise, clearly reaching the 10° C mark around the middle of the month. However, in spite of the many hours of sunshine, conditions overall remained too cool to repeat the exceptionally early budding and growth seen in the previous year. As had been the case in the previous months, precipitation remained at a very low level of just on 30 millimetres. May followed seamlessly along this path. Slightly changeable, but frequently sunny weather at fairly cool temperatures accompanied the growth of the vines.

The beginning of June saw the onset of flowering in the Höllberg site, accompanied by the first really summery days, with mean daily temperatures of above 20°C. In addition, the first significant rainfall of the entire first half of the year was experienced, slightly ameliorating the previous very dry period and drought experienced in spring. Overall, the month ended with a total of 80 millimetres of rain, and the vines really flourished. The weather constellation in late June and early July was characterized by a **particularly stable high pressure zone** over Central Europe, which presented summery conditions for weeks at a time. In the entire month of July, rainfall amounted to less than 15 millimetres, and with more than 280 hours of sunshine the media quickly coined the phrase of a „summer of the century.“ Winemakers were quickly reminded of the 2003 or the 2005 vintage, and thoughts turned to the best way of securing water supplies, particularly for young vines in very rocky locations.



The crest of the Höllberg hill clearly showed the effects of the summer drought. The vegetation on the rocky plateau, sparse at the best of times was totally dried out close to the soil, and even various types of trees had hardly any green foliage left. Vines, by the nature of things, tend to fair slightly better in conditions of extreme drought, and mostly survived the dry period of summer without any visible damage.

It was in this situation in mid-July, with a view to continuing summer weather until way into August that various viticultural decisions were made that differed from those in the previous vintages. We decided not to provide too much exposure to the grape bunches, and at the same time our efforts to reduce yields in our vineyards were restricted to only a few parcels of land. All of the measures implemented were aimed primarily at objectives such as maintaining acidity and stabilizing the water balance, with a view to getting through this hot period without incurring any losses.



The heat of summer was not really beneficial for a potato field located to the south of Siefersheim. In addition, many maize fields in the region were severely damaged by the persistent drought. Conditions of stress for the vines, which otherwise remained mostly undamaged, had grave consequences for many other agricultural products. In the background you can see the Heerkretz site, overshadowed by some thick, dark clouds. A familiar sight in the summer of 2015, when dark clouds were frequently seen, but not followed by the hoped-for rain showers.

A slightly cooler period, with some light rain followed in mid-August, and the transition to September saw a generally noticeable cooling of the weather. Excellent conditions for the ripening of the grapes, which was beginning to take place. The accompanying rain showers in September were much less intense in Siefersheim, when compared to other regions, and had practically no effect on the healthy condition of the vineyards. The ripening and development overall were not yet as far developed as was the case at this point in time in more southerly growing regions. A **really curious feature of this vintage**. Each year there are differences in the timing of the development in the various regions, but this year the differences were truly immense. We planned to start picking on the 28th of September. At that stage, a number of our colleagues had already completed their harvest.

Probably the most remarkable period of the 2015 wine year started on the 20th of September, with a weather situation repeating for a period of almost two weeks the conditions experienced in the main heat of the summer months. Stable, sunny, high-pressure weather with cool, dry winds from the East. The influence of this constellation on the grapes and on the ripening process here in Siefersheim was simply amazing. We observed and experiences a similar process only in a **very few exceptional vintages** in recent decades. The main effect was a form of “drying of healthy berries on the vine“. To put it differently, a slight raisining of the grapes, without any botrytis.



A close-up view of affected grapes, with individual “healthy” dried berries within a bunch. With Riesling, in particular, this leads in some cases to astonishing analytical values. In the course of normal ripening, the steadily increasing sugar levels in the grape are accompanied by a slow decrease in acidity. However, in the conditions experienced in 2015, this remained absolutely constant – a very rare, but welcome development.

What followed on this development was one of the most thrilling and at the same time one of the most relaxed picking seasons in recent years. In the following four weeks, up to the 28th October, all of the vineyards could be successively harvested by hand. Occasionally we had to introduce short breaks to allow the grapes to ripen even a little more. In the case of Riesling in particular, which benefited most from the previous development, the constant levels of acidity allowed us to repeatedly push back the harvesting date. The weather in October also played along. This was often cool but dry, and thus did nothing to change the optimally healthy condition of the grapes, and particularly the cold night in mid-October, which are so decisive for the elegance and the aromatic development of Riesling, were seen as a great gift in the autumn proceedings.

The must weights were in no case exceptionally high. Neither Riesling nor Pinot Noir were picked at must weights of more than 100 degrees Oechsle, in most cases these worked out at somewhere between 90 and a maximum of 97 degrees. This correlated with absolutely fantastic levels of acidity between 9 and 13 grams per litre, which we had not expected to be so high after such a hot summer. It really was a joy to pick such healthy, ripe, high-quality grapes over such a spectrum of varieties, and in such a breadth and consistency.

At this point, we would like to refer back to the introduction. An autumn season such as that of 2015 is really a **balm for the winemaker’s soul** and is most welcome. Of course, one is surprised again each year that all the viticultural activity of the previous nine months comes to be so strongly influenced by the weather prevalent in a relatively short harvesting period. That the weather really is the deciding factor, that almost exclusively decides on the success or failure of all the previous work. This is of course part and parcel of the naturally given self-image of the winemaker and his trade, but in a vintage such as 2015 it is appreciated simply as a great gift. Just simply to receive such a rich gift and blessing.



Virtually perfectly ripened Riesling grapes at the end of October in the Heerkretz site. A sight that wakes happy expectations for the young wines of this year's vintage. There was no negative pre-selection, we did not have to meticulously sort and select grapes on the vine, all we had to do was pick fully ripe and highly aromatic grapes.

Naturally, as has been the case in recent years, an initial rough assessment of the vintage such a short time after the harvest is of necessity slightly vague and difficult. Many musts of the last week of the harvest, with very high must weights, have not even started fermenting. But in total contrast to the 2013 and 2014 vintages we are particularly happy about such a homogenous, high-quality result. Be it Scheurebe or Silvaner, Riesling or Pinot Noir, we brought in practically only very good up to outstanding quality grapes, with at the same time very satisfactory yields.

Purely in terms of style, the 2015 vintage in Siefersheim probably has the potential to stand completely on its own, as the combination of very ripe, healthy grapes with at the same time very high levels of acidity is one not seen in either the very ripe vintages of 2011 or 2007 nor in the cool vintages such as 2010 or 2008. Perhaps the 2012 vintage is the one that is most closely comparable. We are confident that these will be very vibrant, powerful wines, with strong aromatic expression, reflecting the perfect late vintage, and which, with their piquant acidity will balance the full body, providing lightness and elegance. A style that can come very close to our ideal of what wines from Siefersheim should be like. In particular, the enormous contrast of powerful, complex body on the one hand, and the fresh, racy acidity on the other, together with the salty, minerally finish of the porphyric soil structure can hopefully be particularly well expressed in the wines of the 2015 vintage.

We look forward to the coming months with great interest and expectations, and are already very happy with what will hopefully be a really fantastic 2015 vintage.

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