

# The 2020 vintage in Bordeaux

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After 2019, whereby the presentation and marketing campaign were uniquely altered by the COVID-19 pandemic, the entire 2020 vintage was affected by the health crisis. In particular, the issue of organising the harvest greatly worried winegrowers. Although various adjustments were required, the harvest nevertheless unfolded under good conditions, and wines from the 2020 vintage were produced unhindered.

Before analysing the weather conditions in 2020 and the characteristics of wines from this vintage, it is important to bear in mind, as we do so each year, the five prerequisites to create a great red Bordeaux. Please note that they serve only as a guide in our analysis and should not be interpreted as a score chart for the year.

- 1) and 2) Relatively quick and even flowering and fruit-set during weather that is sufficiently warm and dry to ensure good pollination and predispose towards even ripening.
- 3) Gradual onset of water stress thanks to a warm, dry month of July in order to slow down and then put a definitive stop to vine growth no later than *véraison* (colour change).
- 4) Completely ripe grapes thanks to optimum photosynthesis in the leaves up until the harvest, without any noteworthy resumption of vegetative growth.
- 5) Fine (relatively dry and medium-warm) weather during the harvest, making it possible to pick the grapes in each plot at optimum ripeness without running the risk of dilution, rot, or loss of fruity aromas.

The mild start to the year, particularly in March, triggered bud break two to three weeks earlier than usual. Warm weather and rainstorms in April were conducive to the rapid growth of vine shoots, confirming the earliness of the vintage. Flowering occurred in late May under warm, dry conditions, thus fully satisfying the first prerequisite. After summer-like weather in May, June got off to a dull start. Frequent rainfall reduced the vineyard's natural defences and increased the mildew threat, evoking painful memories of the 2018 vintage, which, in some cases, suffered major crop loss. Heavy localised precipitation prevented water stress during fruit set. The weather radically changed from mid-June onwards, and a dry spell lasting nearly two months settled in the Bordeaux region. However, due to the earliness of the vintage and waterlogged soils, the lack of rainfall was insufficient to halt vine growth in the lead up to *véraison*. The fulfilment of the third prerequisite thus varied considerably, depending on the terroirs, grape varieties, and location of the plots. Water stress increased in early August and its effects began to be felt, particularly in plots planted with shallow-rooted young vines. Around 10 August, storms of varying intensity swept over the Bordeaux region, preventing drought conditions. The first half of September was dry and sunny, which accelerated ripening, and the Merlot harvest began around 10 September under fine conditions, thus fulfilling the fourth prerequisite. From mid-September onwards, the weather turned unsettled. While light rain

showers prevented the grapes from shrivelling and helped them finish ripening, their frequency started to worry winegrowers. The Cabernet grapes were picked after the Merlot, in excellent condition overall. The fifth prerequisite was thus fulfilled for the Merlots and early-ripening Cabernets, whereas the later-ripening Cabernets sometimes needed to be picked in haste due to deteriorating weather conditions caused by storm Alex. The majority of the red grapes were harvested in early October.

The grapes used to make dry white wines were picked relatively early, during the last ten days of August and the first few days of September. While the hot summer enhanced their aromatic potential, the grapes retained good acidity. They were sweet, delicious, and in perfect condition.

A great sweet white wine requires alternating periods of rainfall conducive to the spread of *Botrytis cinerea*, and dry weather propitious to the concentration of the grapes. Although the grapes of the 2020 vintage were perfectly ripe in early September, dry conditions delayed the development of noble rot, which became widespread following rainfall in mid-September. Unfortunately, frequent precipitation prevented the increase in sugar levels. Most grapes were picked over several days thanks to a providential window of fine weather mid-October. The difficulties encountered and very low yields should not overshadow the surprisingly satisfactory quality of the resulting wines.

## **A glimpse of spring in winter led to very early bud break**

As in 2019, the winter of 2020 was characterised by surprisingly mild temperatures and very low rainfall in January and February (Figures 1 and 2; Table I). While the last two months of 2019 were very wet, the weather radically changed in January and February, with a water deficit of -23% and -16% respectively.

In contrast, like December, January was warmer than usual with several springlike days and above-average temperatures exceeding 5°C. During this month, frost was rare in the vineyard, occurring on only three days compared to eight on average (1981-2010). This was the second time that the first two months of meteorological winter (defined as the period from December to February) had been so mild, on par with December 2000-January 2001 and just behind December 2015-January 2016.

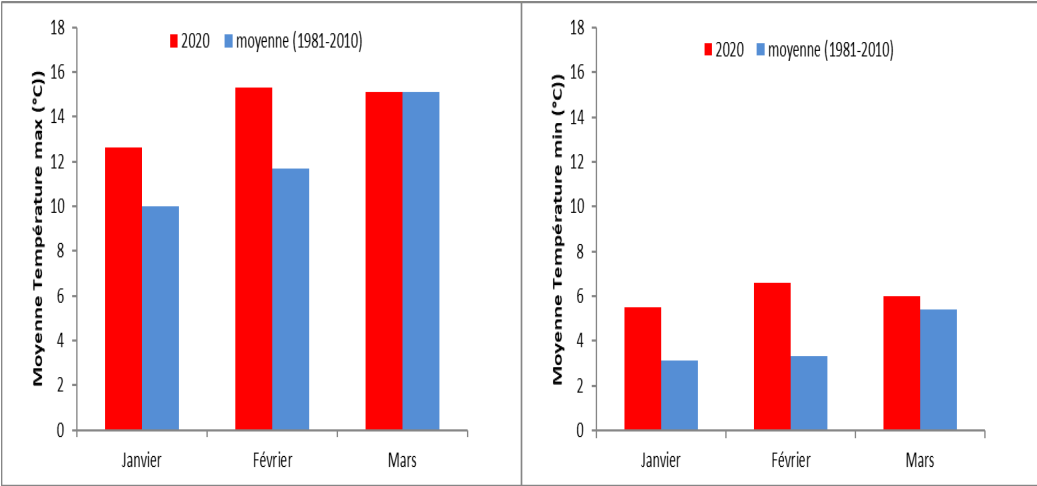
The mild weather continued into February, which was more reminiscent of April, with overall temperatures 3.5°C above average. Most importantly, record-breaking temperatures were observed, including 12.7°C at daybreak on 2 February in Pauillac and 23.1°C at 4pm in Mérignac on 3 February.

March signalled a change in the weather, with heavy rainfall during the first week, accompanied by gale force winds. Precipitation became less regular between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>, petering out towards the end of the month. Cumulative monthly rainfall was consequently 58% above average. Unsettled weather continued on 15 and 16 March, then fine, hot conditions finally arrived with temperatures nearing 20°C between 18 and 24 March.

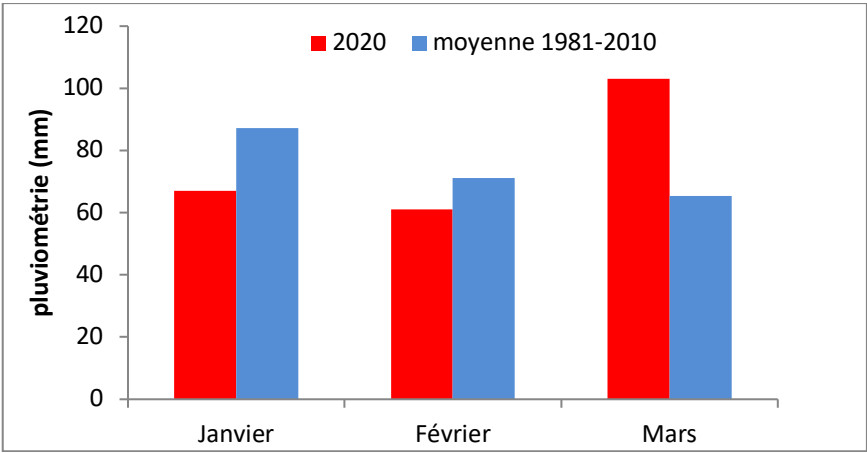
The first buds appeared soon after, two to three weeks earlier than usual. While France was entering the second week of lockdown, around 23 March, the vines teased us by revealing their first buds (Figure 3). Bud break was fairly uneven, depending on the area, and spread out over two weeks between the earliest and latest plots.

