

Red bordeaux vintages

3 Sep 2008 by Jancis Robinson

2009 - 'Vintage of the decade/ century'? This growing season seemed to have it all. A long, fine, warm summer but, crucially, with refreshing nights to help retain acidity. Dramatically ripe, voluptuous wines, especially on the left bank.

2008 - Another ungenerous summer saved by some better weather at the end of the season. Yet again, those properties at the top of the tree managed to field enough good fruit to salvage some pretty impressive *grand vin* but life was increasingly tough lower down the food chain.

2007 An extremely difficult year for growers, with rampant mildew, not enough sun, too much rain until September. Thanks to an arsenal of modern techniques, not least rigorous selection, those who could afford it managed to make attractive wines for relatively early drinking but high prices left the primeur market as flat as a pancake.

2006 This stop-start vintage suffered inevitably by comparison with 2005, although it produced some well-made wines which looked even better in comparison with the 2007s. Drought and high temperatures were the dominant characteristics until the end of July but August was unusually cool and wet and harvest was interrupted by rain. Pauillac and Pomerol seemed to perform best in a year that can taste pretty crisp.

2005 Textbook perfection in all respects other than price. Best kept for many a year. Quite marked tannins.

2004 The last affordable vintage? Large, late crop needed meticulous summer supervision. Grapes were often picked in the rain but healthy at the top end. Not massive but the best really are that rare breed, classic claret. Best on the left bank where sappy tannins suggest they might be ready to enjoy from 2010.

2003 Exceptional heatwave resulted in many raised grapes and uncomfortably dry tannins. A handful of stunning wines for the long term but most are probably best drunk while the bloom of youth can distract from that dryness.

2002 Smallish crop dogged by an uneven flowering and a grey, humid summer which meant uneven ripeness in far-from-uniformly healthy grapes. Growers concentrated on the rescue effect of pretty fine weather from 9 Sep. The wines are correct and, in a 21st-century context, are not expensive, but they may not last all that long.

2001 Extremely varied, large crop which depended on crop-thinning and extremely careful selection to produce exceptional wines. Hot August was followed by dangerously wet September, which sometimes resulted in dilute Merlots and tart Cabernets. Some good value to be found here, and with time the 2001s showed better and better - especially on the right bank where it can be superior to 2000.

2000 Nature's benevolence coincided with the commercial imperative to have a good vintage in this numerically exceptional year. Great consistency and balance. The petits châteaux represented some of Bordeaux's best value for many years though most are ready to drink or even starting to decline. The best wines should last well into their second or even third decades.

1999 Good potential created almost exclusively by three weeks of sunshine from late August was diluted by rain at harvest time. Hail also devastated some St-Emilion vineyards in early September. A cool, humid start to the growing season led to excessive vegetation initially. Fairly early maturing wines with better potential on the left bank.

1998 Very good on the right bank but a less starry performance in the Médoc, whose 1998s are a bit stolid, means that these wines, and their equally successful counterparts in Graves have tended to be overlooked.

1997 Far from dramatic and early developers, these wines were ludicrously overpriced initially but provided some easy drinking in the early years of this century. Few show any possibility of improvement.

1996 Some very fine, potentially long lived wines, especially in the Médoc, although robust tannin levels recall 1986s in many cases.

1995 Hot, dry summer resulted in early harvest of healthy Merlot grapes. Relatively tannic Cabernet Sauvignon was picked after a week of mid-September rain. Generous crop levels, best in Pomerol and Pauillac.

1994 The best year since 1990 (which is not saying that much). Nicely ripe but September rains were a problem again for less conscientious producers.

1993 Another wet harvest. Picked earlier, the right bank a better bet than the left.

1992 Light, fruity, simple wines that needed drinking early.

1991 The start of Bordeaux's run of bad luck. Spring frosts decimated the right bank, but the top Médocs are not bad.

1990 Second scorching year in a row. Very ripe, alluring wines at all levels, many outstanding. The vintage character of velvety texture and luscious, almost overripe fruit is one of the easiest to spot and tends to impose itself over any geographical characteristics.

1989 Seemed an unusually hot summer at the time, producing a huge crop of rich, opulent, expensive wines, drinking astonishingly well young. Some very good right bank wines indeed. And an exceptional year for Haut-Brion.

1988 Overshadowed by 1989 and 1990. 'Classic' style ie firm and initially a bit austere. Chunky and chewy.

1987 Simple, fruity and pleasant but unexciting. Early maturing.

1986 Dense, brooding and viciously tannic at first. Some may impress in the end but have required enormous patience.

1985 Uniformly lovely, fragrant wines especially but not exclusively from the right bank. They drank well for years but most are losing fruit or showing slight herbaceousness now.

1983 Good but less concentrated and opulent than 1982. Their lesser amount of stuffing meant that most have peaked although it was a banner year for Margaux for once.

1982 Legendary year, the first of the modern era. Horribly expensive but very concentrated and so delicious. The best are still going very strong.

1981 Patchy quality, with a lack of guts but attractive balance. Most are well over the hill.

1979 Graceful, suave and well-balanced for a time but they should have been drunk in the 20th century.

1978 A perfect autumn saved the crop. The big left bank names are strongest.

1975 Frequently overwhelmed by dry tannins. A few Pomerols and Pauillacs are huge and magnificent.

1970 These firm, sturdy wines, very much of their era, have lasted well but are generally pretty short on flesh.