

So far in the vineyard “ we have had every possible disaster – one of the worst growing seasons on record...”

Not my words.

The words of the official spokesman for the Champagne growers.

Yes from Burgundy northwards 2012 has been a real stinker of a vintage.

Italy is looking at a half crop. For the whole of France it is officially set to be the smallest crop in two decades.

Here at Yearlstone it is a depressing scene. One huge wall of vine leaf with the odd cluster of fruit well hidden. The strain on the vineyard machinery of such manic growth has been so high the tractor has been worn out, the ride on mower too, and now the ultra-reliable long reach hedgetrimmer has finally cracked.

Funnily enough the vineyard worker ( yours truly ) is still in reasonable working order.

So what will this terrible vintage mean for Yearlstone?

Fortunately it comes after two decent harvests, so we have several thousand litres of rose still in tank, and a small volume of red still in barrel. Unfortunately demand has once again been taking off, especially for our Vintage Brut sparkling wine. Large orders are rolling in both from the wine trade nationally and from loyal customers locally and already we are having to allocate priority customers.

Some serious decisions need to be made.

Our current needs are for a minimum of 20 tons of grapes just to keep up with current orders – and my latest estimate is that we will be lucky to get 2. A few other local growers under contract to us may provide us with a bit more...but we are bound to be critically short of wine. Should prices go up? We are reluctant to follow the logic of the situation as we know times are hard for many of our customers with the five year long squeeze on incomes. But how else do we ration the wine?

The great press nationally and internationally of the past few years has given the business some good momentum. Should we turn away new orders?

The truth is we will have to do a bit of both. Prices will be under upwards pressure – especially of the sparkling wines now we have the country’s best independent drinks retailer so keen on them. Priority for new customers will have to be strictly to those in Devon and even more strictly to those very local to us.

It is very far from ideal.

At the best the momentum of our wines and South West wines in particular has had a check. At worst we will be thrown back several years to the last wine shortage, four or five years ago, which ended up losing us customers simply because we could not guarantee our wines on their wine list long term.

I know a lot of newer vineyard owners in the region are thoroughly depressed. Especially those foolish enough to get involved because of the ridiculous hype over supposed global warming.

The only varieties which have stood a chance in this dreadful year are the ones proven to crop year in year out in the South West for the past four decades – Madeleine Angevine in particular. I fear for those who have planted nothing but the classic Champagne varieties. As Winston Churchill once said – “ the past is the best guide to the future we will ever have”. Too many new growers have done exactly the opposite – and assumed the future will be different. This year has certainly been a reality check for all of us.