

Blatch on Bordeaux 2005 - the wines

11 Jan 2006 by JR

In the second of his two reports on Bordeaux's extraordinary 2005 vintage, Bill Blatch of Vintex SA describes how the wines were made and how they taste so far. See also [How the vines were grown](#).

Vinification

With the combination of such high sugars and such easily-extracted tannins, just about everyone wanted to get **extraction at the beginning** rather than, as is more traditional, at the end of the fermentations. Hence the general increase of pre-fermentation maceration, and of early délestages and remontages, and the reduction of late- and post-fermentation macerations. In fact, there were many who racked off even before the end of fermentation which they then terminated off the skins. There was a general realisation that this year, **nothing needed to be forced** and that maceration on so much alcohol could bring bitterness, as it had to some of those high alcohol, over-extracted wines of the '90s. In any case, there seemed to be **a genuine realisation that the market no longer wants massiveness in their Bordeaux** and that anyway the vintage was massive enough as it was. So "gentle" was the watchword. But it was a balancing act because, with so much power, if under-extracted, the wines would become "*alcooleux*". So most compromised by taking the tannins early and by extracting before there was enough alcohol to liberate the pip tannins. At least then, they had the option still open to them of prolonging the post-fermentation maceration if necessary or of using an extra portion of the year's excellent press-wine.

These high-sugar years always cause **fermentation problems** and everyone has a story to tell about a tank that refused to finish, with all the attendant problems of residual sugar and volatile acidity. Certainly such difficulties are easier to deal with today than of yore: the story goes that even some first growths couldn't ferment their '21s properly. Today we have selected yeasts, specialised in high-sugar fermentation, which can be used to ensure smooth vinification of such musts, and generally, even though it was usually much slower and longer than usual, not too many problems arose. Many properties still rebel against selected yeast and their natural yeasts prolonged their fermentations even further, raising the discussion of totally natural wines at the expense of a little volatile versus technically more perfect wines with no volatile. In the end, it is probably a false discussion – many of those '47s, '29s and 1870s that are said to be still going strong today are said to have high volatile and residual sugar! One generally accepted principle this year was to avoid excessive heat during fermentation, especially at the end, and **most vinifications were conducted well below the normal temperature**.

If the alcoholic fermentations were difficult, the malo-lactics were generally even more so. They had a tendency to start too early, before the end of the alcoholic fermentation, and then to drag on for ever during the ultra cool November days. If not controlled properly, there was a risk of further volatile for the first and of a brett accumulation for the second.

The '90s trend of getting the wines into barrel very quickly for malo-lactic fermentation **seems to be receding** for the second year running and is now practised much more selectively, as is the technique of lees-contact without racking. With such a stylish fruit character in such a powerful wine, **it seemed to many to be a pity to risk flattening out the vintage's freshness just to be more presentable in March** [hooray! JR]. Even many of the *garagistes* say they are seeking this new form of perfection.

Whatever, here was a vintage that winemakers felt they just didn't need to "make", and so long as it was kept on the rails technically, **it didn't really need much intervention**. After all, at the sorting tables, there was not much that needed to be eliminated, in the cellar the must needed absolutely no artificial concentration, and since the grapes were 25% smaller than usual, very little "saignée" was necessary, so everything was as Nature had provided it from the start.

Yield

The official yields for Bordeaux were fixed on 8th September at **lower levels than expected** and the rumour was that this was because Paris was disappointed by the low response to their uprooting and distillation programmes earlier in the year.

This year, basic limits were set, with an extra allowance if the grower accepted a tank-by-tank approval tasting or that a certain quantity be put aside as "*stock régulateur*" to cover any shortages next year. Thus, for example, Bordeaux Rouge was limited to 51 hectolitres per hectare plus 3 hectos more if tank-by-tank sampling was accepted; and Médoc to 49 hectolitres plus 6 hectos for "*stock régulateur*". For most appellations, the total allowed yield came to the same or slightly lower than last year's maxima.

Anyway, **the limits turned out to be largely superfluous** when the crop-size diminished naturally under the effect of coulure and the reduction of grape-size through drought. In the crus classés, the Right Bank generally produced 30 – 42 hectos as opposed to 38 – 50 last year and the Left Bank 40 – 50 as opposed to 45 – 55 last year. But of course in such a year, **the proportion of second wine will be less**, which will in part even things out.

Meanwhile, down in **Sauternes**, for the first time in many years, there was a **good yield**, simply because there was very little bad rot to drop to the ground. Most crus classés are at 15 – 25 hectos, and nearly all lesser châteaux at 20 – 25 (25 being the legal maximum).

At the last count, the overall crop-size of the Gironde is 6,104m hectos of AC wine which makes it **17% smaller than the prolific '04** and 5% smaller than the five-year average.

