

Bordeaux vintages to drink in 2006

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By popular request I reprise this topic after a two year break. Many of you, I know, have wine collections in your own cellars or, more often nowadays, stored with specialists in wine storage. Yet it can be time- and wine- consuming to conduct your own research into which of those bottles is ready to drink. Allow me to report on the researches I have selflessly conducted on your behalf. I do the drinking so you don't have to, so to speak.

In my experience, and contrary to most people's perceptions, more wine is drunk too late than too soon. And too many owners of superior bottles hang around far too long waiting for palates and occasions worthy of them. This seems a shame to me, not least because we are mortal and wine is even more so. Many a mature 'fine wine' cost little more when it was originally bought than some everyday wines cost today. Besides, wine is made to be shared not hoarded. Popping a few corks provides an excuse to buy some younger vintages, and introducing more of your friends and family to the complex pleasures of bottle- aged wine may just enlarge your circle of fellow wine enthusiasts.

Red bordeaux seems to comprise by far the majority of the wine held by FT readers so please forgive me if I concentrate on this popular commodity (and let me know if you would like another similar article on wines other than bordeaux). In very general terms, I would drink the better wines of the 10 last vintages of red bordeaux in the following order: 1997, 1999, 2001, 1995, 1996, 1998, 2002, 2003, 2000, 2004. (I shall report on the infant 2005s in April.)

The 1997s virtually all need drinking now. With the exception of the likes of La Mission and Léoville Las Cases few have anything to gain and are arguably quite subtle and meek enough already. Favourites for current drinking include Canon, Smith Haut Lafitte and Pichon Baron.

In 1995 some tannins are pretty obtrusive now, but taste more as though this was because they never ripened fully than because the wines necessarily have a glorious future ahead. Pomerol seems to have been more successful than St- Emilion, with Certan de May and Vieux Château Certan being particularly suitable for drinking now. Margaux and Graves have few stars other than the first growths but in the northern Médoc Cos d'Estournel, Beychevelle, Lynch Bages, Gruaud Larose, Grand Puy Lacoste, Haut Batailley and both Pichons shine particularly brightly, although I could recommend drinking only the first three of these at this stage. Among first growths and their equivalent, only La Mission, Ausone and Cheval Blanc seem ready to start drinking.

The 1999s, never particularly concentrated, seem to be maturing into very pleasant drinking, if that praise is not too damning. Issan and some other wines made in Margaux have matured relatively fast and prettily.

Such 1996s as have come my way recently have been very impressive but still backward, much more so than the 1995s. The superstars of the Médoc should be kept many years yet.

The 1998s tend to be a bit chewy still and where successful, on the right bank notably, are built to last. They should eventually be rather magnificent. I look forward to, and will report on, a comprehensive blind tasting of the better St Emilions and Pomerols planned for the end of next month.

As for vintages made this millennium, I'd recommend opening only lesser examples – though anyone with a shortage of red bordeaux for drinking next decade should consider buying 2001s, 2004s and the better 2002s while prices are still relatively modest.

All of which leaves vintages prior to 1995 as the best candidates for current drinking. This effectively means 1990 and older. Anything made in the lean period of 1991, 1992, 1993 and 1994 should be rushed out of the cellar immediately – although they are not all disasters. In my experience right bank 1993s and left bank 1994s have been the safest bets.

Although I have had enormous and unusually consistent pleasure from virtually every 1990 bordeaux I have ever tasted, a few carrying even quite smart labels are showing every sign of having reached their peak. The first growths and equivalent are sailing along gloriously but I would be opening most of the other wines now.

For some time 1989 was paired with 1990 since both were considered unusually hot, early vintages (until 2003 came along), but in my experience their different styles are becoming increasingly apparent with age. The 1989s are much more structured, less opulent but may prove longer- lived. It varies from château to château of course but on the right bank at least the earlier vintage has the edge in many cases while Montrose and Haut Brion are also particularly glorious.

The 1988 and 1987 vintages could hardly be more different, respectively muscular and rather a wimp. The 1987s should ideally have been drunk already while the 1988s are great drinking now, although even the best are unlikely to hit the heights of the best 1989s and 1990s.

As for the 1986s, they were tough as old boots for many a long year with virtually only Gruaud Larose to convince us that the vintage will eventually pour forth pleasure but I'm sure that one of these days the best examples will prove just what red bordeaux is good at: unparalleled elegance in the long run.

The 1985 vintage was famous for the opposite: charm right from the start. But signs are that its Achilles heel, less- than- complete ripening, is showing through at last now that the fruit is fading, leaving some grassy notes and increasingly obvious acidity.

So my suggested order of drinking vintages from the mid 1980s to the mid 1990s would be 1987, 1992, 1991, 1993, 1994 immediately if you still own bottles from any of these weaker vintages and then 1985, 1990, 1988, 1989 and finally 1986. As for how these two lists of vintages interrelate, I'd suggest 1985, 1990, 1988 and 1997 are all best for current drinking, along with 1983s (drink these up) - and 1982s even if they are now worth so much that you feel no- one could possibly be worth pulling a 1982- branded cork for. Even that perennial favourite Pichon Lalande 1982 now seems to be past its best.

Obviously individual producers' performance and styles of wine vary considerably with each vintage. The very finest 1989s and 1990s will be superstars in the firmament of wine and will be well worth hanging on to for a while yet. All I have had room for here unfortunately is to sketch broad generalities for typical wines of classed growth but not first growth stature. The most ambitious and concentrated examples from each vintage will be slower to mature than I have suggested here while the weakest, or most exaggerated and least well- balanced, examples usually mature faster than average. Thanks to the infinite elasticity of cyberspace, I have been able to publish detailed tasting notes, ratings and suggested drinking dates on thousands of individual wines in my [tasting notes](#).