However, March is a transitional month, during which temperatures can change rapidly. Thus, widespread frost was recorded from the 25<sup>th</sup> onwards, followed by icy-cold conditions from the 29<sup>th</sup> to the 31<sup>st</sup>, with temperatures up to 12°C below average in the Gironde department. It even snowed on the 30<sup>th</sup>. Fortunately, the cold spell had no major impact on the development

of younger vines, even if damage inflicted by frost, which was difficult to assess, was observed in cold, frost-prone and low-lying areas.



**Figure 1**  
 Average maximum and minimum temperatures in the winter of 2020,  
 compared to 1981-2010  
*Data from Mérignac (Météo France)*



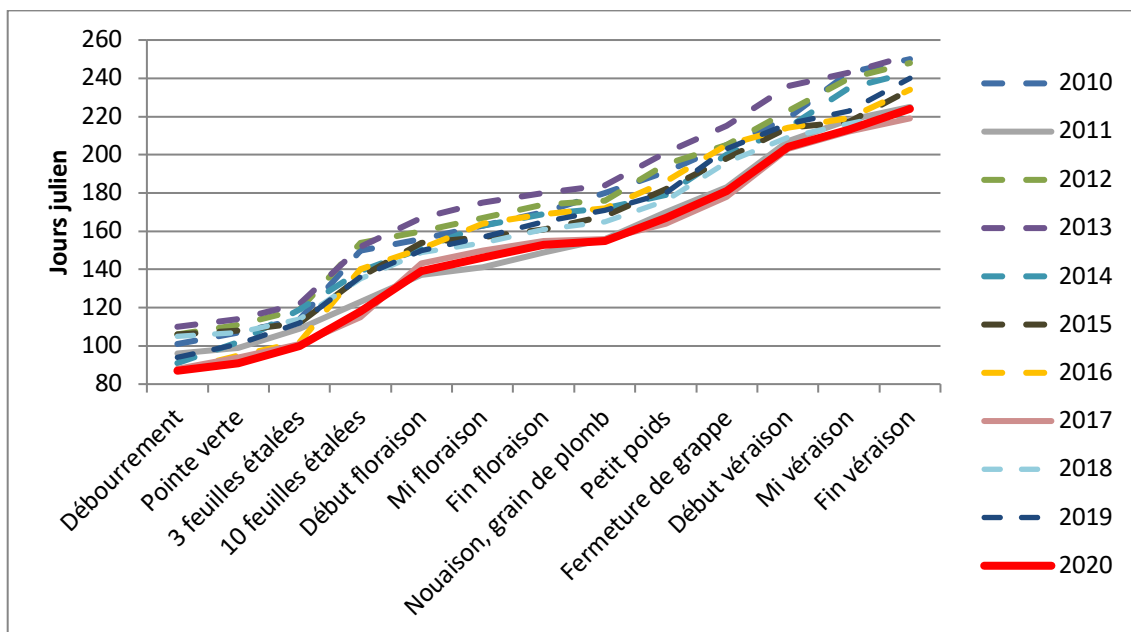
**Figure 2**  
 Cumulative winter rainfall (mm) in 2020,  
 compared to 1981-2010  
*Data from Mérignac (Météo France)*

**Table I**

Weather data for 2020, rainfall and temperature (compared to the 1981-2010 average) and hours of sunshine (compared to the 1991-2010 average).

*Data from Mérignac (Météo France)*

	Sunshine (hours)		Rainfall (mm)		Average minimum temp. (°C)		Average maximum temp. (°C)	
	2020	1991-2010 average	2020	1981-2010 average	2020	1981-2010 average	2020	1981-2010 average
January	<b>95</b>	96	<b>67</b>	87	<b>5.5</b>	3.1	<b>12.6</b>	10.0
February	<b>129</b>	115	<b>61</b>	71	<b>6.6</b>	3.3	<b>15.3</b>	11.7
March	<b>165</b>	170	<b>103</b>	65	<b>6</b>	5.4	<b>15.1</b>	15.1
April	<b>178</b>	182	<b>105</b>	78	<b>10.6</b>	7.4	<b>20.6</b>	17.3
May	<b>122</b>	217	<b>122</b>	80	<b>12.8</b>	11.0	<b>23.8</b>	21.2
June	<b>91</b>	239	<b>92</b>	62	<b>13.8</b>	14.1	<b>23.6</b>	24.5
July	<b>316</b>	249	<b>3</b>	50	<b>16.4</b>	15.8	<b>28.8</b>	26.9
August	<b>232</b>	241	<b>67</b>	56	<b>17.2</b>	15.7	<b>28.9</b>	21.7
September	<b>226</b>	203	<b>90</b>	84	<b>14.1</b>	12.9	<b>26</b>	24.0
October	<b>82</b>	147	<b>179</b>	93	<b>10.2</b>	10.4	<b>18</b>	19.4

**Figure 3**

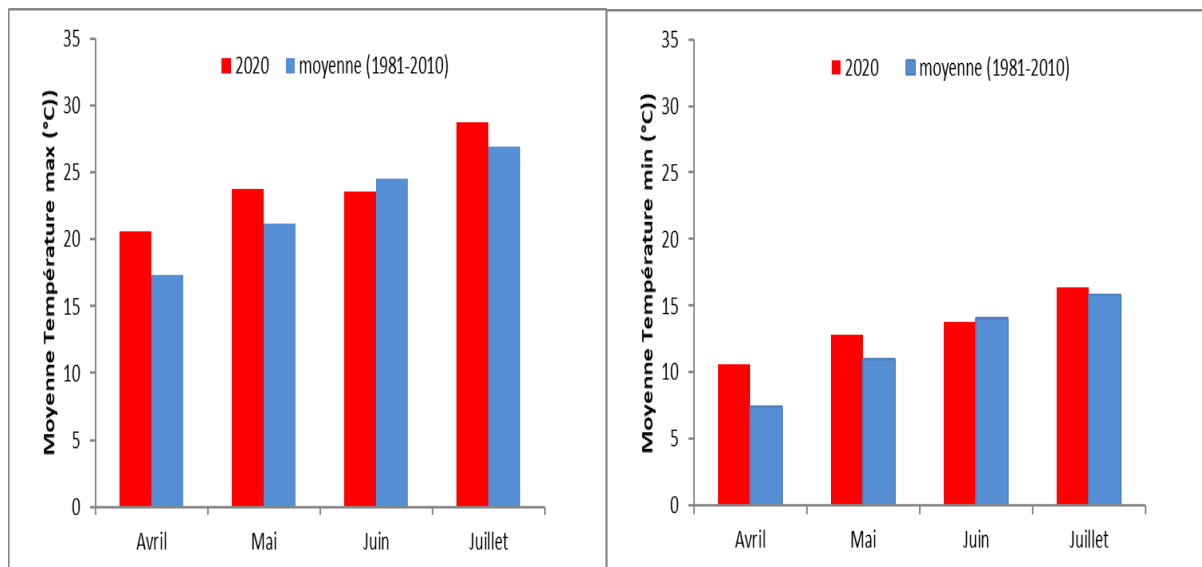
Development of phenological ripeness in 2020 compared with the past ten years (*Data from SRAL and ISVV*)

## An exceptionally hot April led to rapid growth

After a cool end to March, which caused fears of delayed vine growth, temperatures were much higher than average in April (Figure 4, Table I), which triggered the very quick development of young vine shoots. In terms of maximum monthly temperatures, April 2020 was the third hottest over the past 50 years, just behind 2007 and 2011, and the warmest on record in terms of average minimum temperatures.

