

## Bordeaux 1982 - worth the hype?

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If it seems strange to you that I flew 6000 miles to attend a wine-tasting, then you clearly have no conception of the reputation of the 1982 vintage of red bordeaux.

France's resident wine-tasting guru Michel Bettane had also flown specially to Los Angeles for this three-day marathon designed to see whether 1982s deserved their hype (and prices, higher even than wines 20 years older). As he put it, 'it would be impossible to imagine a tasting like this in France - there aren't any collectors rich enough.'

Rich collectors southern California has in abundance however and, to put it crudely, it was their \$6600 tickets that enabled a bevy of us professionals, mainly wine-writers, to enjoy the ride too.

The man who painstakingly organised it all is Riverside particle physicist Professor Bipin Desai who conducts his famous wine-tastings not unlike scientific experiments. His object was to test the quality of the 1982s by serving us blind a series of flights of three or four carefully-chosen great vintages for 25 of the most important châteaux.

All we knew when tasting them was that one of the vintages would be a 1982. In order for the experiment to work, we had to do our best not to try to guess which vintage was in which glass, but simply to assess the relative intrinsic quality of the wines in front of us.

It was clear from the off, however, at the Friday night tasting at the restaurant, Josiah Citron's M<sup>é</sup>lisse on Wilshire Boulevard, prepared to put up with all this palaver, that it would be difficult to persuade some of the collectors to play the game. As soon as we started, my neighbours pulled out their copies of American wine oracle Robert Parker's most recent notes and scores on the 1982s, furtively trying to work out which glass matched them best. Surveying the line-up of Ch Léoville Las Cases, one of my them said reverentially, 'a 100-pointer here', referring to Parker's worship of the stern 1982 vintage of this St Julien. And when our four glasses of Ch Palmer were served, another who reckoned he had worked out which was the legendary 1961 asked for a top up.

We were each allowed one vote for our favourite wine in each flight and these votes were kept strictly segregated between collectors and professionals (embarrassingly highlighting the fact that one of our number voted for the thoroughly cork-tainted Montrose 1982). Once the votes had been collected, the vintages were revealed and the room would occasionally ripple with air-punching and 'Yesssss's.

At one point there was so much chatter during the tastings that Bipin stood up. 'I want this as scientific as possible, so don't discuss the wines, please. I want individual, not group, opinions.' He was met with giggles.

But for most of us, this was a chance in a lifetime of assessing the heavily-lauded 1982 vintage against other years of greatest réclame such as 1959, 1961, 1986, 1989, 1990 and appropriate younger vintages. You might say that the exercise was futile; that the older wines would so obviously taste different from the younger ones. But if you kept your eyes on the wines and not on anyone else's scoresheet, it was fascinating.

I wrote about the La Mission Haut Brion 1961, for example, that it tasted like 'a very slightly older version of wine number one' (which turned out to be a wine exactly 28 years younger), while some of the wines that most obviously needed drinking were 1985s, even though in years they were much younger than most. The bottles were all in good condition, except unfortunately for some badly-stored Haut Brion 1961 and 1959 and a couple of corked bottles.

When I looked at my own scores and votes, it became clear to me that overall I preferred 1961 and 1990 to 1982, even if my favourite vintages of Chx Cos d'Estournel, Gruaud Larose, Lynch Bages, Pichon Lalande, Ausone, Lafleur and (just) Pétrus were all 1982s.

Needless to say, our votes and comparisons provided ideal data for analysis by our scientific host. What is clear is that 1982 was by no means streets ahead of the competition.

Statistically the group preferred 1961 to 1982 in nine out of the 11 cases in which a preference was clear (there was a tie for Calon Ségur and Latour). The only vintages decisively 'beaten' by 1982 were 1975 and 1983, neither of them years of enormous repute. In the case of both the very old (1959) and very young (1998 and 1996) vintages, 1982 was vanquished.

Was there much discrepancy between the preferences of the collectors and the professionals? Well, in only half of the flights did we agree which was the best vintage, with the collectors, perhaps not surprisingly, more likely to favour the really old wines (only they can afford them, after all - or perhaps it is that they have relatively little experience of forecasting how a very young wine will develop?).

The taste-athon was spread over three sessions - Friday night, Saturday and Sunday lunch (this last at Wolfgang Puck's Spago in Beverly Hills). In all 98 wines were served blind in these multi-vintage flights, but that of course is not really enough for a true southern California extravaganza. For good measure, a further 102 1982 red bordeaux were served with the three (pretty delectable) meals - again in appropriate flights but this time fully identified.

Not all tasters were fully focused on the wine. My tablemates on the Sunday morning, for example, when we had a chance to taste all the stars from Pomerol and St Emilion, ignored the Pétrus for a chat about Paris restaurants, one of them in particular fussing about how 'Wolfgang is going nuts about how late this is running.' As well it might.

My own absolutely favourite wines in the whole caboodle were:

Lafite 1959, Cheval Blanc 1990

followed by

- Cheval Blanc 1998
- Lafite 1996
- Latour 1990
- Lafleur 1982
- La Mission Haut Brion 1961
- Palmer 1961
- Pétrus 1961 and 1982
- Trotanoy 1961

For detailed tasting notes on all these wines, see [purple pages](#).