

2008 - Bordeaux's big surprise

18 Apr 2009 by Jancis Robinson/ FT but this is much longer

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By the end of the second week of last September, when the grape harvest is usually well underway, Stéphane Derenoncourt, Bordeaux's increasingly powerful consultant winemaker profiled on these pages five years ago, genuinely thought that he wouldn't be making any wine in 2008. He was far from the only one to suspect that grapes so swollen by summer rains, ravaged by mildew and threatened by rot were unlikely to survive in any healthy, flavourful form long enough to be picked and fermented into wine.

As harvest approached, winemakers found their usual sorties into the vineyard to taste the grapes, and judge when they are sufficiently ripe to pick, very much harder work than usual. The harsh malic acid in them was so high that they tended to taste more like cooking apples than grapes. And even after the grapes had, finally, been picked and fermented into wine, later than in living memory, malic acid levels were still so high that the traditional second fermentation that transforms malic into softer lactic acid was difficult to start and at times seemed almost impossible to complete.

I asked Fiona Morrison MW, who made the delicious Le Pin 2008 Pomerol with her husband Jacques Thienpont, when they first realised the wine was going to be all right. 'Two weeks ago?' was her flippant initial response, although Jacques reminded her that when they first pumped the purple juice over the caviar-like layer of grape skins floating on top of the fermentation vat they had been very impressed by the colour and purity of the fruit. 'I think that we were so battered and bruised from all that sorting we needed to do (wretched Merlot!) that we didn't pay much attention to the wine at first', she admitted.

Certainly the 100-odd wine commentators and approximately 4,500 wine merchants who descended on Bordeaux at the beginning of this month to taste the 2008 bordeaux did not expect to find such attractive wines - especially in view of what Baptiste Guinaudeau of Ch Lafleur described as 'a typically British, sad August' and an even wetter first half of September.

But in fact most of the reds are now tasting very well, with enough but not excessive ripeness, nice fresh acidity, and tannins that at the moment seem reassuring in quantity and not too abrasive in quality. My first exposure to the vintage, straight off the plane, was a collection of wines from less exalted properties in Pessac-Léognan, as the posh bit of the Graves is called nowadays. Even at this quality level I was thrilled by the purity of the aromas and the harmony between the acid, tannins, alcohol and fruit.

And in St-Émilion, the large region on the right bank of the Gironde which has produced more than its fair share of exaggerated wine styles in recent years (even in a recent blind tasting of 200 top wines from the celebrated 2005 vintage), the 2008s seemed in general attractively succulent, energetic, concentrated and only rarely over-extracted.

In next door Pomerol - crucially dependent on the Merlot grapes which caused so many headaches for Bordeaux vignerons in 2008's exceptionally extended growing season of 120-125 days - the 2008 success rate was even more striking. The distinctively dry wines from the Pomerol-dependent J P Moueix stable seemed on better form than ever in 2008.

Although the individual performances of different châteaux vary considerably in 2008, particularly among the top wines, there seemed to be no geographical weak spot in 2008. The plateau of Cantenac just south of Margaux was admittedly badly hailed at the end of May, although the resulting crop reduction may have been no bad thing - just as the unsettled, damp weather during the late flowering reduced and possibly concentrated the potential crop, especially for Merlots, and resulted in uneven ripening in virtually all districts.

François Mitjavile observed in his positively burgundian cellar at Ch Tertre Roteboeuf in St-Émilion, 'Every serious agronomist I have seen says they don't understand why this year produced such a good wine. Perhaps we can say it was a very good July, or the lowest yields since 1991, but it was rainy and cold pretty much all year.'

Like 2007, 2008 was a relatively small vintage but, unlike in 2007, July was usefully dry - as dry as in 2005. Jean-Hubert Delon of Ch Léoville Las Cases attributes the success of his St-Julien to a July he describes as *remarquable* - and also of course to the prolonged fine weather from mid-September until mid-October, when, in temperatures too low for rot to spread, the last grapes were picked. Without this saving grace, the vintage really would have been mush.

As for the vinifications, most thoughtful winemakers seemed to be aware that these super-fragile grapes needed delicate handling without extracting too much of the grapes' considerable charge of tannins. Mathilde, daughter of Burgundy's Etienne Grivot, was doing a stint with Alexandre Thienpont of Vieux Château Certan in Pomerol and apparently assured him, 'we know how to save the fruit from grapes like this'. Macerations were short - just 12 days here. And clearly the key everywhere was selection. Many producers sold off significant quantities of substandard wine in bulk.

It seems that in this era of climate change, the old sayings need to be rewritten. It used to be said that a fine August made the flavour of the wine, but, as Denis Durantou of Pomerol's Ch Église Clinet pointed out, 'in the recent past it has sometimes burnt it whereas in 2008 the cool weather just kept it nice and fresh. I've never made such good wine from such a late harvest.' Not far away at Ch Cheval Blanc, Kees Van Leeuwen said that they realised quite early that 2008 was going to be good 'because the analysis after fermentation was very like 2005's'. Certainly, there is no shortage of tannin, or acidity, in these 2008s and it could be that, for once, the primeurs tasting season six months after fermentation caught the youthful fruit in these red wines at an ideal point in their evolution for tasting. They may well firm up over the next year or two.

The dry whites are still chock full of acidity and grapefruit-like aromas, which bodes well for their longevity, while the sweet whites (which I have not tasted myself) are said to be lighter and fresher than the 2007s - *apéritif Sauternes?*

Modest triumphs in 2008

Below, in recognition of the supreme efforts they must have made to produce such quality, are some of the lowlier successes in 2008 red bordeaux, although, even more than for the smarter wines, there should be no need to buy them before they are bottled.

Ch Baret 2008 Pessac-Léognan
Ch Belle Vue 2008 Haut-Médoc
Ch Bernadotte 2008 Haut-Médoc
Ch Bouscaut 2008 Pessac-Léognan
Ch Camensac 2008 Haut-Médoc
Ch Carignan 2008 Côtes de Bordeaux
Ch La Chenade 2008 Lalande-de-Pomerol
Ch Les Cruzelles 2008 Lalande-de-Pomerol
Clos Les Lunelles 2008 Côtes de Castillon
Ch Fougas Maldoror 2008 Côtes de Bourg
Ch La Garde 2008 Pessac-Léognan
Ch Gazin Rocquencourt 2008 Pessac-Léognan
Ch de Gironville 2008 Haut-Médoc
Dom de Grandmaison 2008 Pessac-Léognan
Ch Grand Village 2008 Bordeaux
Ch Haura 2008 Graves
Ch Haut-Gardère 2008 Pessac-Léognan
Ch de Malleprat, Cuvée Clemence 2008 Pessac-Léognan
Ch Mancèdre 2008 Pessac-Léognan
Ch Marjosse 2008 Bordeaux
Ch Mille Roses 2008 Haut-Médoc
Ch Paloumey 2008 Haut-Médoc
Ch Roque la Mayne 2008 Côtes de Castillon
Ch Sénéjac 2008 Haut-Médoc
Ch Thébot 2008 Bordeaux
Ch Tour de Gilet 2008 Bordeaux
Ch Tour de Mirambeau 2008 Bordeaux

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