During the first two weeks of April, vine growth was very rapid, exceeding the stage of three unfolded leaves at the end of the first week in our reference plots (Figure 3). Cumulative rainfall was 34% above average in April, although unevenly distributed throughout the month (Tableau I). The weather remained dry until mid-April, becoming unsettled during the last ten days of the month. Storms between 17 and 20 April brought substantial rainfall (31 mm in Saint-Emilion on the 17<sup>th</sup>) as well as well hail, which swept across the middle of the Entre-Deux-Mers region up to the Saint-Emilion/Castillon area, causing variable damage, ranging from slightly impacted leaves to the total destruction of green parts.

The last days of the month were also characterised by a very active weather front and significant rainfall.



**Figure 4**

Average maximum and minimum temperatures in the months of April, May, June and July 2020, compared to 1981-2010  
*Data from Mérignac (Météo France)*

## Reversed seasons: a summer-like May, followed by a spring-like June

May started out very mild, with heavy rainfall during the first half of the month (Figures 4 and 5, Table I).

Between 9 and 11 May, precipitation was high, with weekly cumulative totals varying considerably depending on the area: 103 mm in Listrac between 1 and 5 May, 122 mm in Sauternes between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>. Localised daily rainfall reached 70 mm (10 May in

Mérignac) and was sometimes accompanied by hail. On the 10<sup>th</sup>, the southern Gironde was hit by a hailstorm in the villages of Budos, Pujols-sur-Ciron, Mazères, Saint-Maixant and Landiras, causing complete destruction in some areas.

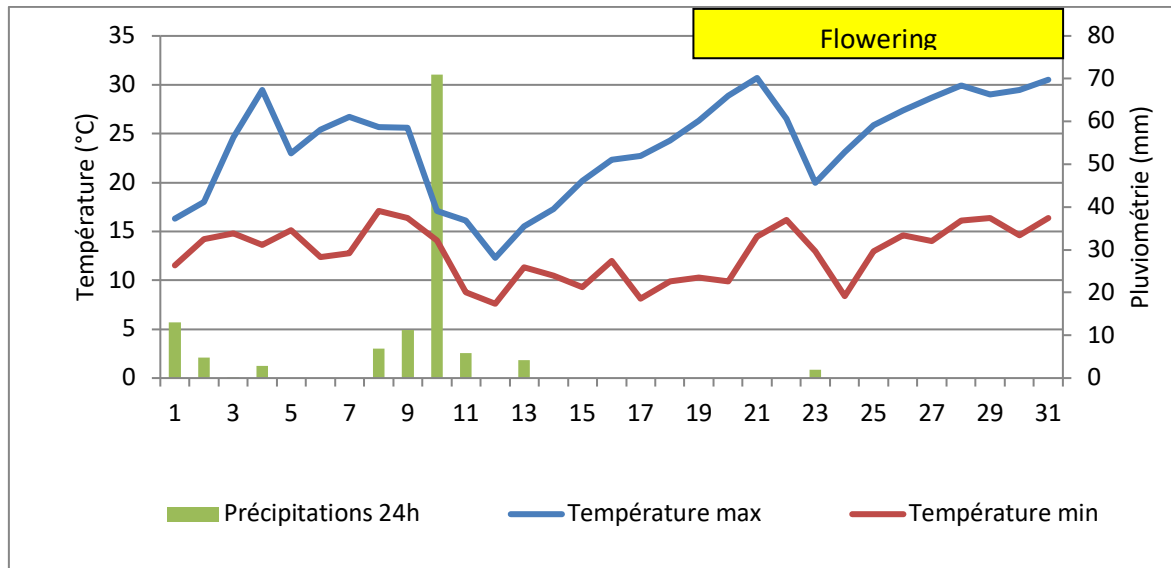
Despite below-average temperatures during a rainy spell between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup>, May 2020 was nevertheless warmer than usual, thanks to summer-like conditions at the start and end of the month. With average maximum temperatures exceeding 20°C, including 16 days above 25°C and two days above 30°C, May 2020 was the fourth hottest in the past 75 years, only three tenths of a degree behind the record-breaking May 2011 and 1989, and just behind May 1999.

These conditions accelerated vine growth, and, due to early bud break, the first flowers were visible from mid-May onwards in the earliest plots. Flowering picked up pace mid-month, reaching its peak around 26 May in our reference plots, i.e. approximately ten days earlier than the 20-year average (Table II, Figure 5), but later than in 2011, one of the earliest in recent years. On the whole, these conditions were conducive to good flowering and few physiological phenomena, such as *coulure* (shot berries) were observed.

**Table II**

Mid-flowering and mid-*véraison* dates in 2020 compared to the ten-year average and the mean over the last 20 years

<b>Period</b>	<b>Mid-flowering</b>	<b>Mid-<i>véraison</i></b>
1999-2019	4 June	6 August
2010	9 June	9 August
2011	17 May	21 July
2012	11 June	12 August
2013	18 June	22 August
2014	7 June	13 August
2015	5 June	6 August
2016	11 June	7 August
2017	30 May	30 July
2018	3 June	4 August
2019	4 June	9 August
<b>2020</b>	<b>26 May</b>	<b>1 August</b>



**Figure 5**  
Daily variations in temperature and precipitation in May 2020  
Data from Mérignac (Météo France)

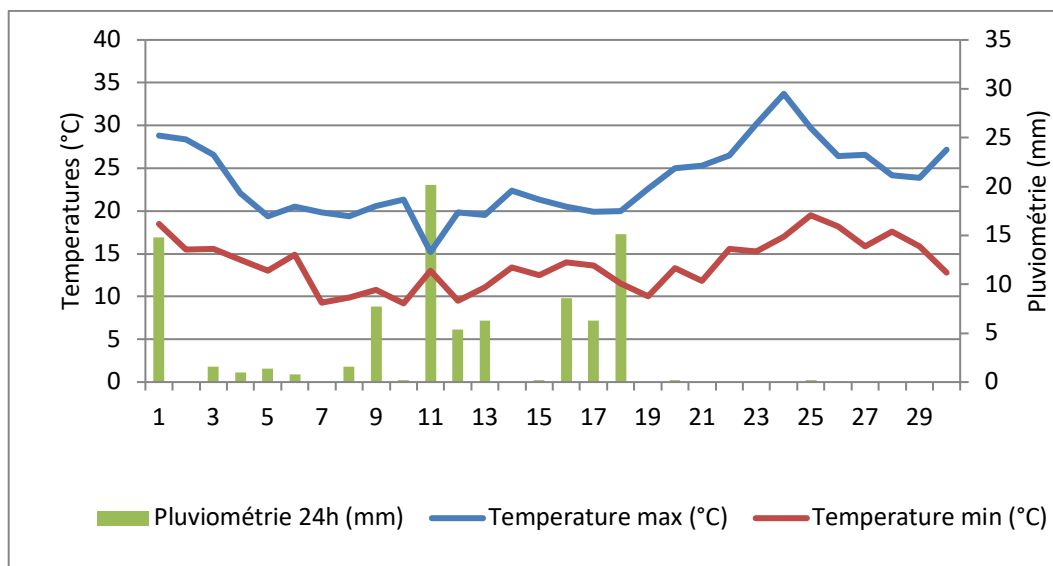
***At this stage, the first prerequisite for a great vintage, i.e. quick, even flowering, with little coulure, was mostly fulfilled.***

While late May was almost summer-like, the start of summer was marked by cool days in June, combined with frequent rainstorms, creating a gloomy impression overall. Average maximum and minimum temperatures were lower than usual, rainfall was higher, and, above all, sunshine was much lower (-148h) (Table I, Figure 4). Vine growth slowed down, even though the berries continued to swell. Meanwhile, the mildew threat increased from late May onwards and significantly damaged grape bunches in certain plots, resulting in major crop loss.

