

VINTEX S.A.
370 Boulevard Alfred Daney, 33300 Bordeaux
Tel : 05 56 11 20 80 Fax : 05 56 11 20 85 E-mail : vintex@vintex.fr

Preliminary Bordeaux 2003 vintage report

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France has had only eight vintages this century with such an extended period of extreme heat, and never ever before has it culminated in such an outrageously fierce August burn. It should have been enough to dry out the whole French vineyard, grapes and all. Yet Bordeaux seems to have fared better than elsewhere, first by having had a good cold and wet Winter, and then by gradually leading up to that extreme August by a hot May, and an even hotter June and July. In addition, the peaks of heat were less violent and less absolutely dry than elsewhere in France, with the result that only some of the vines actually shut down and the grapes could keep on evolving, in spite of the extreme conditions. The other capital difference from the rest of France was that Bordeaux, right in the midst of all this heat, actually got some good rainfall in July

The harvest started exceptionally early, in the extreme heat of 12th August, the earliest since 1893. A week or two later, once the rest of France had just about finished, after the re-invigorating late Summer showers and cooler nights, those whose grapes hadn't actually totally dried out in August or who had not been panicked into premature picking, could wait for true phenolic ripeness and harvest at leisurely pace, all through September.

The result is two kinds of wine, the first burnt into shape by the extreme conditions of August, the second evolved in a more relaxed way thereafter. Both are as unusual as the year's climate. Nobody had any experience of handling such an extreme vintage, and even less of assessing its results. The sugar-levels seemed so high and the acidities so low, even before the grapes were fully ripe, that many lesser estates took fright and harvested right there and then before any more yield would get evaporated away. Such wines bear the '03 hallmark of high alcohol yet are light in colour and flavour. But those with more heat-resistant soils, older vines on good rootstock, and a well-kept vineyard were able to hold off, could enjoy watching the acidities at least partially return in the determining fine but cooler September conditions, and enjoy ripeness as well as alcohol, which of course was high, but nowhere near as outrageous as the "aoûttiens" had jealously warned.

At first, these later harvesters were shy to say anything about the quality of the vintage, having just lived through all the hot-vintage nightmares of cooling difficulties during vinification, of stopped fermentations and the ever-present risk of volatile acidity, and seeing a result that, because of its exaggerated alcohol and very low acidity, was not at all their, or their oenologists', idea of what Bordeaux ought to be.

Today, often under the influence of admiring outsiders, they are gradually warming to it, and beginning to admit at least certain comparisons to other extreme vintages which ended up becoming famous. Of course, as everywhere in France, the yields are horribly low, and the moment when these wines will be put on the market is only a few months away, so they are not averse to such rumours. But most remain unconvinced that this is a truly great vintage. It is still early days and the wines are not yet really tasteable, but the following account of the history of the vintage although pointing to many rather average wines, also explains some of the really outstanding successes, surely to become great wines.

Winter 2002-2003

Although in Bordeaux we had the impression that it was a long, cold Winter, it was in fact a perfectly normal one, mild and normally wet up to the New Year, then very cold and still normally wet for January and early February.

Rain fell very regularly and slowly all through the Winter, allowing the water to penetrate the soil well and building up reserves that were to be vital later on. This is the main difference to the previous similarly hot-Summer vintages '89 and '90 which were preceded by an arid Winter. As soon as the last 2002 grape was picked on October 9th, after one of the driest harvests we could remember, it started to rain, with October about on the average at 74mm, November and December much wetter with 115mm and 91mm, and, in spite of prolonged cold snaps, January registered 93mm, again right on the average. It was only February that was down, at 57mm, and most of that fell early in the month (This was when the upper Dordogne had all that disastrous flooding). From early February until mid July, there was to be little more serious rain, but a lot had already fallen and the water-tables were normal going into the season.

The mild temperatures of the last 3 months of 2002 were not a problem; everyone much prefers to have it mild early and cold later rather than the other way round, with all the attendant frost risks of the latter. With the sap falling only slowly, it was difficult to find good days for pruning outside of early December, and this provided a good excuse for growers to put it off until much later – the real reason being that yields had been short in 2002, and there was no point in taking undue risks with the 2003. (later pruning reduces risk of frost damage)

After the violent storm of January 2nd, a lesser preview of what was to come on June 24th, there were two very cold weeks with 10 nights of frost and one day (January 10th) when it was -5° all day, followed by 3 more cold snaps: January 27th-31st (when the UK's airports closed because of snow), February 6th-10th and February 12th-19th, a total of 22 days of frost. This is a lot for Bordeaux, and the mean temperature for Jan-Feb ended up 1° colder than the average. It meant that the sap could really go right down, and assured that parasites got killed off. If we have to have global warming (and for the Globe, 2003 was $+0.45^{\circ}\text{C}$ warmer than the 40 year average, making it the 3rd warmest year since records began), it is better for us that it comes in such long cycles, rather than in short bursts.

