

Bordeaux 2005 - an overview of what made it great

15 Apr 2006 by JR

Most years I find tasting hundreds of young primeur samples of bordeaux each spring intellectually fascinating but physically exhausting. This year, even after tasting over 700 samples of often still- fermenting red and white bordeaux barely six months old, I felt great. Why? Because most years the palate is assaulted by a succession of wines which have an excess of something: alcohol in 2003, tannin in 2004, acidity in 2001. But although the 2005s have a lot of everything (and certainly no shortage of alcohol or tannin), all the elements are in the right proportion. During my intense seven days of tasting in Bordeaux last week the palate and teeth weren't constantly adjusting for too much of any one ingredient. And, with some notable exceptions, there are more very good to great wines than I can remember in any other vintage.

In 2005 Nature did everything right and put not a foot wrong so that decent quantities of beautifully healthy grapes were delivered to practically every cellar. Jacques Thienpont of Le Pin called it 'the deckchair vintage', a reference to where he spent most of August instead of hovering anxiously over his precious Merlot vines in Pomerol.

Christian Moueix, who manages Ch Pétrus and a host of other châteaux almost as famous in St- Emilion and Pomerol on the so- called right bank, describes the vintage as "effortless" and claims that "it was clear by spring 2005 we were heading for a great vintage".

While the 2003 harvest was marked by extreme heat, the key characteristic of the 2005 vintage was how exceptionally dry the growing season was – the driest since 1949 for the period between budding and harvest. Ch Cheval Blanc in St- Emilion registered a water deficit of 41 per cent in the nine months leading up to the harvest while on the left bank Ch Palmer in Margaux had 57 per cent less rain than usual. While there was no shortage of useful showers in April and rainfall was about average in June, every other month was much, much drier than usual – particularly in August so that by then the vines seemed to have accustomed themselves to this particularly dry season, and by the beginning of August every ounce of energy and ray of sunlight (7.5 per cent more sunshine than usual from May to Sep) went into ripening the grapes rather than being squandered on growing leaves and shoots.

South- west France's continued drought had two more benign effects for lovers of bordeaux. The grapes remained unusually free of the fungal diseases which vines habitually suffer in humid weather. The lack of rain also, crucially, meant that the grapes were very small and unusually low in juice. It was the thickness of the skins, in which all flavour-, colour- and tannin- producing compounds reside, which were responsible for the 2005s' quite exceptional charge of these vital elements. The most striking feature of the 2005 analyses in comparison with other years is the average weight of 100 Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon grapes, far lower than in any other year this century, whereas sugar levels were pretty similar to those of 2000 and 2003.

While the flavours of the 2003 heatwave vintage were exotic and sometimes overblown and roasted, those of 2005s are delightfully refreshing and precise. This is partly because temperatures in 2005, unlike 2003, were not exceptionally high – in fact they were below average in that very dry August, but another vital difference was in night- time temperatures. In the summer of 2005 nights were relatively cool, which helped to keep the grapes ripening gently and steadily rather than stopping photosynthesis altogether as in 2003, and helped to develop the gradual accumulation of all the important phenolic compounds in the grape skins that were lacking in the less successful 2003s.

If vintage 2005 had any drawback at all, anything to stir Jacques Thienpont out of his deckchair, it was the ripening of the Merlots. Merlot, the dominant grape variety on the right bank, always ripens much earlier than the naturally late- ripening Cabernet Sauvignon which predominates in the Médoc and Graves on the left bank. Because of this, Merlots were much more heavily influenced by the warm weather in early Sep which saw acids plummet in Merlot to levels practically unknown except in 2003. Although the dry weather persisted, temperatures were much more moderate in late Sep and early Oct, leaving the Cabernets to continue their gentle ripening on the vine so that average acid and sugar levels in the Cabernets were very respectable – provided crop levels were limited and full ripeness achieved.

All of this meant that the date of picking for Merlot was particularly critical. When asked whether 2005 was a vintage made by terroir or winemaking, Frédéric Engerer, responsible for arguably Pauillac's most highly- rated first growth this year Ch Latour, insisted that picking dates also made a huge difference. It is notable that at Ch Latour they picked their Merlots almost a week earlier than most of their peers in the Médoc, between 16 and 21 Sep, and then waited to pick fully ripe Cabernet Sauvignon from 26 Sep and 6 Oct. It was much more common in the Médoc to keep the Merlot on the vine until 22 Sep or thereabouts and the result is that some Merlots got just too ripe and had to be consigned to the second wine rather than the grand vin. At both Ch Margaux and Ch Léoville Las Cases, for example, there is more alcohol and markedly less freshness in the second wine than usual.

On the right bank too, there was considerable variation in picking dates. Christian Moueix started picking famously early, on 7 Sep, and has made his most distinctive set of wines ever - "we haven't had such purity of fruit since 1998"- although because the fine weather persisted for so long, the Moueix team was able to spread out the harvest until 27 Sep deciding on exactly when each plot had reached optimum ripeness. The Guinaudeau at Ch Laffeur followed on 9 Sep and found both Merlot and Cabernet Franc grapes interesting and complimentary, whereas their Pomerol neighbour Alexandre Thienpont at Vieux Château Certan picked slightly later and favoured his Merlot in 2005, making a particularly eloquent tribute to it.

Within sight of here but just across the boundary in St- Emilion, Pierre Lurton at Ch Cheval Blanc, another 2005 over- achiever, said, "the solution for me was early picking for Merlot which needed freshness in 2005, especially on the early- ripening soil here." Many of those who picked late found the musts just so high in sugar that they were difficult to ferment fully. Jean- Philippe Delmas at Ch Haut- Brion, which made arguably the single most successful range of wines of 2005, reports that, unusually, they used a specially powerful yeast developed at Davis in California expressly for dealing with high sugars. And no- one quite understands why the second, malolactic fermentations were quite so long and late, some of them incomplete even by last week.

But the great thing about the successful 2005s is their purity. They have power but they also have refreshment value. They have keeping potential, as witness the high levels of tannins in virtually all the wines, but in the best those tannins are fully ripe, beautifully managed and so well hidden by ripe fruit that the wines are already delicious. One would like to call the wines classic claret, but Bordeaux has surely never known a vintage quite like this. The Bordelais may be famous for touting their latest crop as 'the vintage of the century' every few years but, as Jean- Luc Thunevin, the impish creator of the archetypal garage wine Ch Valandraud explains about 2005, "in Bordeaux we say, 'this year it's true'".

I found hundreds of wines to recommend and don't feel that Frédéric Engerer was too close to hyperbole when he said "I think now we should retire; we can't do anything better than this".

But I also encountered too many wines that were spoilt by winemakers who could not accept that Nature had given them perfection and were vainly determined to improve upon it. More detail on all this and my favourite wines next week.

See my detailed [tasting notes](#) and ratings on well over 600 wines which are currently being published in purple pages.