It was not until the last week of June that summer conditions finally returned and properly set in (figure 6).

Even if vine growth was slow just after fruit set, the berries continued to swell and bunch closure was observed in early July (Figure 3), thus confirming the earliness of the vintage. Nevertheless, in certain cases, this slowdown was sufficient to trigger *millerandage* (abnormal fruit set), which prevented complete bunch closure.

***The second condition for a perfect red wine vintage – no rainfall after fruit set – was thus only partially met.***



**Figure 6**  
Daily variations in temperature and precipitation in June 2020  
*Data from Mérignac (Météo France)*

### **An exceptionally hot and dry summer with drought-like conditions until mid-August**

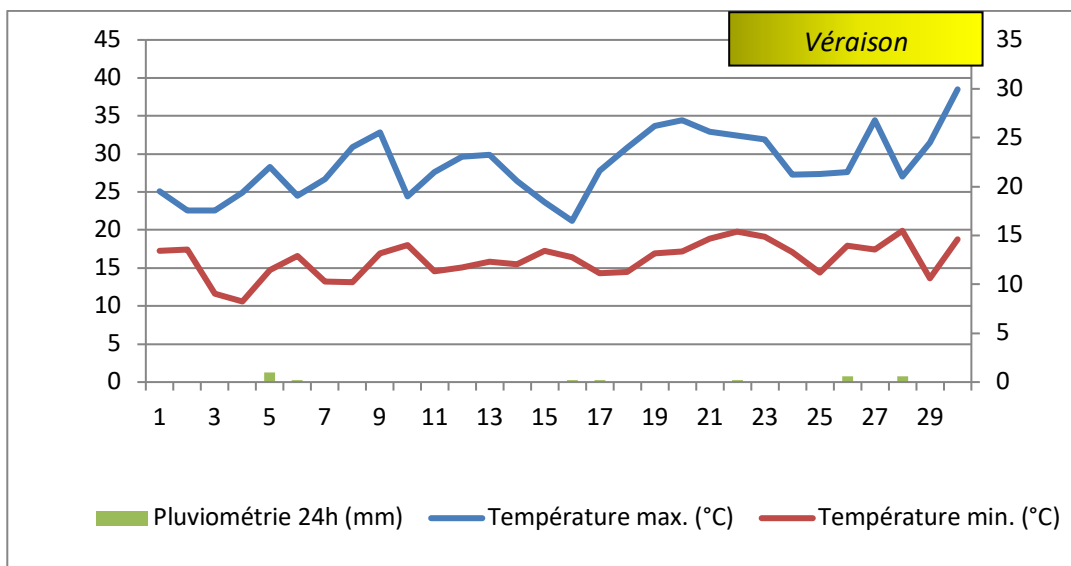
Precipitation was at an all-time low in July, with the average cumulative total below 10 mm in Gironde (Table I, Figure 7). However, heavy rainfall observed during the first few months of the year prevented water stress from setting in early.

Temperatures in early July were not exceptionally high. A cool spell prevailed until the 17<sup>th</sup>, with average maximum temperatures 2°C lower than usual, despite the occasional hot day. From the 18<sup>th</sup> onwards, summer-like conditions prevailed, with ten days exceeding 30°C, peaking at 39°C on 30 July. Fortunately, the nights were often cool, except for the very end of the month, which protected the vines against heat stress, unlike in other wine regions.

The first berries changed colour fairly unevenly around 20 July, and *véraison* did not properly set in until the last few days of July. *Mi-véraison* (mid colour change) occurred around 1 August in our reference plots, nearly ten days later than in 2011, but nevertheless six days earlier than the 20-year average (Table II).

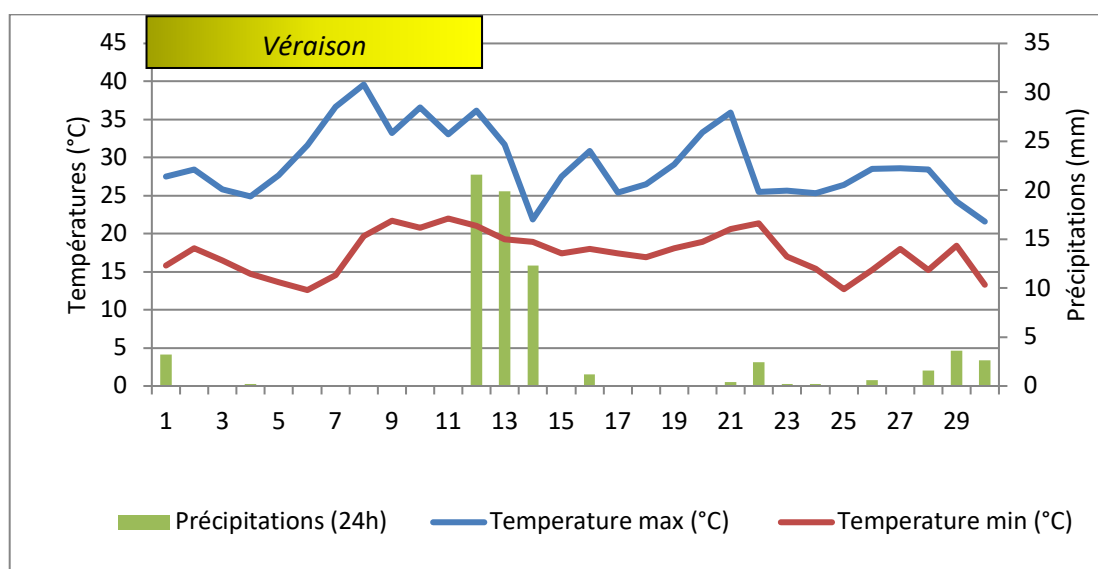
In late July, despite the lack of rainfall and high temperatures, only shallow-rooted and young vines displayed obvious signs of water stress. *Véraison* slowed down in these plots, and progressed at an uneven pace with initial signs of interrupted physiological development.





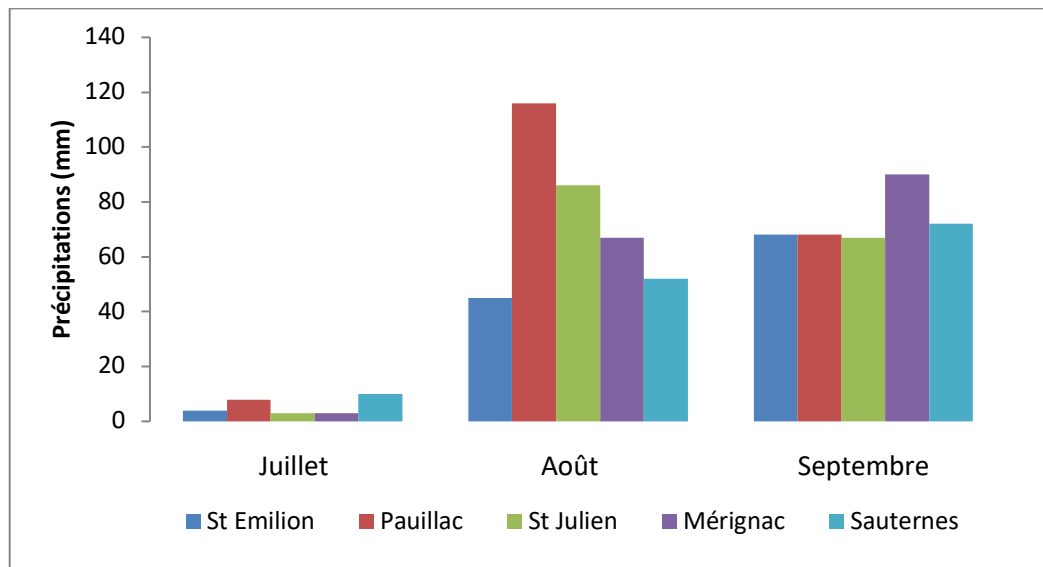
**Figure 7**  
Daily variations in temperature and precipitation in July 2020  
*Data from Mérignac (Météo France)*

Cooler temperatures in early August helped complete *véraison* while the lack of rainfall led to significant water stress in localised areas. The second week of August was marked by a heatwave. While less extreme than in 2003, several very hot days between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> were particularly noteworthy, with night-time temperatures exceeding 20°C (Figure 8, Table I). These exceptional highs sometimes affected the aromatic potential of the white wine grapes, although not significantly.