Spring, budding and early growth

Then suddenly, the sap started to rise when the warm Southerly winds of February 20th-28th provoked a few frighteningly early swellings. Some heavy showers March 1st-5th were followed by temperatures in the 20s March 9th-12th, these swellings became widespread and most bud-bursts happened quickly during the warm dry days around March 20th, a full week or 10 days ahead of schedule. The shoots sprouted almost immediately, influenced by some light showers March 27th-28th and by continuously warm days: now we were up to 2 weeks ahead, with growth literally exploding – by April 2nd, the shoots were up to 10cm / 3 or 4 leaves on Right Bank Merlots and to 5cm / one leaf on most Médoc Cabs.

In less than a month, the vine had gone from total dormancy to vigorous growth. With a mean temperature of 9°C , March had been the warmest since '45 – and it showed. The vineyards had suddenly gone from Winter brown to Spring-like bright green. March had also continued seriously dry, with total rainfall finishing at only 42mm on the Right Bank and a

tiny 28mm in the Médoc. At first, this was regarded as positive: It not only meant growers could skip a few expensive sprayings (they had to do the excorioso one but could forget the mildew one for the moment), but also – and the enormous importance of this was of course not realised at the time – it made the vines' roots go down to find more permanent deeper water reserves.

However, there was a negative side to this Spring drought which now starved the vine into producing (1) a small to average “sortie” (number of embryo bunches), and (2) “fenêtres” (gaps between bunches). These now dashed the hopes of the large harvest everyone had been hoping for to compensate for the low yields of 2002. Surprisingly, given that this was now a “vin de mars” year (embryo bunches visible before the end of March), frost was not much talked about. Everyone seemed to just laugh it off: “We’ll worry about the ‘03s once we have worked out how to bring the ‘02s to market”. Also, the Full April Moon was late (16th) meaning less risk. But then the early mornings started to get colder from April 3rd with the arrival of a chill North-Easterly that was to stay for 5 days. The morning of 7th saw some pots burning in the vineyards, and on 8th, it went down to $-0^{\circ}5\text{C}$ in parts of the Médoc, -1°C on the Right Bank and $-1^{\circ}5\text{C}$ in Léognan and Sauternes. This was not quite enough to do much damage, but a few shoots got frizzled here and there. More importantly, it was now talked about for the first time – but never implemented - as a factor in the 2002s pricing: What if 2002 and 2003 were to be two consecutive half crops? In the end, they would be, but from too much heat not from too much cold!

This cold patch slowed down the vegetation but not for long. After some light showers April 10th-11th, the Southerlies returned with their 23-24° afternoons, and growth continued, slowly at first, then very fast after the storms of April 26th-30th. The vineyard turned fast from dull pale to vigorous dark green again, and by 30th, the Merlots were at “boutons floraux séparés” stage (embryo grapes separating from each other in the bunch), so the 2 week advance had been maintained, in spite of the cold snap and the continued drought (April totalled a paltry 18mm in the Northern Médoc)..Early years have a better chance of being good years than late ones and growers were generally optimistic. We could not know at the time that this earliness was to put the beginning of the harvest right in the hottest part of August, and later we wished it had not been so early.

Early Summer and Flowering

May continued dry (Rainfall was 43% below average at Méridnac), and most of it fell early on, over the 3 days 5th-7th. There was another sudden surge of growth, but this time we were getting dangerously close to the flowering, and even if the cool nights calmed things down a bit, such a pre-flowering spurt was exactly what had caused all the coulure on the 2002.

The first flowers were observed over the weekend of May 17th – still 2 weeks early. Then two things happened: (1) The flowering got spun out, especially on the Merlots, first by the stormy day of 19th, then by the very cold subsequent mornings. The Merlots didn't finish until May 28th, and the Cabs until June 6th; (2) For the second year running, there was coulure on the bunches that were in full flower during the period of maximum irregular weather: a spike of heat up to 31°C on 22nd-23rd, followed by 2 days of light rain on 24th-25th, 3 very cool nights down to 8°C on 25th-27th and finally a sudden burst of 27°C - 31°C heat on 27th-31st. These are less than ideal flowering conditions and it quickly became clear that some damage (although less than last year) had been done, once again especially to the old vine Merlots, in

the form of both coulure and millerandage. These were to be precisely the grapes that would suffer the most from the heat stress later and they didn't need this problem now.

High Summer: June and July

This so far fairly routine if very early year now entered a phase that was to set it apart from all other years in the recorded history of Bordeaux. For 92 days from May 28th right the way through to August 28th, Bordeaux experienced the most unrelenting and totally exceptional heat-wave of all times. Many previous heat records were to remain unbeaten for June (number of days over 30°C: 15 in '76, "only" 10 in '03) and for July (number of days over 30°C: 17 in '49, "only" 11 in '03; average maximum temperature: 29.8°C in '49, "only" 27°8C in '03; maximum single day: 38°8C in '90, "only" 37°9C in '03). But August pulverised them all: The average maximum daytime August temperature in '03 was 32°1C (previous record 29°5C in '91); maximum single day 40°7C (previous record 38°8C in '98); number of days over 30°C: 20 (previous record 15 in '90), and of course the major title of the year: those stifling 11 consecutive days over 35°C August 3rd-13th. As elsewhere in France, that should have dealt the final blow, as it did to all those old people who tragically couldn't cope with it. But strangely, only parts of the Bordeaux vineyard shrivelled and collapsed under the stress. The rest of the vineyard continued to look dark green and flourishing all through, and went on to enjoy the showers and the fresher weather that followed, and above all, those halcyon days of September that could put the final touches to the ripening of the skins and pips long after the sugar and acidity had arrived at apparent ripeness.

