



Sauternes 2008: That Joke Isn't Funny Anymore

Last year, Sauternes was a golden oasis in a sea of green-ish red. To balance their fortunes, Mother Nature decimated half their vines with a pernicious frost that fell on April 7, and so with the growing season barely begun, single figure yields were inevitable. Who was spared? Of course, it had to be Château d'Yquem, located high up on the hill, watching hopes evaporate from above. Still, life goes on. The summer passed smoothly, and the damp, humid weather that vexed the Médoc offered the Sauternaise rays of optimism, and the botrytis-rich tries at end of a mainly sunny, clement September boded well. Rain arrived on October 7 and provoked second-generation botrytis; however, it was rather lethargic in 2008; the crucial rôti stage always due tomorrow, never today. It was therefore the first tries that formed the basis of most (but not all) of the Sauternes wines and therefore Sauvignon Blanc tends to dominate more than Semillon. Rain returned on October 27, and the final tries in November lacked botrytis and were generally more of a "mopping up" process.


I tasted the 2008 Sauternes twice during my week in Bordeaux, plus several visits to châteaux to assess individual lots. Although there are climactic similarities between the growing seasons of 2007 and 2008, there is a significant difference between the resulting wines, for tangibly the 2008s do not have the same level of botrytis, weight or concentration. But dismiss the 2008s at your peril: there are a cluster of superb, steely Sauternes imbued with a thrilling sense of nervosité and precision. This is a year where terroir proved fundamental vis-à-vis quality; readers should, with one or two exceptions, stick to the top names. 2008 is crowned by one imperious wine: Château d'Yquem. Having avoided the frosts on the clayey upper slopes, their vines were stressed during a dry period around mid- August, and then September was notable for its cool nights that retained acidity levels. Picked in six tries from September 17, most of the 2008 derived from the second and third tries, especially the Semillon that ripened slowly and uniformly, ergo these first tries constitute 50% of the blend compared to just 25% in the previous year. Cropped at a healthy 14-15 hectoliters per hectare and with 139 g/l of residual sugar, their 2008 has a bewitching bouquet of apricot, acacia honey and white flowers, the palate demonstrating superior weight and concentration than any other Sauternes, although the finish is more linear and brilliantly focused, rather than fanning out in a "peacock's tail" like the 2007 that has more weight and richness. But the Yquem 2008 remains an inspiring wine that took on the challenging growing season...and won. The success of Yquem must be galling for Alexandre de Lur-Saluces, yes? On the contrary, his Château de Fargues is rapidly becoming one of the essential wines of Sauternes, and his 2008 is a brilliant success against the odds: losing 40-50% of the crop to frost, mildew in May...no wonder there are only three barrels per hectare (2.47 acres)! Along with Yquem, this is one of the few wines to have real weight and concentration, a dense, vibrant palate redolent of a great TBA, with a gorgeous apricot and Seville orange-tinged mellifluous finish. Wonderful!

Last year, the Château Climens gave me as much joy as the “Southend Shrimpers” equalizing against Chelsea in the final minute of the FA Cup. As usual, Bérénice Lurton guided me around the individual lots that were picked in four tries from September 30 until October 29 (the final trie was unsuccessful.) The common theme was one of poise and nervosité, what looks set to become a vibrant, mineraly Climens and with crisp, almost Alsace-like green fruit intertwined with modest levels of botrytis. Bérénice has the components to blend another sensational Climens, but one that will electrify the senses rather than lacquer them in viscous honey.

Elsewhere, there are commendable wines from the likes of Doisy-Daëne (no Extravagance in 2008), Doisy-Védrines, a resurgent Lafaurie-Peyraguey, an over-achieving Lamothe- Guignard, Guiraud, Clos Haut-Peyraguey, de Malle, a sleek, sensuous Rieussec and an intense, ravishing Suduiraut. I have included a note for Chateau La Tour Blanche, who eked out a subtle, honeyed, pure Sauternes...but at less than 2 hectoliters per hectare, it may not be released commercially. Some wines such as Nairac were too primal to evaluate at this nascent juncture, and I look forward to re-tasting them in the future. Outside this list, the wines that I tasted were either showing a little greenness or simply lacked substance. Speaking to Sauternes growers, once again I was humbled by the efforts that go into producing this sweet nectar, so cruelly ignored by cognoscenti. Writing this a year to the day that Mother Nature destroyed the vines with frost, somebody should tell her that joke isn't funny anymore. It virtually guaranteed that irrespective of quality, the 2008s will not be financially rewarding for the vigneron, but in terms of the quality of the top Sauternes, they are certainly rewarding where it matters: on the palate.

—Neal Martin

2008 Guiraud

Guiraud 

A Sauternes Blend Sweet White Dessert wine from Sauternes, Bordeaux, France

Source	Reviewer	Rating	Maturity	Cost
Wine Advocate Issue #182 Apr 2009	Neal Martin	(91-93)	Drink -	\$38-\$58

The 2008 Guiraud has a subtle, nuanced nose with touches of acacia, apricot, citrus fruits and a touch of limestone. The palate is crisp and honeyed on the entry, cohesive, nice weight of fruit with a conservative but well-defined finish of citrus lemon, apricot and honeydew melon. Good length. Very fine – great drive and passion here.