

FIRST PICKS OF GRAPES

compiled by Oliver Richardson

WHAT TO GROW?



In the South of England, climate change has permitted the large scale growing of classical varieties- **Chardonnay**, **Pinot Noir** and **Pinot Meunier**. Even the French, with more than half an eye on the future are involved in plantings. Opinions in Mercia vary.

On the western side, the farthest north of such outdoor plantings is at Penarth in Montgomeryshire. On the eastern side, Welcombe Hills has successfully produced them outdoors for many years. Our local Dobbies branch is trying to expand this range by persuading the public that **Cabernet Sauvignon** is an outdoor grape for the future. Suttons' catalogue was also plugging **Sauvignon Blanc** as an outdoor grape. Morville St Gregory has proved them right, though it may be rather too late ripening for many sites.

Stephen Skelton, who has many years of experience as a writer and advisor on which grapes to plant has commented that the choice is very site-dependant. However, many viticulturalists in Mercia hedge their bets and plant a number of experimental varieties. Older varieties such as **Pinot Blanc** and **Sauvignon Blanc** occur on some sites and have ripened. **Acolon**, a new variety, has had a mixed reception though it seems to be settling in well at Welland Valley.

The problem is that this experimentation can add years to the commercial development process. Those that all ripen late are a hostage to fortune, as, in some cases, are those that ripen early! I have tried **Queen of Esther** (red), **Boskoop Glory** (red) and **Theresa** (white) that are locally recommended. The **Queen of Esther** has ripened well. The other two, in early November, were still far from ripe.

In the meantime, we have to live with the vines that we have planted and hope for favourable conditions. In 2009, we had an Indian Summer – a great improvement on our alleged British one! This went right through September and into October. We were fortunate- it does not always happen. Thus it is worth having a mixture of early and late varieties to improve the chances of getting a crop at all. In this survey, I have attempted to see which of the former is the best bet. By carrying out the same survey for the next few years, it may be possible to spot trends- Tiltridge (see below) have produced some fascinating figures for the last 10 years and it is well worth others doing the same.



[See photo - left.]

In 2009, it was **Rondo** that was the success story amongst the early varieties. Looking at the map, it is possible to note this trend right across the Midlands and north (South-eastern vineyards rarely answer e-mails!). Most respondents were picking in September and early October.

Rondo = Zarya Severa
(= Précoce de Malingre x Vitis
Amurensis)
x St Laurent (Geisenheim 6494-5)

The white **Solaris**, grown by Ryedale, Harlestone and Wroxeter was also coming in with good sugars around this time.

Regent was harvested at Mill Lane in Lincolnshire on 1st October.

Of the classic varieties, Aller Hill in Somerset and Hambledon, the original English vineyard site (though now replanted) brought in **Pinot Noir** at the beginning of October.

Of the older varieties, **Reichensteiner** seems to be variable. Camel Valley in Cornwall picked in mid September, Brightwell in Oxfordshire at the end of that month, and Frome Valley at the beginning of October. Elsewhere in Mercia it is not widely grown.

Bacchus came in at the beginning of October, mainly towards the south-east of our region, including the Chilterns and East Anglia.

Madeleine Angevine was picked at Staplecombe (Taunton) on September 29th, at Rose Bank (Worcestershire) and Hendred in Oxfordshire on the 1st October. Like Hambledon, Hendred is one of the early batches of English vineyards, which has changed varieties since its initial plantings.

Brightwell reported late ripening of **Dornfelder**, an old red variety. This was late too at Commonwood on the 17th October, but in superb condition.

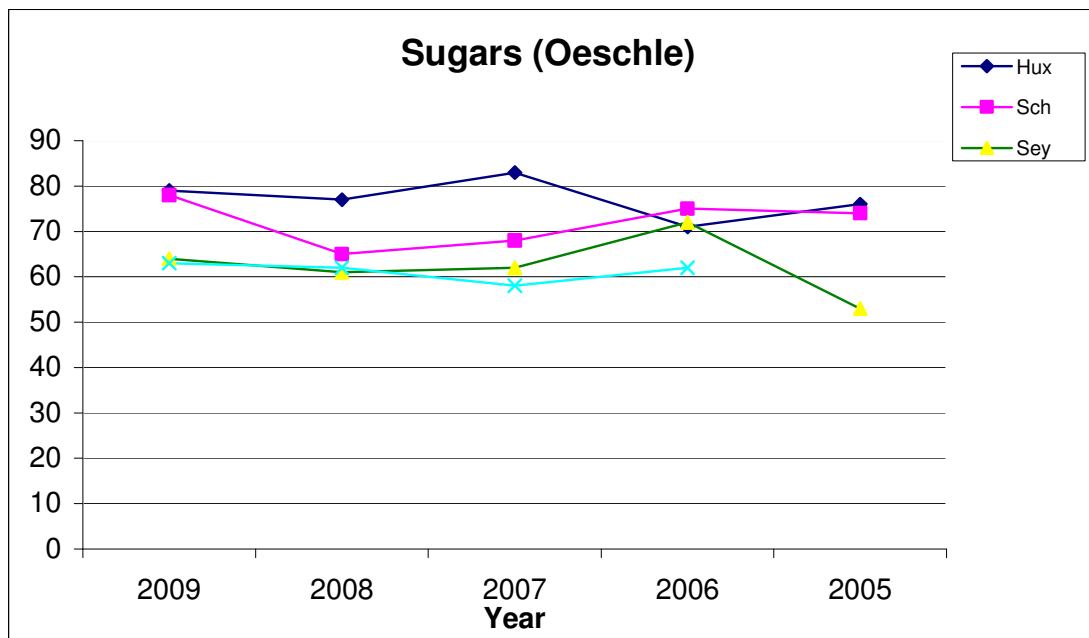
Tiltridge were the first to report pickings of two reliable old varieties, **Huxelrebe** and **Schonburger** on the 3rd of October, followed by **Seyval** and **Phoenix** on the 10th.

Keeping a record

Tiltridge have been keeping ripening figures since 1997, which demonstrate the early reliability of **Schonburger** and **Huxelrebe**.

The ripening dates are:

	Earliest pick	Latest pick	Average date
Huxelrebe	16 th Sept (2006)	20 th Oct (2001)	22 nd Sept
Schonburger	20 th Sept (2003)	20 th Oct (2001)	22 nd Sept
Seyval	30 th Sept (2006)	26 th Oct (2008)	14 th Oct
Phoenix (1995-9)	30 th Sept (2006)	26 th Oct (2008)	13 th Oct



In conclusion, these figures for a single year are interesting, but not indicative of trends. Those of Tiltridge show that which are the reliable grapes for a particular site and when they are liable to be ready for picking. How climate change will affect the trend remains to be seen,

but collecting statistics over the next 10 years will provide an indication of what we are in for and will provide a valuable resource for researchers and viticulturalists in the decades to come.