All over France, we heard of how the vines stopped functioning, the grapes shut down and shrivelled, and then had to be picked in a hurry during the searing heat of August. Of course all this happened in Bordeaux too, but to a much lesser extent. First of all, with its Atlantic climate, Bordeaux's maximum temperatures were more moderate than further East. On only 4 out of the 92-day heat-wave did the wind come from the dry East: On all the other 88 days, the weather came in from the West, with at least some moisture in it, off the Atlantic. This immediately sets this '03 heat-wave apart from the blast of hot drying air we got from the East in '76, '90 and the end-of-season '86.

In addition, we have already seen how the Winter rainfall was sufficient to maintain moisture deep in the soil, and even Bordeaux's low rainfall figures for February - May made other regions envious. And now, the rainfall for these 3 searingly hot Summer months, even though most of it came in the form of storms that tend to run off quickly, was perfectly normal: Depending on the area, June saw 40-75mm (the Méridon average is 68mm), July 35-90mm (average 54mm), and August 27-61mm (average 63mm). This was in marked contrast to the total drought of many other parts of Europe and it also clearly sets the vintage apart from other similarly hot years such as '47 when the heat had been totally dry, with no Summer rainfall at all to alleviate it.

Finally, the heat-wave was very progressive rather than in the form of a sudden burst of searing heat such as had moulded vintages like '90 into their very roasted, sometimes almost overblown character. Even for that growing band of people who de-leaf in June, the grapes, already not over-abundant, got used to being exposed to the sun and their skins hardened to protect them, as did the leaves, which tended to grow sideways at this time rather than vertically.

This progressive June heat, followed by a hot but quite wet July, really set the vineyard up to deal with the August roasting. The ultra-hot days of June 11th-15th also re-consolidated a lot of the disparity that had been created at the flowering and the bunches started to look more uniform, the Merlot ones still very long and loose, this impression of looseness being enhanced by the small size of the grapes. The Cabernets were also long but much tighter. Then the 35°-38.5°C temperatures of June 20th-22nd stopped the TGV running and were heralded as “August in June”. Extreme heat at the beginning rather than at the end of the ripening cycle can fix unwelcome green tannins into the grapes’ skins as it had done in ’98. Little did we know at the time that this was just a prelude to a far hotter August, but it was enough to restrain growers from doing any more de-leafing.

July, with its 3 series of rain, ended up marginally less hot than June with the mean temperature at 22°2C vs June’s figure of 23°1C. But the thermometer still got up to 37°9C on 13th and the month ended up a full 2°2C over the average.

All this heat was bound to provoke some sort of violent counter-reaction from the weather. So it was no real surprise when we got two cataclysmic storms on the evenings of June 24th and July 15th. Normally such storms are very local, but these two created enormous widespread damage. Both originated from a temporary retreat of the Summer high pressure system, which otherwise was situated permanently over N Europe for the whole Summer (affectionately dubbed “la patate” by French meteorologists), fending off any trans-Atlantic depressions. On these two occasions, the “patate” temporarily weakened allowing cool, moist North Atlantic air to suddenly flow into the region, violently confronting all this extremely warm low-level air and convecting it into towering cumulus clouds that moved slowly inland SW to NE, dumping deluges of rain and, worst still, copious quantities of hail.

The first one, June 24th, the third night of Vinexpo, formed over S Graves and moved quickly NW across the Graves to Portets, crossed the Garonne, pummelled the Premières Côtes and Entre-Deux-Mers around Langoiran-Capian-Créon, crossed the Dordogne at Branne, dumped more on Vignonet and St Christophe in St Emilion, before expiring in Puisseguin. 160km/h winds blew down whole rows of vines, then hail ripped through them. In this maelstrom – this was no ordinary localised hail-storm – a whopping 6000 hectares of vines were severely damaged in the Graves, Entre-Deux-Mers and lower St Emilion. Vinexpo party-goers in tuxes and long dresses had to evacuate marquees and manhandle trees off the roads to get home that night, and over 1.3 million cases of potential wine were lost.

The second one, July 15th, was just as strong, with 158km/h winds and lashings of rain and hail, but its similar SW-NE trajectory this time took it slightly further North than the first one, and most of its track was over forest, from which it emerged at Moulis, crossed the Gironde and hammered Blaye. Consequently “only” 2700 hectares of vines were damaged, mostly to a lesser extent than the previous one. But, in an already diminishing vintage, there went another 350,000 more cases.

