



# The Story of Y 2022

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“Fire is the test of gold;  
adversity, of brave men.”

Seneca the Younger

Every year, winemakers around the world will grapple with the mercurial moods of mother nature over another growing season, living daily with the knowledge that one spell of frost, hail or disease could herald disaster. What drives them to wake to that challenge each morning, to embrace all the risks, if not that tantalising promise in every vintage – the chance to create something new, and perhaps, sublime? So it is at Château d’Yquem, where even after 400 years, every vintage is still an opportunity for growth. And in that respect, 2022 was a veritable hothouse vintage. Marked by heat and drought, fires and fear, but also solidarity and courage in the face of new challenges, and in the end, nature’s overwhelming generosity, 2022 was a year brimming with lessons for the team at Château d’Yquem, yielding insights into the resilience of its terroir, the adaptability of its vines and the character of its wines. The 2022 vintage of Y – Château d’Yquem’s dry white wine, pronounced “ee-grek” – is a delicious encapsulation of all those lessons. For while it could be said that Y has been growing in the shadow of its sweet sister wine since its creation more than a half century ago, 2022 was truly a year that saw it reach for the sun.

# Climate in a Bottle

For many at Château d'Yquem, to encapsulate 2022 in a word is to reach for superlatives. "Intense," says Toni El Khawand, Yquem's cellar master. "Extreme," says Thomas Robert, Yquem's vineyard manager. "Extraordinary," says Lorenzo Pasquini, Yquem's estate manager. If we see wine as a climatic year in a bottle, 2022 was a meteorological blend like no other in history. After a very dry and cool winter, the growing season opened with four nail-biting nights of uncharacteristically frigid, frost-warning weather in early April, before swinging to unusually high temperatures with episodes of heavy rains. With May came almost no rain, but the dramatic rise in temperatures would continue, with above-average temps for the season recorded almost every day. Fortunately for the growing vines, these conditions proved optimal for the crucial stages of budburst, flowering and fruit-set. June finally brought some brief respite from the hot, dry conditions, with a week of cool temperatures and 72 mm of rainfall, which would essentially constitute the hydric reservoir for the entire summer. For thereafter, there would be practically zero rainfall, save a few scattered showers, until October. So 2022 would become the driest, hottest vintage on record at Château d'Yquem since it began collecting meteorological data.

This summer of drought brought constant off-the-chart temperatures, with some 25 daily records surpassed. The all-time record set at Château d'Yquem in 1945 of 41.3° C would nearly be equalled during two scorching 41.2° C days. The vineyard team found it impossible to maintain their normal schedule, instead arriving in the early morning hours to avoid working under the sweltering afternoon sun. The dry conditions thankfully reduced risk of fungal disease, yet created new challenges for the vigneron, who worked tirelessly to protect the vines from the sun's searing rays, trialling new techniques such as the repeated application of white talc powder to the vines as a form of natural sunblock. Vines on the edges of parcels along roads and paths were especially vulnerable, as sand or dust settling on the vines could magnify the sun's rays and kill the leaves – as Thomas Robert discovered after the first day of 41° heat. "It was the first time I'd ever seen leaves that had been burnt by the sun," he recalls.

Thomas and the team spent much of the year hoping for rain, and that longing only grew when two wildfires began simultaneously 80 km and 10 km west of Sauternes on the 12<sup>th</sup> of July. "All of us at Yquem will remember arriving in the morning, looking just across the valley and seeing the blanket of smoke which would loom there for more than a month," recalls Toni El Khawand. "That cloud on the horizon every day marked everyone."

As the fires spread, neighbouring villages began to be evacuated, forcing a number of Château d'Yquem employees to temporarily leave their homes. But thanks to the heroics of 3000 firefighters, Sauternes itself would be spared and the fires would finally be tamed in August, allowing Château d'Yquem and its neighbours to safely begin a momentous harvest.