**Figure 8**  
Daily variations in temperature and precipitation in August 2020  
*Data from Mérignac (Météo France)*

The extreme heat triggered a series of thunderstorms between 9 and 14 August, resulting in above-average monthly cumulative rainfall in the Gironde department, although with significant disparities from one area to the next. (Figure 9). The northern Médoc saw the most rainfall, with around 110 mm compared to 86 mm in Saint-Julien, 67 mm in Méridnac, 52 mm in Sauternes and only 45 mm in Saint-Emilion. The consequences in the vineyards and on the onset of ripening thus varied considerably.



**Figure 9**  
Breakdown of precipitation by region in July, August and September  
(data from Météo France)

In general, though, the rain arrived just after *véraison* put an end to the early blocked ripening observed in the most well-drained plots.

*As a result, due to the earliness of the vintage and intense heat at the onset of véraison, the third prerequisite for a great red vintage was only partially met. The situation varied depending on the terroir and geographical area: vegetative growth continued after rainfall in vigorous plots or those located on rich soils, whereas vine growth stopped late July in plots sensitive to water stress with no real return to véraison, and, finally, vegetative growth was halted at the onset of véraison in plots on clay-limestone soils, but colour change was then accelerated by the arrival of thunderstorms.*

### **The stormy conditions were followed by cooler temperatures and the first white wine grapes were harvested under clear skies**

The end of August was not excessively hot, with maximum temperatures 1 to 3 degrees cooler than the seasonal average and minimum temperatures 1 degree below normal. Nights were cool and ripening accelerated without excessive heat, conducive to the synthesis of colour compounds while preventing any considerable loss of aromas.

The earliest-ripening Sauvignon Blanc grapes were picked on 14 August in the Sauternes region, i.e. around ten days earlier than in 2019 (Table III). Very high temperatures recorded over the previous days undoubtedly hastened ripening in plots which still had

abundant water reserves. Meanwhile, the Sémillon grape harvest began in the last few days of August. This later-ripening grape variety had not yet reached optimum ripeness when a stormy spell arrived. The grapes thus needed to wait for fine weather to return before finishing ripening. In the Graves and Pessac-Léognan region, the harvest began on 20 August with the picking of Sauvignon Blanc grapes and finished at the end of the first week of September.

Very hot summers are generally not conducive to aromatic and refreshing white wines. However, with the exception of plots with very permeable soil or very young vines, where water stress set in too early, the white grapes in the 2020 vintage retained their good acidity. While less exuberant compared to 2019, their aromas were nevertheless intense and they were picked in perfect condition.

**Table III**

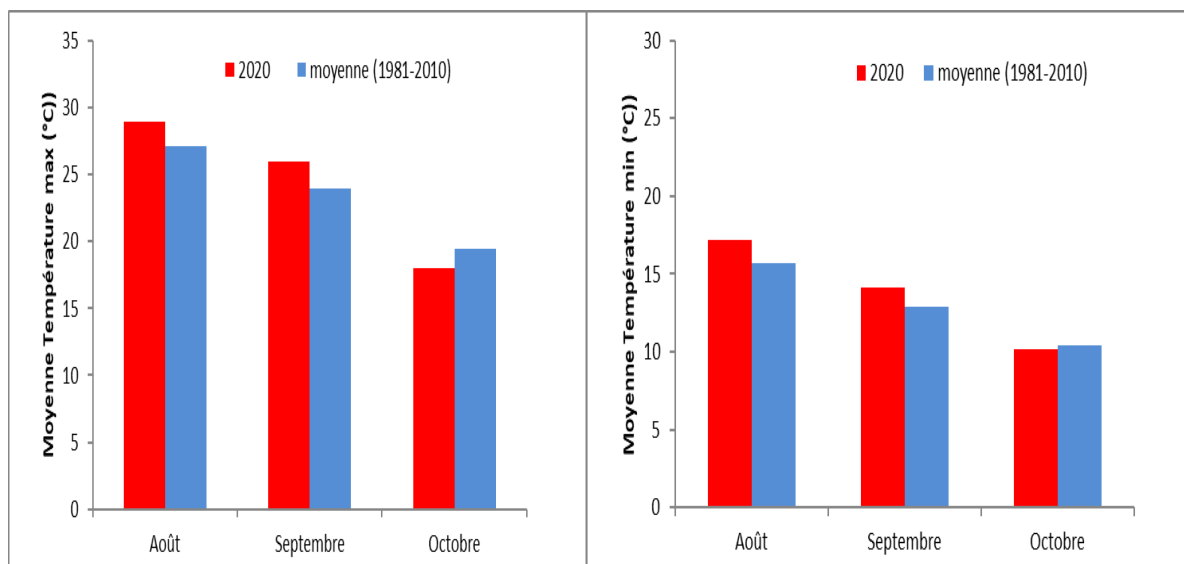
Harvest dates for dry white wine grapes in the Bordeaux region in 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019 and **2020**

	Sauvignon Blanc	Sémillon
2013	10 – 22 September	21 – 25 September
2014	6 – 12 September	12 – 20 September
2015	28 August – 6 September	5 – 11 September
2016	2 – 15 September	8 – 18 September
2017	16 August – 7 September	1 – 15 September
2018	23 August – 10 September	5 – 15 September
2019	26 August – 19 September	6 – 23 September
<b>2020</b>	<b>14 August – 5 September</b>	<b>27 August – 10 September</b>

**Table IV**

Composition of Sauvignon Blanc grapes from a plot with limestone soil in the Graves region in 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019 and **2020**

	Potential alcohol (%)	Total acidity (g/L)	pH
2013	13	6.4	2.97
2014	12.3	6.9	3.04
2015	13.7	4	3.33
2016	13.4	3.6	3.32
2017	13.2	4.6	3.2
2018	13.7	4.6	3.22
2019	13	4.3	3.27
<b>2020</b>	<b>13.9</b>	<b>4.3</b>	<b>3.28</b>



**Figure 10**

Average maximum and minimum temperatures in the months of August, September and October 2020, compared to 1981-2010  
*Data from Mérignac (Météo France)*

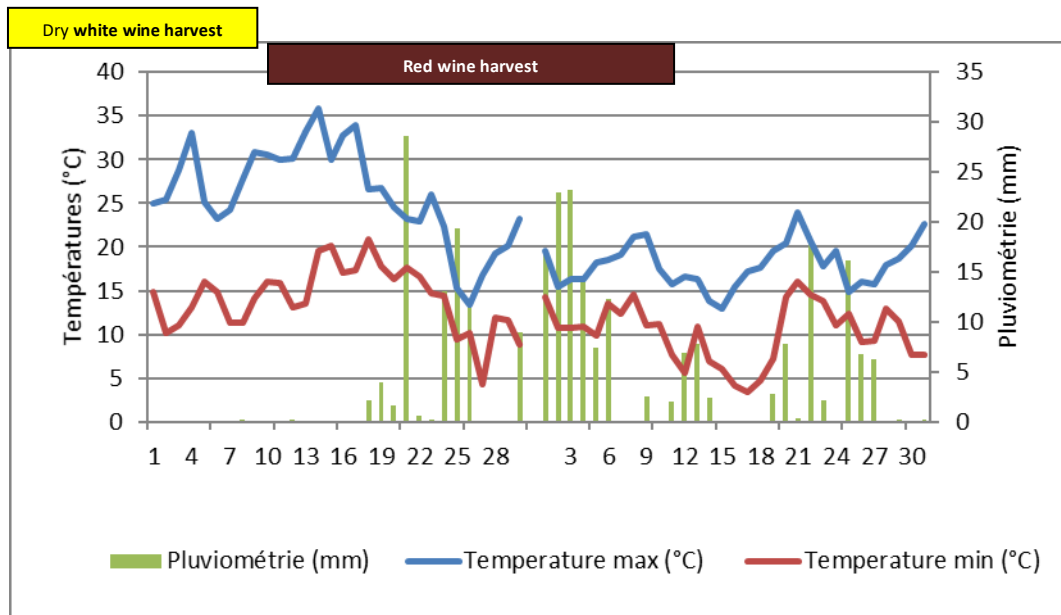
### **September: a month of contrasts, with the last ten days signalling an abrupt shift from summer to autumn**