High Summer: August

There has never ever been more heat than this. From August 2nd to 13th, every day saw 35°C+ temperatures and the all-time Mérygnac record was set on 4th at 40°8C, and that day further inland at Montauban, it hit 41°8C. Up until now, it had been hot but there had been moisture in the air (There had even been a mildew scare in July), but from July 28th to August

16th, not a drop of rain fell nor was there any dew until it suddenly cooled on 14th. Yet amazingly, the South-West of France had no forest fires, as in the South-East, we were never forbidden to wash the car or water the lawn as was the case elsewhere, and around Bordeaux there was comparatively low mortality amongst older people. Similarly, with a few exceptions on lighter soils such as Western Pomerol and the plateau of St Emilion; the vine remained dark green throughout, did not lose its leaves and only really shut down from 6th-13th August. Only the exposed grapes suffered and shrivelled, and even then not all, the remainder concentrating down to almost no juice – just pips and skin – but still just functioning. Those who had de-leafed too energetically lost a lot of grapes now, whilst those who de-leafed to only 50cm or so, or whose rows of vines ran E-W rather than N-S - thus avoiding violent exposure of the bunches to the afternoon sun - could claim that they had reduced dehydration of the vine (because the leaves are the vehicles of evaporation)

During all this, the véraison had happened, swiftly and effectively, from July 25th. It was finished during the extreme heat, around August 7th for the warmer soils, a few days later for the cooler vineyards. The rapidity of this véraison caught up a lot of the irregularity that had been occasioned in the bunches during the spun-out flowering, and by mid month, the long bunches of tiny grapes that had survived were looking tired but good, whilst the ones that hadn't made it were already shrivelled and falling off.

The harvest

In the final days of the early August super-heat-wave, it was time to harvest many of the Pessac-Léognan whites. They had already lost much of their juice to the heat, the sugars were very high, and any further delay would not only bring further evaporation but any aromas that were left would be totally blown away. Accordingly, in a much-publicised move, Château L'Hospital was reportedly the first with a small pick on Tuesday August 12th, and this was followed by an even more publicised total pick of the Haut-Brion and Laville Haut-Brion whites on the Wednesday and Thursday, followed quickly by the André Lurton estates. This was the earliest start by far, including 1990, of any vintage since 1893. Many others would have picked their whites now, but could not get their personnel back quickly from Summer holidays. So the grapes had to stay on the vines and run the risk of drying out even more.

This is where they mostly got lucky, when, from August 14th, the daytime temperature dropped from over 35°C to a "mere" 28°C., and over the weekend of 16th-17th there were a few gentle thundery showers – the same system that brought flash-flooding and gales in the Languedoc and South-East, but had not yet worked up much strength when it had gone over Bordeaux. A few mm of much-needed non-violent rain fell on the whole region, more in the SW of the appellation than on the Right Bank. But the Right Bank caught the situation up nicely in a second round of much heavier but just as gentle thundery rain overnight on Tuesday 19th, when it received 35mm whilst other regions only got 20. With the vines nicely refreshed and the grapes reviving from their wrinkled torpour, the rest of the Pessac-Léognan whites were harvested during this cooler, breezy week of August 18th. Then, a third small 4-5mm shower on Sunday 24th was exactly what was needed to set off the main body of the Bordeaux and Graves' white harvest during the sunny week of 25th, most finishing in ideal conditions around September 3rd, after a fourth little round of gentle thunder showers (5-20mm) over the weekend of 30th.

It was just now, September 3-4th, that the earlier ripening red wine areas such as Pessac-Léognan, St Emilion and Pomerol started their Merlot harvest, first under bright sunny conditions 3rd-5th, then between the showers (fortunately the really heavy ones fell at night) 6th-10th. Most of these 3 regions had finished their Merlots by 12th, in a hurry towards the end because those 5 days of 20-35mm rainfall had provoked some outbreaks of grey rot, about which there was a lot of concern, since it could spread very quickly indeed during the long period of warm fine weather that was now being regularly forecast for the following days.

That growers began to count on this fine weather during the showery days of September 6th-10th was now to become a determining feature of the vintage. If there had been rain in the forecast, all remaining Merlots and probably a good proportion of the Cabs would have been picked right away. The sugars were very high, the acidities abnormally low; only the pips and the wood of the grape needed to ripen. Better to have slightly green grapes than rotten ones, and the resulting qualities would have been as mixed as those who had already harvested.

So, of those Merlots still to be picked, mainly the Médoc ones, the better Bordeaux and Côtes ones, and the Right Bank ones on "argilo-calcaire" soils, most now had the confidence to put off harvesting until the following Monday September 15th. Others who had more grapes that were fragile, dried-out or tasteless (a very frequent comment at this time) quickly picked now over the fine weekend of 13th-14th, marginally before total ripeness, and, as a result, missed out on the fabulous, most perfect September conditions that were to come, as the "patate" high-pressure system ballooned out once more over Northern and Central Europe for two whole weeks, bringing dry Easterly and Southerly breezes into France.