# Harvesting Histor-Y

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On the 9<sup>th</sup> of August 2022, Château d'Yquem launched the harvest for Y, thus setting a record for the earliest vendanges in the estate's history. The move was preceded by a period of soul-searching for the team, which had been distressed by the pre-harvest tests measuring the berries' sugar concentration, titratable acidity and pH, which were all as unusual as the year's weather. "We'd never had grapes with acid levels so low in our recent history," recalls Toni. "It was alarming for us." Toni and the team wondered how they could possibly create a dry white wine with balance and freshness, and began to consider forgoing the 2022 vintage for Y entirely. Yet when they set the lab tests aside and tasted the grapes for themselves, hope returned. "The berries were flavourful, rich, concentrated, aromatic..." recalls Toni. "They didn't seem to be missing anything at all." With some vines already on the cusp of phenolic maturity, the team took a leap of faith. By the 24<sup>th</sup> of August, the harvest of Y was over. "Today, when I taste Y 2022," says Toni, "I wonder how I ever could have considered not making this vintage?" Not only would the wine prove to be surprisingly lively and elegant, 2022 also turned out to be one of the most affirmed expressions of the ambition behind Y: to create a white wine at once dry and quintessentially Sauternais.

# Hope

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If 2022 was, in Toni El Khawand's words, "a trial for what the future might hold if climate change continues this way," then the vintage was both revelatory and reassuring. Fears that the high temperatures could adversely affect the profile of Y were surely warranted, but the early, precision harvest proved an inspired strategy in a heat wave for harvesting quality Sauvignon Blanc (a variety which thrives in cooler years), while the Sémillon reminded everyone just how at home it is in balmy Sauternes. As Toni puts it, "2022 allowed me to see that if we remain open-minded and ready to try new things, even when faced with summers like this, we can still create a very great vintage at Yquem." It was a year that proved once again that freshness and balance are not expressed as numbers on a lab sheet, but as a sensation on one's palate, created not only by acid and sugar, but by more elusive elements too, from the elegant bitter notes even a hint of noble rot can conjure to the salty minerality only a remarkable, multiplex terroir can impart. And so 2022 became a vintage of hope. A vintage, in Lorenzo's words, that offers reasons aplenty to get up in the morning: "I believe there is a resilience in this ecosystem, in the vines and in the people, and our job is to protect it for the next generation."

Yes, fire is the test of gold, and 2022 was an extraordinary test for Château d'Yquem. It answered with extraordinary wines.



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## The language of Sauternes

A rare wine (never more than 30,000 bottles produced), Y was born in 1959 when the late Marquis de Lur Saluces was inspired to create something new from the last bunches remaining after the harvest for Yquem. At first produced occasionally, early vintages like 1964 and '66 were powerful wines and have aged extraordinarily well, developing rich oxidative aromas. By the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Y had evolved into an annual wine marked by greater freshness, following the decision to begin the harvest each year with a special selection of grapes for Y – a single bunch from each of the best vines grown for Château d'Yquem, the Sauvignon Blanc bringing its citrusy, lavender freshness, and the Sémillon providing the complex aromas of ripe grapes with a hint of noble rot. Thus, as Lorenzo explains, even wine lovers who never tasted one of the region's sweet wines can discover in Y the distinctive universe of Sauternes – the pleasing bitter notes, salinity, even a touch of residual sugar, though experienced as richness rather than sweetness. "Tasting Y for the first time is like another door into the world of opulence and voluptuousness of Yquem," he says. "For us, Y is a parallel expression of this terroir – it's a dry white Bordeaux, but with a strong Sauternes accent." That accent was even more pronounced in 2022, after the team decided to increase the amount of Sémillon in the blend to 40% – a reflection of how notably well the region's native grape variety fared during the hot Sauternes summer, retaining both freshness and intensely expressive aromatics. That complexity was all the greater since the team was able to select Sémillon at the perfect stage of early botrytis, known in the local vernacular as castamé – leopard skin. Without question, Y 2022 is a wine that speaks the language of its terroir.

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## Y 2022

Ageing:	12 months in oak barrels 1/3 new oak and 2/3 barrels previously used for Yquem
Blend:	60% Sauvignon Blanc 40% Sémillon

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## Tasting notes by the Technical team, July 2024

In Toni El Khawand's first vintage as cellar master, he discovered an Y that evoked the summers of his childhood: *"On the nose, Y 2022 is evocative of ripe pear, ripe white fruits, and ripe peach. An elegant, rich, salty aroma follows, almost like warm bread – it's the aroma of ears of wheat turned golden in the sun. It transports me back to my childhood, to walks I took on warm mornings in July when the wheat fields were ready to be harvested. Y 2022 doesn't have the icy freshness of a vintage like Y 2017 or 2021, yet it's very rich and very pleasurable to drink, strongly marked by the Sémillon, which also brings a floral dimension – white flowers, almond blossom... Yes, for me it's a wine of ripe fruits and nuts, fresh almonds and white flowers."*