While the white wine harvest had already begun, the ripening of the red grapes intensified during the first few days of September. The first 20 days of the month were hot, with record-breaking temperatures on the 14<sup>th</sup>, although nights were cool in the first ten days, propitious to slow ripening and the synthesis of anthocyanins (Figures 10 and 11).

After 20 September, temperatures dropped dramatically and, once again, record monthly daytime lows were observed on 26 and 27 September. In Pauillac, for instance, a maximum high of 12.3°C was observed on the 26<sup>th</sup>. The cool temperatures lasted until late October.

The first half of September was dry, which had not been the case since 1958. During this period, the berries shrivelled up on terroirs affected by water stress or in areas spared by rainstorms in August, sometimes resulting in major crop loss. In any case, the grapes remained in perfect condition up until this point.

Frequent rainfall returned from 16 September and continued throughout all of October, with cumulative precipitation varying above average overall (Table I, Figure 10).



**Figure 11**

Daily variations in temperature and precipitation in September and October 2020  
*Data from Mérignac (Météo France)*

**The harvesting conditions were ideal for the Merlot grapes yet more variable for the Cabernet Sauvignons, with later-ripening grapes failing to reach optimum maturity despite the earliness of the vintage**

After rainstorms which prevented significant blocked ripening, the end of the month was cooler, conducive to colour compound synthesis, high sugar levels and good acidity. Early September was warmer and windier, and the technological maturity of the Merlots accelerated with the rapid degradation of malic acid and the concentration of sugar, which varied considerably depending on the region. While average sugar levels suggested that the sugar content was generally lower than or comparable to that of 2019 (Table V), individual analyses highlighted disparities between appellations, mainly due to August rainfall (Figure 12).

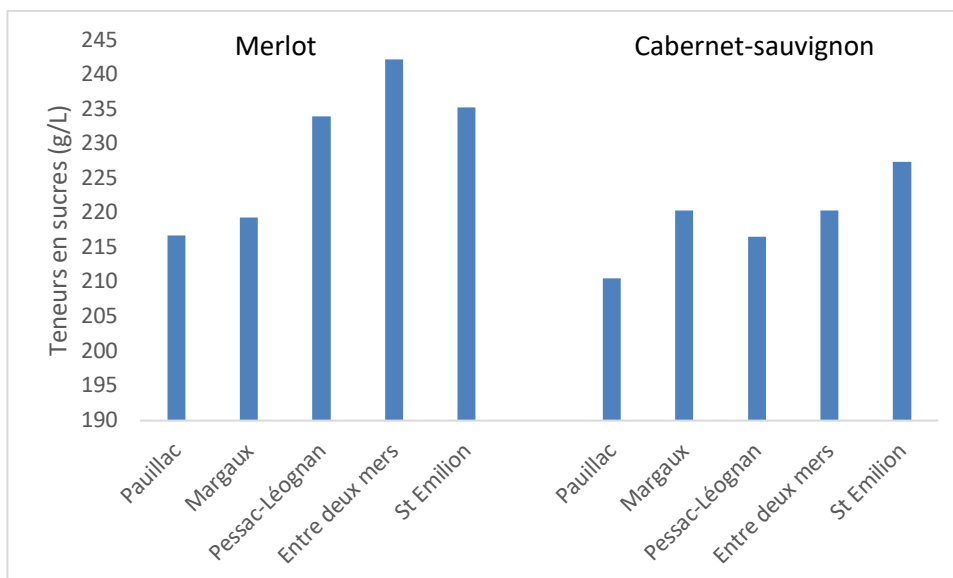
However, phenolic and aromatic ripeness were not yet evenly attained, and the grape skins remained thick. It was necessary to wait until around 20 September for the ripe fruit aromas to clearly emerge.

The harvest began at the end of the first week of September for the earliest-ripening plots and lasted approximately two weeks.

*Late August and early September are often decisive for the success of a vintage. Merlot grapes benefited from ideal weather conditions to achieve optimal ripeness. The fourth and fifth prerequisites for a great red wine vintage, i.e. a dry period without excessive heat and clement weather during the harvest, were perfectly met in 2020 for Merlot.*

**Table V**  
Variations in sugar content and acidity during ripening in reference plots

	Weight per 100 berries (g)	Sugars (g/L)	TA (g/L H <sub>2</sub> SO <sub>4</sub> )
<b>2020</b>			
<b>31/8 Merlot</b>	<b>154</b>	<b>216</b>	<b>2.6</b>
<b>Cabernet Sauvignon</b>	<b>106</b>	<b>201</b>	<b>3.4</b>
<b>07/9 Merlot</b>	<b>151</b>	<b>229</b>	<b>2.6</b>
<b>14/9 Cabernet Sauvignon</b>	<b>99</b>	<b>235</b>	<b>3.4</b>
<b>2019</b>			
26/8 Merlot	119	199	4.7
Cabernet Sauvignon	99	177	7
16/9 Merlot	127	244	2.7
30/9 Cabernet Sauvignon	105	233	3.3
<b>2018</b>			
27/8 Merlot	142	214	3.3
Cabernet Sauvignon	116	193	4.9
10/9 Merlot	143	233	2.5
24/9 Cabernet Sauvignon	126	230	2.8
<b>2017</b>			
28/8 Merlot	140	222	3.8
Cabernet Sauvignon	121	203	5.2
11/9 Merlot	144	225	3.0
18/9 Cabernet Sauvignon	131	217	3.2
<b>2016</b>			
06/9 Merlot	134	203	4.1
Cabernet Sauvignon	114	187	5.4
20/9 Merlot	151	246	3.0
Cabernet Sauvignon	119	223	3.2
<b>2011</b>			
29/8 Merlot	131	235	3.1
Cabernet Sauvignon	112	210	3.9
5/9 Merlot	138	242	3.0
Cabernet Sauvignon	118	233	3.5