Most French and half of Bordeaux's vineyards had finished their harvest by now, and could only watch with dismay what they were missing. Bordeaux's best was still on the vine and could now be harvested at leisure right the way through to the end of the month. Only two light showers sprinkled the region on 21st-22nd September (4-7mm) and on 27th-28th (1-2mm) and September's total rainfall ended up one of the tiniest of all time: 32mm (The average is 85). And the temperatures ended up very high too, with the mean temperature at 1°4 over the average and the hottest day (on 20th) at a full 32°C, very hot for September in Bordeaux. If it had been wet, such weather would have been a disaster, but, like this, with a renewed dry late-season heat-wave, it was just like in '86 – except that in '86, the grapes went into it all swollen by the late Summer rain and needed to dry out. This time, they were all concentrated already, sometimes a little shrivelled, sometimes taking time for the grape-wood to ripen perfectly, but basically, it was just a question of allowing the finishing touches to be applied to the ripening, and with the forecast so serene, no-one needed to be hurried into any untimely decisions. Anyway, if anyone was going to panic, they would have done so back in late August / early September, not now.

These later harvesters chewed at their nails over the weekend of 13th-14th September. Supposing they had miscalculated? What if the grapes had been ripe after all last week? And, above all, what if the weather forecasts were wrong? With such a small yield hanging on the vines already, it was a tough call, especially for those estate managers who are responsible to shareholders and owning families, with the consultant oenologists almost universally advising earlier harvesting. They were going for broke in the face of nearly all professional advice.

The week of 15th September dawned bright and clear, with a pleasant drying East wind. The vines were all dark green again, having been restored by the rains of 6th-10th, and the skins of the more wrinkled grapes began to tighten once more under the pulp's pressure from within.

Most of the Merlots from the Médoc, from the later-harvested “argilo-calcaire” St Emilion and Bordeaux-et-Côtes vineyards were picked during this glorious week of 28-32°C days and cool nights, the hot days rounding off the ripening, the cool nights returning a semblance of acidity to the juice.

On the Sunday night September 21st, the remains of hurricane Isabel arrived on our shores, but it was by then pretty much spent, and the total rainfall that night was only 4mm on the Right Bank and 7 on the Left. This put the final touches to the ripening of the Cabs (Franc on the Right Bank, Sauvignon on the Left) so that harvesting could commence – or in some cases continue – during the following 7 days of sunny if cooler conditions, only interrupted by very light showers 28th and 30th September that did absolutely no harm at all. Most of this week’s harvest was first class, only compromised here and there by a few shrivelled bunches.

Some lingered on for a few more days into October up to Friday 3rd, in damper and more stormy weather, not looking so good as the previous week but with generally better results for these final parcels than if they had not waited. But the great bulk of Bordeaux’s Cabs were in by 27th and immediately the juice displayed all those dark colours and strong structures that had been missing from the earlier Merlots and whites. At this time, it was thought that this was clearly going to be more of a Cabernet vintage than a Merlot one. It had happened just in time. It had been an early vintage, but it had finished much later than originally planned at the véraison, and nowhere near as early as Burgundy which had finished by the end of August, and it was extremely fortunate not to have gone on any longer: For right then the heavens opened and October ended up incredibly wet at 155mm (the average is 87). Nobody could quite believe their luck, and maybe because the mass of early harvesters were cursing theirs, those who had been able to harvest later could not quite come to terms with the fact that they had possibly produced something rather special. Even at the time of writing, they are only just beginning to admit that at least some of what they have produced is truly outstanding, and then largely under the persuasion of outsiders who had not witnessed all the difficulties of the pre-harvest and who just figured from afar that a hot Summer = automatically great wine.

Vinification

In a very short time, Bordeaux has made tremendous progress in harvest-reception and vinification equipment, right across the board. Ripeness analyses are now extremely detailed and untold efforts are made to ensure that the grapes arrive at the cellar in perfect condition (bunches brought in in crush-proof boxes, special hoppers to prevent pre-cellar crushing); introduction into the de-stemmer-crusher above the tanks by gravity in order to avoid pip-crushing screw pumping; double vibrating sorting-tables separated by the de-stemmer to ensure that no even minor imperfect grapes get through; boosted cooling systems that will allow several days of pre-fermentation maceration whatever the ambient temperature (very important this year in order to gently extract the laggard fruit flavours of the year); and above all, re-building of the cellar into smaller tanks, often returning to concrete or wood (less brutal thermic shock than stainless-steel), that correspond to the average produce of each parcel of land / grape variety so that the lots can be kept apart up to “assemblage” and a better final “grand vin” decision can be made.

Even with all of this, 2003 was a winemaker’s nightmare. The grapes often came in at over 35°C and had to be drastically cooled before any of the above could be effective. If cooling could be quickly achieved, a pre-fermentation maceration was just possible, but, as soon as the fermentations started, extreme care had to be taken not to extract any of the unripe

components of the very large pips and other ligneous parts of the grape. So generally, “remontages” (pumpings-over) and “délestages” (tank-to-tank wooshing) were very light, and, wherever “pigeage” (cap-plunging) was already practised, it tended to be gentler. The tannin counts being extremely high and yet the pips often being very large and slightly unripe, post-fermentation maceration was often very short, especially on the Cabs.