The wines

Dry whites

The fruit expressions of this vintage are really exceptional. The Sauvignons have the qualities of ripe Riesling, petroly yet flinty, the combination of absolute ripeness and of lively acidity. The Sémillons, crushed from very small thick-skinned grapes, have high alcohol and very pronounced grapefruit character, sometimes more obviously fruity than the Sauvignons.

These wines will certainly become something of the full, rich 2000 type rather than the lower-acid 2003 style, but with more nervousness in the fruit than both those vintages.

The Pessac-Léognans, all harvested very early end August/ early September seem to have good unctuousity and are beginning to regain the pronounced aromas they had at the beginning. They are shaping up to be something very good.

The early-picked straight Bordeaux's and Graves are clearly less expressive than the later-picked ones since the aromas developed in the grapes for once after absolute ripeness rather than, as is more usual, before.

All in all, **a very successful white vintage**, provided the aromas stay. As such, a cross between the powerful '03s and the tensile, flinty '04s.

Reds

As in 2000, we have a vintage that is **potentially excellent in every region of Bordeaux**, Right Bank as well as Left Bank, Merlot as well as Cabernet. There will be minor variations, mainly linked to the particular rainfall – or absence of rainfall – in each commune. We have seen that in June and July, there was much more on the Left than the Right, in August vice-versa, and in September more on the Right early in the month and on the Left more later. **So it all pretty much balances out**.

All the red wines have the sweet-fruit character of exceptional ripe vintages, like an '82 or '90, but without the immediate fat of the former or the roasted quality of the latter. Above all, they ally great richness of alcohol (the Merlots are often 14-15°, the Cabs 12°5-14°) with – depending on the vinification – **an enormous tannic punch**, making them clearly **wines for keeping**. These will be more in the vein of the tannic '28s, '45s and '00s, rather than the softer more opulent and faster-maturing hotter- August '29s, '47s and '03s.

For the moment, many of them seem very strongly tannic, even a bit dry in their tannic structure, suggesting a measure of '70 or '75, or even sometimes on the Right Bank, '98.

Maybe they are a little bit what the '95s would have been like (after a less excessively dry but otherwise similar summer) if it hadn't rained. Or maybe we are just not used to assessing this kind of vintage: all recent hot vintages have also tasted hot, and we have no recent experience of tasting such a combination of such concentrated ripeness together with such freshness and tannicity.

Sauternes

At first, one would imagine '05 Sauternes to resemble the other dry years such as the ultra-powerful '21 or the ultra-sweet '03. Yet there seems to be very little resemblance to either. They are less powerful than the '21s are reputed to be and less outrageously sweet than the '03s. In fact, the '05s, in spite of the very dry conditions, have **more to do with the rich yet fine and elegant '01s** than either of the other two.

By the end of August, the grapes, already slightly larger than elsewhere in Bordeaux, were at "full golden stage", with 13 – 15° potential, and ready to botrytise if conditions got damper. There had already been a 10 mm shower on 17th August and now there was another on 31st. The combination of these two showers brought botrytis very quickly and by 11th – 12th September, the grapes were getting to rosé colour. The showers of 8th – 12th September accelerated the botrytisation which would have spread phenomenally quickly, as in 2003, had we not then encountered the very cool nights of 18th – 22nd September which slowed down the botrytis and transformed the harvesting into a **five-week four-to-five *trie* affair** rather than a one-week one-*trie* rush as in 2003.

For the first time in ages, there was no bad rot to weed out. **Everything was either healthy or regularly botrytised**, and could be picked at leisure as the botrytis arrived. Generally, the first *trie* was made during the week of 26th September, immediately after the Sunday showers (which had given only 10 mm in Sauternes against 20 in the Médoc and 30 inland). It resulted in a good quantity of regularly botrytised 20 – 21° musts, of great purity and style. It ran quickly

into a larger 2nd *trie* during the fine sunny days of early October, which often accounted for slightly stronger musts, at around 23° potential, still of extreme purity and was, in most châteaux, to become the major part of the vintage.

Most châteaux stopped harvesting during the showery period of 12th – 15th October, and when the heat came on immediately after, there was an onrush of late botrytis providing even richer musts – many thought too rich and therefore picked wider – accounting for a magnificent 3rd and 4th *trie*, up to the end of October.

A very few estates had not had the same botrytis development early on and proceeded to pick their first *tries* at this time, just as everyone else was finishing. Consequently their grapes got to golden stage at much higher sugar- levels when the botrytis finally came in a rush in the extreme heat of late October. These wines are therefore richer and sweeter. It will be very interesting to see if they turn out better or just richer.

At the end of October, others still had some grapes on the vine and, after the heavy showers of 3rd and 4th November, brought in a 4th or 5th *trie* of extremely concentrated, fat, full but perhaps less fine style.

The result of it all is quite clearly an exceptional vintage, with the pure yet concentrated style of the 2nd *trie* as its mainstay, resembling the remarkable balance of the '01s but with perhaps a touch less of 2001's vibrant acidity. It will be difficult for the '05 to dethrone the '01 but, in a similar style, it won't be far behind.