**Figure 12**

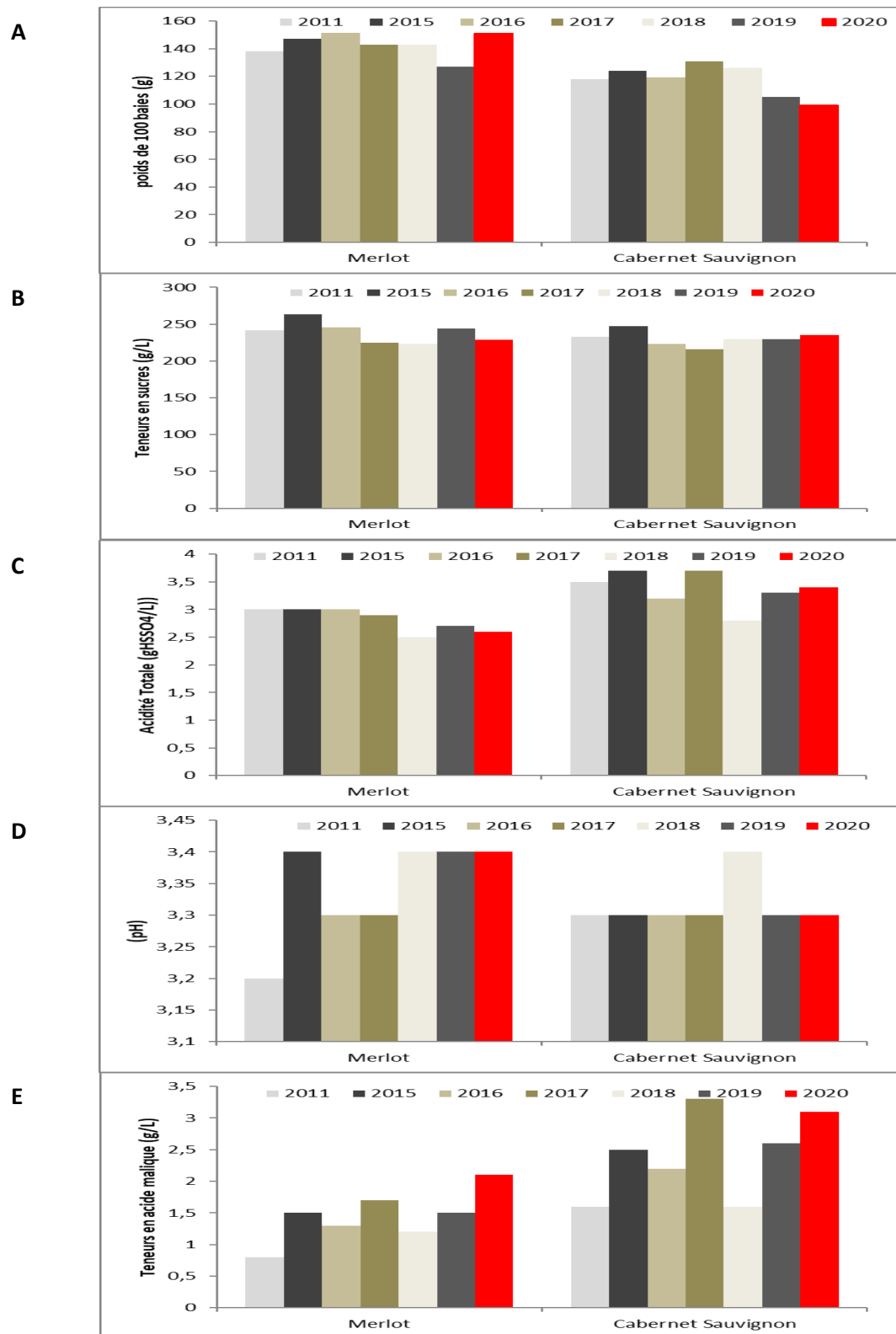
Comparison of sugar levels in reference plots per appellation on 7 September 2020

The Cabernet grapes were picked without delay after the Merlots during the last ten days of September, under cool, wet conditions.

The grapes were among the smallest of the past decade, despite the rainfall in late summer, and were often just as sweet as in 2019. The most notable differences were observed in the malic acid content, which was greater compared to 2019, and especially 2011 (Figure 13, Table V). One of the most noteworthy characteristics regarding the composition of the grapes in this vintage was their high concentration of anthocyanins and tannins at harvest time, the levels of which were rarely seen (Figures 14 and 15). Gentle extraction helped to prevent any excessive hardness in the wines, which naturally display a fine tannic structure.

While the fruity character of the grapes took a while to appear, probably due to rainfall in late September, complex aromas of fresh red fruit are distinctly noticeable. Although the phenological development of the 2020 vintage was similar, particularly in the first stage, to that of 2011, the analytical and sensory characteristics of the grapes are clearly different.

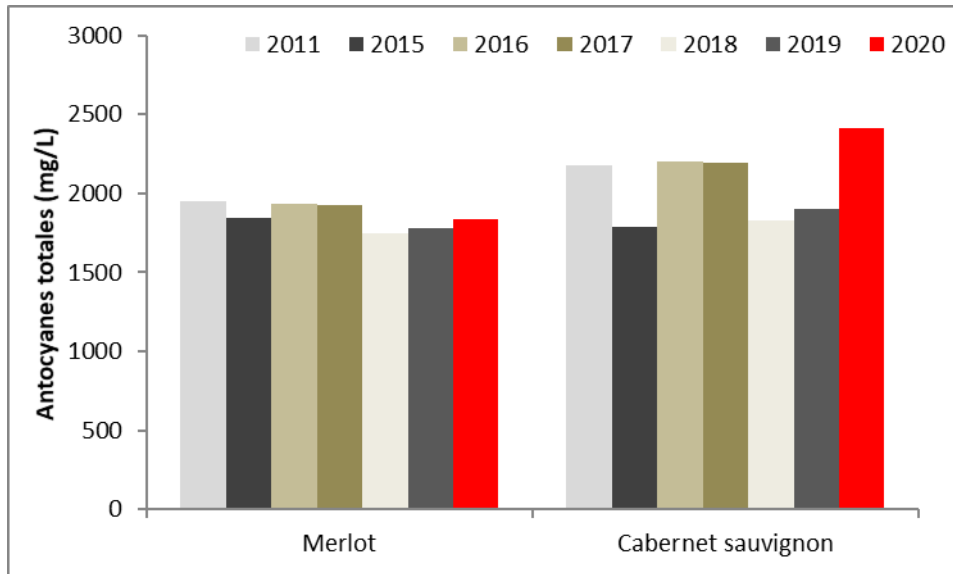
*As was the case for the Merlot, the late summer weather and showers in August helped the Cabernet Sauvignon grapes to continue ripening, although rainfall in September and October required the latest-ripening plots to be harvested before optimum maturity had been reached. The fifth and final prerequisite for a good red wine vintage was only partially fulfilled for this grape variety.*



**Figure 13**

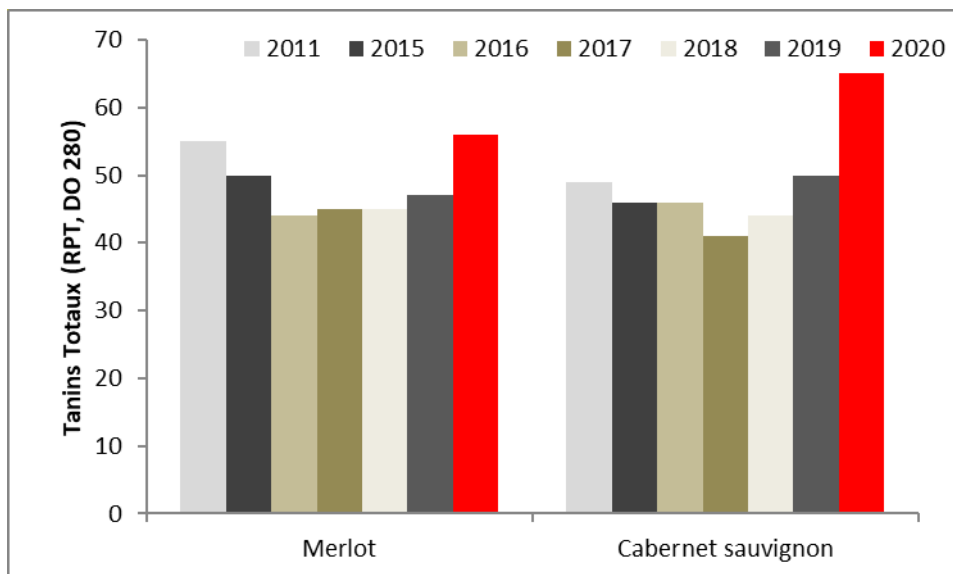
Analytical characteristics of Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon grapes at harvest time in reference plots in the 2020 vintage, compared with six vintages from the previous decade  
 A: Weight in grams per 100 berries – B: Sugar content (g/L) – C: Total acidity (g/L H<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub>)  
 D: pH – E: Malic acid content (g/L)