The watchword of the year was: “beware of 1010” – i.e. because of the extreme richness of the musts, the fermentations had a tendency to stop at 1010 specific gravity (only 2/3 of the way through) and had to be re-started artificially. From such sketchy reports as we have of 1947, apparently this was the same problem in that similarly hot vintage, which accounts for the high volatile acidity and the lingering sweetness of many ‘47s (so I am told), since the knowledge of yeasts was just not there in those days. In the end, this year, apart from some disasters at the lower end, most growers seem to have come through without residual sugar, if with a relatively high VA count.

The question of acidification has been widely reported, especially by a rather vindictive section of the Press, ever since the French government exceptionally allowed it for this very low-acid vintage. Widely used - and abused - elsewhere, especially in Burgundy where I happen to be writing this report, it was at first espoused by the similarly early-August-harvested Bordeauxs in order to compensate the lack of acidity in the juice of overheated and dried-out grapes and to protect fragile musts from oxidising (This essential technical rather than stylistic reason for acidifying is often overlooked). But, by the time the later mid-September harvesters were crushing, it had become clear that, in the earlier harvested vats, 1) the pH's had in fact dropped and the total acidity had risen during fermentation and that 2) due to the warm nights of August, there was very little malic acid in the juice. As a result, everyone's total acidity count went from catastrophically low pre-crush, to just about acceptable post-malolactic fermentation. The later harvesters, who this year were often the more reasoning and reasonable growers, took account of this news and most, if not all, refused to compromise their hitherto brave efforts to work with rather than battle against such an unusual vintage and made almost no artificial acidity corrections. As a post-script to this little chapter, it is interesting to note that several oenologists later confessed to having made erroneously low acidity pre-harvest analyses anyway, by taking readings on the juice rather than on the skins, which is where the acidity was in such sun-baked grapes and which could only release that acidity once properly crushed and extracted into the fermenting juice. So in the end all these concerns about the acidity had been to a large extent much ado about nothing, and once again, no action at all was the best course of action..

The earlier harvesters also provided valuable information to the later ones about the alcohol content of wines made from such high sugar juices. It quickly became very clear that the yeasts were transforming 18 – 18,5 g/l sugar into 1° alcohol rather than the usual 16 – 17. As a result, the much feared prospect of 15° wines became in reality more like 13°5 – 14°, still high but now within reach of being traditional Bordeaux after all. As with the acidities, it was best to let it sort itself out naturally rather than intervene by the premature harvesting that was being constantly prescribed by the oenologists.

The malo-lactic fermentations have been generally difficult across the board, often lingering well into mid-November, but generally now completed, in the end without mishap. A drawn-out “malo” is of little consequence anyway and Burgundians chuckle when the Bordelais worry about malo-lactics that are not completed in November!

Yield

Bordeaux has produced 5.990.000 hectolitres total of 2003 wine, which is only 1.5% less than 2002 (deficient from coulure), and 15.5% less than the 5-year average. These figures are eloquent in showing the comparatively greater stress experienced by the vines of the Eastern part of France (Burgundy –20%; Jura –36%) and indicate once again how these regions suffered from the severe drought that Bordeaux never had. Heat was the problem, not drought. The figures are even more eloquent when we consider that it was a small “sortie” (number of bunches) and that there was once again considerable coulure and millerandage: Burgundy ended up with 32% less yield than what was forecast on July 1st, whereas for Bordeaux the figure was only 5% less.

Nonetheless, for lesser Bordeaux and Médoc estates, especially those that got hit by hail, this second short harvest in a row is now spelling financial disaster, coupled with a 12% fall in bulk prices over the year and with a 20% increase in operating costs over the last three years (35 hour week etc). Most serious lesser properties produced 35-45 hectos per hectare rather than the usual 55-60. At the top end, the Right Bank heavier soils were at 25-40 hectos, the Northern Médoc and Graves at 40-50 hectos, whilst the lighter soils of both regions, especially Pomerol produced only 20-25 hectos. The maximum authorised yields were marginally reduced, for example from 55 to 53 hectos for Haut-Médoc, but everyone was way below anyway. But, because 2002 had so much coulure, the general decrease in the top estates (apart from the lighter soil vineyards) in relation to last year is only about 5%, and since there will certainly be very little second wine, availability and allocations should generally actually increase. Ha, ha, we’ll see...

In Sauternes, 2003 production is well up on previous years, with most generics on the maximum of 25 hectos, and most crus classés between 12 and 20;

The wines

This is a vintage made from excessive heat, and as a result, the wines’ common denominators are Southern type strong alcohol and low acidity. Beyond that, the variations are enormous, ranging from light unbalanced and sometimes seriously faulty wines to superb full-balanced and strongly tannic competition winners. At both ends of the scale, white as well as red, the wines are as unusual as had been the weather, and at the top end, just as in ’82, ’89 and ’90, the people who made them are not quite sure if they are great or not. As the advertisements for the new untraditional 5-series BMW say: “It’ll take a lot of getting used to. The good stuff always does”.

