

Bordeaux v Rest of the World

16 May 2009 by Jancis Robinson/ FT

The surprisingly good quality of the 2008 vintage currently on offer from Bordeaux has prompted comparisons with other good, recent vintages, of which the revered 2005 is the most obvious candidate. The 2005 Bordeaux vintage was favoured from the start because of near- perfect conditions throughout the growing season which led some producers to call it 'the deckchair vintage' because they could afford to spend the summer sunning themselves. In 2008 they had to spend most of the time in the vineyard fighting rampant mildew and fending off rot.

It is far too early to judge the likely long- term evolution of the 2008 vintage – although those clever enough to buy initial allocations of the first growths at their much- reduced prices can pat themselves on the back. The delicious 2005s have been in bottle for almost two years now, however, and this is a particularly good time to look at their performance. Many fine wines go through a rather surly period between the bloom of youthful primary flavours and the complex nuances of tertiary aromas that develop in bottle once all the different compounds have knit together to form more sophisticated alliances. (If it all sounds rather like progression through a school, the process of wine maturation is indeed called *élevage* in French). This dumb period typically starts after a couple of years in bottle so it may be that this will be the last time for a while when we can judge the relative merits of the 2005s. Frustratingly, it is impossible to predict which vintages will 'close up' and which won't. But in very general terms, those with a high level of tannins are more likely to go through an awkward stage, and the 2005s are chock full of them.

I am all the more grateful therefore for the three chances I have had so far this year to 'look at' the best red bordeaux of 2005. The most thorough of these was a two- day immersion in 200 examples in the Suffolk seaside town of Southwold, where a group of wine merchants and wine writers gather each January in Adnams' two hotels there to taste an indecent quantity of wines, served blind in carefully arranged flights.

But I was also treated to a couple of wallows in 2005 first growths, currently selling at around £600 a bottle, thanks to one Chilean wine producer and a group of New Zealand ones. Why? Because these brave souls wished to demonstrate that their own wines could hold their own in a blind tasting against this, the stiffest competition imaginable.

These sort of comparative tastings are not new. The most famous was the 1976 'Judgment of Paris', a blind comparison of France's finest wines with upstarts from elsewhere. California 'won' in 1976, and at the replay in 2006. Ambitious and hopeful wine producers have sporadically copied the format ever since. Eduardo Chadwick of Viña Errázuriz, one of Chile's top wine producers, has parlayed blind tastings into a marketing strategy. He first laid on a comparison of his top wines - Don Maximiano, Seña and Viñedo Chadwick – in Berlin in 2004. To his delight, Viñedo Chadwick 2000 and Seña 2001 were preferred by 36 generally Francophile tasters to Chx Lafite 2000, Margaux 2001, Margaux 2000, Latour 2000, Latour 2001 and the famous Italian Bordeaux blend Solaia 2000. And the other four of his wines performed reasonably well against this stiff competition.

It is hardly surprising therefore that he felt emboldened to lay on repeats of this 'Berlin tasting' in, successively, São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Tokyo, Toronto, Copenhagen, Beijing, Amsterdam and, last week, London (see image, with Tim Atkin and Jamie Goode in the foreground at the Landmark Hotel). His wines generally constitute half of those shown in these blind tastings and there are usually at least 40 tasters. The almost 80 tasters assembled for the London taste- off (which must have cost a five- figure sum) tactlessly proved the most immune so far to the Chilean wines' charms. The three overall favourite wines were Ch Margaux 2005, Ch Lafite 2005 and the Italian Solaia 2005.

At a remarkably similar exercise held in London in February this year, a rather smaller group of British tasters were served six top Bordeaux 2005s and six of the finest copies of them made in the Gimblett Gravels sub- region in Hawke's Bay in New Zealand. In this case, too, the tasters' favourite wines came from Bordeaux: this time Ch Lafite 2005, Ch Mouton 2005 and Ch Angélus (the Kiwis deprived us of the chance to taste Chx Margaux and Latour 2005). **The average of my recent scores for the 2005 first growths, incidentally, suggests this personal preference: Latour first, followed by Margaux, Lafite, Mouton and then Haut- Brion, but all are great wines.**

In both of the recent comparative tastings in London, it seemed clear to me which wines had come from Bordeaux and the best of them did seem the best wines. But in the New Zealand tasting, all the wines were remarkably similar in style, so the Gimblett Gravels producers certainly proved that they make wines very similar to top bordeaux – at a fraction of the price (£15-30 a bottle). In the case of the Errázuriz tasting, it was immediately apparent which wines were the red bordeaux and which the Chilean. (The Opus One from California was a bit of a surprise, and was the least popular in the tasting.) But even the Chilean tasting proved that these top Errázuriz wines, retailing at just £25-40 a bottle, 'belonged in the company of the world's finest wines', to quote the late Robert Mondavi, who co- founded Seña with Eduardo Chadwick, although it is now 100% Chilean owned.

So, although most Bordelais shudder at these comparative tastings, typically muttering about comparing apples with oranges, they do tend to benefit the organisers – if only to show that their wines are much better value than top bordeaux. But then most of us knew that anyway.

2005 BEST BUYS

On the basis of the three tastings referred to here, these seem to offer some of the best- value (with the lowest UK price at the time of writing).

See www.wine-searcher.com for global stockists and these articles for tasting notes, scores and suggested drinking dates:

[Errázuriz v The Rest](#)
[Gimblett Gravels v Bordeaux](#)
[Southwold – the 2005s](#)

Trinity Hill, The Gimblett 2006 Hawke's Bay £17 Swig

Don Maximiano 2005 Maipo £22.49 Hailsham Cellars, Edencroft Fine Wines

Ch Camensac 2005 Haut- Médoc £16 Wrightson

Ch Chasse- Spleen 2005 Moulis £23.86 Four Walls

Ch d'Armailhac 2005 Pauillac £30.99 Averys