**Figure 14**

Total anthocyanin content (mg/L) of Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon grapes in reference plots in 2020, compared to six vintages from the previous decade



**Figure 15**

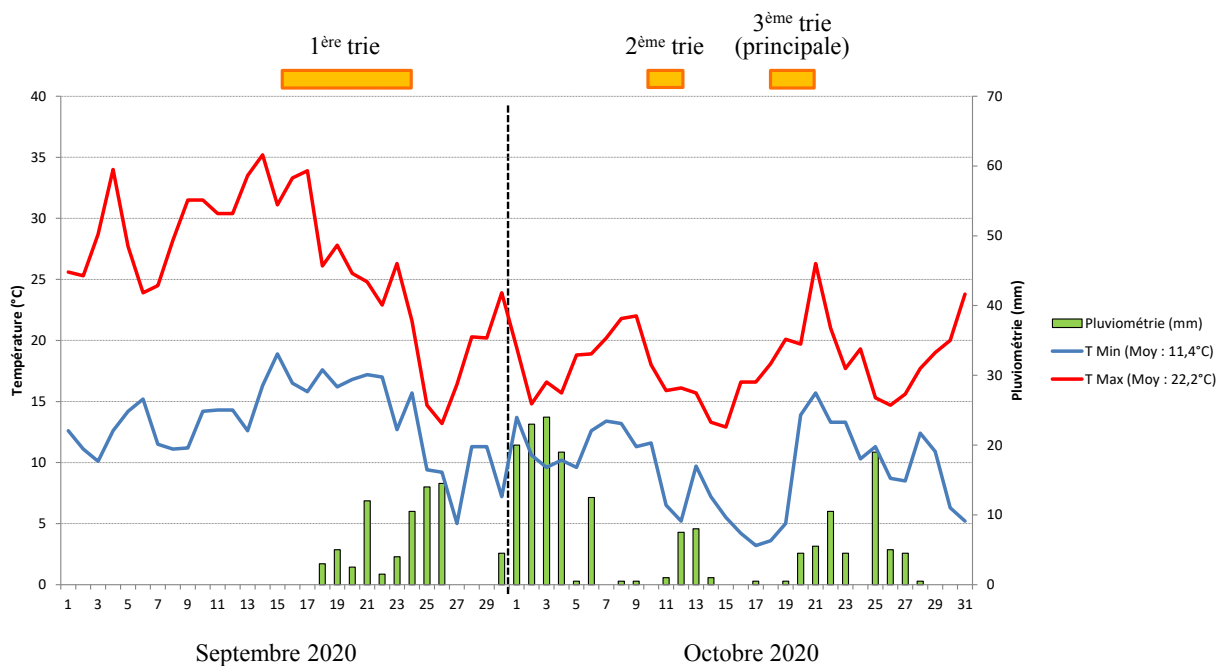
Tannic index (TPC) of Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon berries in reference plots in 2020, compared to six vintages from the previous decade

**The development of *Botrytis cinerea* was delayed due to drought conditions in early September, followed by rainfall which impaired the concentration of the grapes, and left only short windows in which to harvest botrytised grapes**

Although the grapes destined to produce white wines were perfectly ripe in early September, hot, dry conditions with little morning dew were not prevented the development of *Botrytis cinerea*. As of early September, a first pass yielded concentrated grapes (mainly thanks to raisining), with good acidity and an extremely well-focused aromatic profile.

The radical change in weather from 20 September onwards triggered the rapid development of *Botrytis cinerea*, firstly in Barsac and later throughout the Sauternes region. However, frequent rainfall prevented the concentration of the grapes, necessary for producing the finest sweet white wines. Winegrowers became worried, and responded in various ways. Some resigned themselves to picking insufficiently concentrated grapes on a large scale, abandoning production of the first wine in 2020. Others decided to take a gamble and wait for the concentration to increase, at the risk of losing their entire crop. With heavy rainfall in early October caused by storm Alex, the situation in the vineyards turned critical, although cool temperatures fortunately prevented the development of fungal diseases, which would signal the end of all hopes. The rare periods of dry weather provided a window in which to harvest a few grapes, particularly around 12 October.

The weekend of 18 October saw several days of consecutively dry weather, accompanied by strong south/south-easterly winds. These providential conditions thus made it possible to pick the majority of perfectly botrytised grapes, which constituted the lion's share of the 2020 vintage. From 20 October, deteriorating weather marked the end of the harvest, which was once again particularly testing for sweet white wine producers. While the quality of the crop was preserved, this was unfortunately at the cost of considerable efforts and particularly low yields.



**Figure 16**  
Daytime temperatures and precipitation in September and October 2020 in Sauternes  
*Chronology of the development of noble rot and the progression of passes (example)*

## **With delicious dry white wines, rare, miraculous sweet white wines, and structured, well-balanced red wines, with some great successes**

The summer heat could have resulted in dry white wines lacking brilliance and freshness. The water reserves in the soils nevertheless preserved the good condition of the vines and the 2020 white wines are soft, well-balanced and delicious. While less aromatic than in 2019, the Sauvignon Blancs maintained good acidity, particularly in clay-limestone terroirs. Except in well-drained soils, which are more prone to water stress, the Sémillons are especially successful, soft, and flavoursome. They contribute smoothness and depth to the blends.

The vintage once again put sweet white wine producers' nerves to the test, with the very late development of *Botrytis cinerea*, then very few dry weather periods propitious to the concentration of the grapes. While they sometimes feared they would completely lose their crop, their efforts were rewarded thanks to short yet miraculous harvesting windows. Although the quantities produced were often very limited, the best wines are perfectly focused, aromatic, and well-balanced. They pay homage to the devotion of their winemakers.

2020 also tested red winegrowers due to the extreme weather conditions which impacted the regularity of vine growth and the ripening of the grapes. However, this should not overshadow the success of the red wines from the 2020 vintage, which look particularly promising at the start of ageing.

The Merlot wines are deeply-coloured, intensely fruity and delicious. Despite being made from fairly large grapes, they boast a good tannic structure, without hardness or dilution. In the context of climate change, which, for logical reasons, prompts winegrowers to choose later-ripening varieties, the remarkable success of this grape variety in the last three vintages has led us to reflect and challenge some of our convictions. The Petit Verdot grapes yielded good results in terroirs where water supplies remained sufficient. This grape variety, which is highly sensitive to water stress, nevertheless suffered in very well-drained soils. The Cabernets grapes, which were generally very small, produced deeply-coloured and tannic wines without any herbaceousness. Due to the deteriorating weather conditions, the early-ripening great terroirs were clearly at an advantage and produced very fine wines.

The mildew threat, the conditions during fruit set and the concentration of the grapes in early September resulted in lower production volumes compared to 2019. The alcohol content varies significantly depending on the area. Although generally lower compared to last year, it nevertheless remained high, sometimes causing difficulties during fermentation, which will require heightened vigilance during ageing to prevent deviations.

In conclusion, like every year, it is very tempting to play the comparison game, by looking for similarities between 2020 and a particular vintage. However, given current climate trends, marked by increasingly extreme events, such comparisons are becoming even more dubious. Each vintage boasts a unique identity, and, above all, extreme weather tends to exacerbate local variations. The success of a vintage should be considered at the level of individual vineyards, while remaining wary of general assumptions and instead focusing on the personality of each wine. Since 2018, it has been a pleasure to witness a succession of three promising vintages, each with very different backgrounds. Their success is a blessing, not only for the Bordeaux wine region, but for wine enthusiasts in general who follow their respective developments.