Dry whites

The white Pessac-Léognans are always a week or two ahead of the rest, and with this year’s additional 2 week advance, that put the earliest estates’ picking dates right in the final days of the August heat-wave just as the grapes were daily losing weight and acidity, yet not properly ripening. Happily, the light showers of August 16th-17th, and above all of 19th-20th reversed that trend as the grapes started to recover, and encouraged owners to wait a little more, in spite of the oenologists’ exhortations to pick right away. What followed produced heavily-built Chardonnay type wines of high alcohol and low acidity, very similar to the 82 whites when they first came in: The Sauvignons had lost a lot of their flavour, even when harvested at night (as many did – and, this being France, all the neighbours complained about the noise of the tractors), but generally the Sémillons regained theirs and have bold grapefruit

aromatics. As in previous hot vintages such as '82, '90 and '00, we expect these heavy-set wines to gain flavour as they go along, and, in spite of their low acidities, to be full-styled keepers just like the '90s unexpectedly turned out to be.

Reds

The erratic way that different soils, varieties, root-stocks and regions reacted to the heat often has no rhyme or reason. But there are several general if not failsafe patterns that seem to apply:

- 1) Most of the grapes harvested before mid-September, before they could recover from the August heat, achieved high sugar-levels and low acidities but were not always totally phenolically ripe. The excessive heat had accelerated the break-down of acidity and compounded the sugars without fully ripening the tannins. As a result, much of these earlier-harvested reds were strong in alcohol and now give an impression of underlying Rhône softness and power, but, because of the slight unripeness of the large pips and thick skins, either have bitter tannins if extracted normally, or have an absence of tannins because vinifiers were afraid of extracting. Most of these cases occurred in the lesser areas of the Bordeaux et Côtes, which happened to be also the main areas where there were vinification accidents.
- 2) Young vines, with their shallow root systems and less protective canopies, generally suffered more than older vines, and produced very little acceptable fruit. In some cases the vines actually died. There will be much less second wines (mostly made with young vine produce) than usual in 2003;
- 3) Light gravel and deep sandy soils could not provide nourishment to the vines in the heat, and as a result, got stressed, blocked, and their leaves withered or in extreme cases fell off, resulting in shrivelling of any remaining grapes. Every Médoc and Graves château has a small portion of such soil, sometimes the one that in a normally wet year produces the finest grapes, but which this year produced nothing much worth using, or at best, wines with rather dry tannins. The biggest wholesale areas of such soil to have this problem were the Pomerol plateau, especially the sandier half on the Libourne side, and the plateau behind and the plain below St Emilion.

From the above, we should deduce that later-harvested old-vine Cabernets on heavier soils did better than anything else, and this is generally the case. Successes of this type are dotted all around the region, often on all but the noblest terroirs, but it is especially the Cabernets of the Northern Médoc, from St Julien upwards, especially St Estèphe, that are clearly going to be sumptuous, and the later-ripening Petits Verdots, for the second year running, even more so. The Merlots from these areas are also extremely meaty and full-styled, and even tend to have more positive fruit character than the more neutral-tasting Cabernets. This lack of flavour in the Cabernets – in spite of their very strong structure – is a recurring theme in tastings to date, especially in the Southern Médoc, as is the very dry tone of tannin, not the slightly unripe dryness of the 75s, nor the drought-induced dryness of the 49s, more the furry all-pervasive dryness of the 86s.

On the Right Bank, the moisture-retaining clay-limestone soils of the St Emilion Côte and Southern part of the plateau, which also received more August rainfall than any other region of Bordeaux, have produced some very intense Merlots and Cabernet Francs, quite clearly also destined to be great wines. Many of the newly famous estates are here on these noble terroirs, and it is a pleasure to see these garage wines back in their naturally ripe element again. The traditionally less noble heavier soils of the satellite St Emilions and especially of Castillon have also done extremely well, as have many of the clay soils of well-managed

straight Bordeaux and Côtes properties, where we are noticing many successes in places that do not usually produce the good stuff.

Sauternes

Sauternes has had yet another excellent vintage. Totally the opposite of the finely-tuned elegance of the 02s, these are more in the style of the 90s, fat, full, with a rich botrytis effect and enormous sweetness.

However, the harvest got off to a difficult start during the showery period September 6th-10th when twice as much rain fell on Sauternes than on the rest of Bordeaux. The grapes were fully ripe, with 14-15° of sweetness but, because of the preceding heat and dryness, the botrytis had not yet attacked them, and now, with this rain, just as in '97, grey rot and "pourriture aigre" (that rather nasty orange coloured rot) started to take hold, just at the critical turning point after ripeness and before botrytis-induced concentration.

Most estates undertook a "trie de nettoyage" as soon as the dry weather returned on 11th, weeding out all the bad-rot-affected grapes as well as those that had shrivelled in August, then, with temperatures rising rapidly again to the mid-20s, the long-awaited botrytis suddenly arrived and all pickers were hurriedly summoned to gather all botrytised grapes on the Monday 15th. This was planned to be the first of several "tries", and it produced excellent, full musts mostly around 20°; an exceptional strength for a first pick. But then, with the temperatures rising into the 30s again from 17th, the botrytis totally invaded the vineyard in an even more accelerated onrush and everyone went crashing immediately into the 2nd "trie", which, instead of being the second of several, turned into a single final picking "à tir" (everything that was left), just like in 1990, all totally botrytised and with sugars that had progressed from 19° to sometimes over 28° in just a few days.

