

WINE AND PESTICIDES, THE LAW OF SILENCE

The marathon of the 'en primeur' wine tasting of the vintage 2012 starts this week in the Bordeaux region. There will be thousands of people visiting châteaux for a tasting, some in a minibus as part of a group, others in limousines for a private tasting, depending on their status or purchasing power. For newcomers, the principle is as follows: wine producers submit the previous year harvest to the palate of the experts, that is to say wine brokers or wine merchants, at a price estimated right for them according to the quality and the economic situation. The wine has not yet been bottled and will only be available two years later. In this way the château can ensure its cash flow while the buyer anticipates at a preferential rate the future quality and value of the bottle, hence the importance of the 'en primeur' tasting in order to assess the pleasure or work out the profit to come.

Among the subtle and promising tannins, aromas of prunes, toast, spices, vanilla or old Cordoue leather satchel that these highly skilled tasters will not fail to identify, how many are going to detect notes of cyprodinil, iprodione, azoxystrobin, procymidone or pyriméthanil? None, of course! Because pesticides do not appear in the official tasting protocol and these phytosanitary molecules can only be detected in laboratories. However, they are in the wine.

How could it be otherwise in France, the first European user of pesticides (62 700 tons in 2011), where vineyards occupy 3,7% of the total usable agricultural land and consume 20% of pesticides. Figures are stubborn. Despite plans of 50% reduction in the use of phytosanitary products in the medium-term, their use has increased in agriculture by 2,6% between 2008 and 2010 and by 2,7% between 2010 and 2011 according to the Excell laboratory founded by Pascal Chatonnet, the oenologist and manager of several family vineyards in Pommerol and Saint-Emilion.

During a conference last February in Bordeaux, Excell revealed the results of analysis of 300 wines of Aquitaine and the Rhône valley (2007 and 2008), in which the laboratory was looking for 50 active substances. Only 10% of samples (mainly organic) contained no pesticide. The remaining 90% held at least one – often a fungicide – and up to 9 different ones in one single wine.

All the figures given by Excell are well under the LMR, the famous 'maximum limits of residues' below which there is no health hazard, if we are to believe the people who fixed them. The only problem is that there are no LMR for wine and the reference used is that of grapes in stainless steel vats, which, according to a widely shared opinion, is not relevant because it is too high. Although studies on whether pesticides are present in fruit and vegetables, milk and water are common, those on wine are rare and remain confidential (Etude PAN 2008, Que Choisir 2011, 60 Millions de Consommateurs 2012). However, all of them come to the same conclusion and reveal traces of pesticides in the great majority of wines, except organic wines, even though some of them are sometimes contaminated by the neighbourhood.

In the absence of credible LMR, the situation remains blurred for the consumer as well as for the wine producer. Nevertheless, wine growers have become aware of the effect of pollution of soils, vines and grapes by chemicals, but this realisation seems to stop at the entrance of the cellar, like the cloud of Tchernobyl over the Vosges. By becoming wine, the juice of the vine, thanks to the magic of the cellar, is granted a tacit immunity from phytosanitary research. To give way to this research and publish the results is regarded as an attack on 'the wine sector already attacked from all sides'. Therefore, keep it under your hat!

One day this silence will be broken because the wine exception as regards the LMR is likely to disappear. Since 2008 the LMR are decided at the European level and already applied to more than 300 fresh and industrial food products. The merlot and syrah will not escape indefinitely from the LMR, and just the very fact of fixing the maximum level of tolerable residues in the bottle amounts to acknowledging, de facto, their existence. Pascal Chatonnet and his laboratory have anticipated this inescapable outcome and offer a new service, "+ Nature by Excell", which, from its own unilaterally fixed LMR, would allow to reduce the use of pesticides and to introduce alternative practices in the treatment of the vine. Until then, the best solution is to consume organic wines.



