

Ch Montrose back to 1880

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See also [full tasting notes](#) on these 37 great vintages and [what Clive Coates said about the 2003](#).

Last week I found myself, for the second time in a day, sitting at a table at the three- star Taillevent in Paris, where even the waiters are better tailored and perfumed than the average Englishman. The quality of the 80 year- old wine in the eight glasses in front of me was such that Francois Audouze, organiser of fine wine dinners in Paris based on a cellar containing multiple representatives from every vintage for the last 200 years, sighed, "I've never in my life had so many great vintages at one time" while Christie's most famous wine man Michael Broadbent swore "I would have crossed the Atlantic for any single one of them."

At least eight wine lovers had indeed crossed the Atlantic for this extraordinary 'vertical' tasting of 37 vintages of Ch Montrose (T silent, by the way), Bordeaux's archetypal St Estèphe, while three well- known wine writers, from Japan, Hong Kong and Singapore, had travelled even further. They had flown in specially for this single day's wallow in Montrose's renowned longevity and convincingly thoroughbred imprint of terroir which Gerald Asher, long- serving wine correspondent of *Gourmet* magazine, described as "couture- like simplicity of line".

The person who had persuaded the ruddy- faced Jean- Louis Charmolüe, whose great grandfather acquired this second growth in 1889, to open up so many bottles was Bipin Desai, the Los Angeles- based physicist who has been organising such tastings since at least 1983 when several of us in that upper room at Taillevent had enjoyed a 'horizontal' tasting of multiple examples of 1959 bordeaux he had set up at Sotheby's in London. A look at www.bipin.com suggests that he spends more time on seating plans and tasting sheets than on quark mass matrices. This Montrose tasting was the result of a visit he made to the Charmolües last December, sniffing round their famously well- stocked cellar to work out which vintages might most effectively be extracted and then 'producing' them, putting them into an order, with food, that would leave us tasters entertained and impressed and the Charmolües with the feeling that it had all been worthwhile. They had participated in only one similar tasting - in Germany, some years ago - ever before. Adding to our pleasure was the fact that when old bottles have to be recorked by the Charmolües, they are topped up with exactly the same vintage apparently.

Quite apart from how to stage vintages back from the 2003 to the quite remarkably rich 1888 while maintaining the titillation factor (chronological order would have been so predictable, and tiring), was the small matter of feeding nearly 30 of us two three- star meals in a day (plus the wines of course) without sating us by early afternoon. The distinctly wine- aware Taillevent proprietor Jean- Claude Vrinat must have had a bit of practice at this and the lunch menu, which on paper looked a mite on the meagre side, succeeded brilliantly. We began with a tiny cup of almost colourless tomato jelly, a sort of palate- freshener. With the most recent vintages, the famous 2003 (wine of the vintage, vindication of gifted young winemaker Philippe de Laguarigue, ex Lynch Bages) back to the stunning 1989 (better and much cheaper than 1990), came poached whole fresh autumn vegetables in a clear broth with crushed black truffles - almost nothing. And then the main course, served with an unusually successful 1964 back to a fading 1952, was - shock, horror - sea bream in a light chestnut foam with one or two ceps (a plateful would have been too much, no matter how delicious) and more, long- cooked globe artichokes. On paper this looked distinctly unfriendly to red wine, but it was very friendly to our constitutions and worked well with the wines.

There was more of a clash at the cheese course, which was designed to provide a foil for the most ancient vintages of the lunch session, the gloriously opulent 1918 back to the quite extraordinary 1888, the product of vines that had not been grafted on to rootstocks immune to the ravages of the phylloxera louse that devastated the world's vineyards in the late 19th century. And of course there are few people readier to find foods inimical to wine than some of the old hands of the British wine trade such as were represented here. Our creamy Basque cheese Ossau Iraty was, can you believe it, coated with a thick crust of ground spices and pepper! There was a certain foaming at the mouth of an unintended sort at this, but at least we rose from the table (admittedly only four hours before we were expected back at it) in a much fresher state than might have been expected.

Juggling a total of more than 1,000 pours of wine with up to eight glasses per place at a time, the service was difficult, and not helped by the fact that many individual bottles proved in some way not up to scratch, so we had to share portions poured from the other (two bottles of each wine were opened). But pours from the two bottles were alternated to make this relatively easy.

That night we attacked four courses (fish and meat with only an over- sweet, over- creamy crème brulee of foie gras being *de trop*) with gusto. Again we began with a flight of relatively youthful wines, the still classically restrained 1986 back to a disappointingly hard 1970 with such high points as 1985, 1982 and a convincing 1975 inbetween. The next flight however was probably the least rewarding of the lot: the last three vintages of the 1940s, supposedly famous but pretty tired and austere from the Montrose cellar, plus the best two vintages from the miserable 1930s. Spirits did flag a little at this point, but presumably this was exactly what vinous impresario Desai had in mind for this made us super- receptive to the last flight, a truly exceptional array of eight vintages, including no fewer than five from the roaring 1920s and an amazingly fresh and rich 1893, presumably still dominated by pre- phylloxera vines. In fact the wines from two such celebrated vintages as 1900 and 1945 almost paled next to the staggering bounce and vitality of the 1920, 1921, 1926 and 1928 - every one stuffed with lively fruit and incredible richness, while the famous 1929 was beginning to fade just a little.

Incredible might just be the right word according to Francois Audouze who, looking contentedly but reflectively as his glasses, remarked on how uniformly sweet all these 1920s wines were compared to the other Montroses. They made him wonder whether they might not contain a bit of Algerian wine? (His cellar is thoroughly eclectic.) We agreed we would never know. The cellar records of Bordeaux chateaux are famously casual.

I learnt just as much from my fellow tasters as from the wines. James Suckling of the American magazine *Wine Spectator* noted approvingly the wines of the 1980s, the "modern era when wines had fruit" (this was said before our glorious 1920s wines). France's leading wine writer Michel Bettane recalled how in the 1950s very little new oak was used, and grapes were often picked in a hurry before the threat of rain. Jean- Louis Charmolüe recalled how he had grown up at the château listening to oft- repeated discussions about the relative merits of 1928 and 1929. Gerald Asher, who now commutes between San Francisco and Paris but was once a ground- breaking wine importer in London, recalled how it was 1952 v 1953 that was the theme of his first years in the wine trade. Michael Broadbent, mincing no words, told us "I hate 1937s, but this one was quite good", while he and fellow Master of Wine David Peppercorn, celebrating his 50th year in the wine trade, argued about exactly when Bordeaux château owners were most prosperous. Broadbent argued for the 1920s, claiming similarities between the 1980s, while Peppercorn maintained it was really the 1890s.

This truly was a historic occasion.

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