By Friday night 26th, most had finished the quickest harvest in history, quicker even than the '90, less than 10 days from start to finish for most estates ('97 had taken two months). Some lingered on into early October, but, after the end of September showers, the best period had clearly passed, except for one or two estates that managed to do an excellent but very small 3rd "trie" in mid-October..

This is going to be an exceptional vintage for Sauternes, with all the richness and fantastic botrytis character (currently masked by a wall of fat sweetness) that you could want. Nobody pretends that it will dethrone the '01 in terms of balance, absolute race, and potential longevity, but, in terms of sheer opulence, it will have a good shot at the '90.

So ended a frighteningly unusual year, producing wines that were often excessive, to the extent that nobody has a clear idea about them at the moment of going to press. Our conclusion is very simple: a vintage with too much sun somehow has to be better than a vintage with too much rain, at all levels, and, at the top level, our bet is that it will gradually be accepted in the peer group of similar great hot-climate vintages of the century.

We all love to beg comparisons to other similar vintages, so here are a few outrageous ideas off the cuff:

It is more concentrated than **1893** the earliest vintage in history (which I am told was too abundant to provide much concentration). It is as tough but less concentrated than **'28**. It seems to have similarities to **'29**, especially the effect of the Summer roasting but is not so soft and sweet. It doesn't seem to have the muscles of **'45**. It has many uncanny resemblances

to '47 (some great wines and a lot of average wines; grapes dried-out from the heat; ultra-low acidities and unfinished fermentations) but '47 was a much more arid, parched Summer than '03 as was the '49 (when the whole forest from Bordeaux to Spain burned down – no forest fires this year in Bordeaux – sorry, Côte d'Azur and Corsica). It doesn't seem to have the sweet concentration of the freak year '61. It would have been very similar to '76 if it hadn't rained in September that year. The high alcohol and low acidity are similar to '82, but it doesn't have the fat middle weight. It has a lot to do with the blander, alcoholic style of '89. It does not have the up-front easy-going roasted nature of '90. Yet it bears some resemblance to the dried-grape nature of '95 (before it rained). It is totally unlike the more rigid-styled '98 except possibly at some St Emilion estates, and seems more forceful if more irregular than the '00, which was hurried into its big style by only two rather than four hot Summer months.

How about 2003 as a mixture of 25% '29, 25% '47/'49, and 50% '89? But of course the most obvious similarity is to none of the above but rather to the 1540 vintage, which, at the end of the last period of global warming, was the last time you could cross the Garonne (above Langon) without getting your feet wet.

To sort out the sheep from the goats, rendez-vous March 30th -April 1st for the UGC tastings and the two weekends either side March 27th -28th and April 3rd -4th for Vintex's tastings.

Diary of the harvest

Date	Temp °C	Weather	Wind	Rainfall mm	Harvesting Dates				
					Whites	Merlot	Cab Franc	Cab Sauv	Sauternes
August									
01 F	15-30°	S	W						
02 S	17-34°	S	W						
03 Su	19-38°	S	NW						
04 M	21-41°	S	SE						
05 T	24-39°	S	SW						
06 W	22-36°	S	W						
07 Th	21-38°	S	W						
08 F	23-37°	S	NE						
09 S	25-39°	S	W						
10 Su	22-36°	S	SW						
11 M	23-35°	S	W		<u>Pessac-Léo</u>				
12 T	21-38°	S	NW						x
13 W	22-36°	S/C	W						X
14 Th	24-28°	C/S	W						X
15 F	22-28°	S/C	W						X
16 S	21-24°	R/S	N)						X
17 Su	20-26°	R/S	W)	01-08mm					X
18 M	19-29°	S	NW						X
19 T	18-32°	S/R	NW)						X
20 W	19-22°	R/S	SW)	11-37mm					X
21 Th	16-28°	S	W						X
22 F	17-30°	S	N						X
23 S	19-28°	S	SW		<u>Bx/EDM/Graves</u>				
24 Su	20-29°	R/S	W)	04-05mm	X				<u>Early pick</u>
25 M	19-31°	S	W		X				x

26 T	20-23°	S	NW	X	x		
27 W	27-33°	S	S	X	x		
28 Th	21-26°	S	SW	X	x		
29 F	18-25°	C/R	SW	X	x		x
30 S	17-20°	R/S	SW	) 00-17mm	X	x	x
31 Su	12-23°	C/S	NE	X	x		x
September							
01 M	13-23°	C/S	N	X	<u>Right bank</u>		
02 T	15-24°	S	NE	X	<u>+ Pess-Léo</u>		
03 W	12-23°	S	NE	X	X		
04 Th	13-22°	S	SE	X	X		
05 F	15-26°	S/C/R	S	X	X		
06 S	14-22°	R/S	W		X		
07 Su	14-20°	S	S		X		
08 M	16-18°	R/C/R	N	)	X		
09 T	14-22°	R/C/S	NW	)18-36mm	X		
10 W	13-20°	C/S	W		X		x
11 Th	16-24°	C	NW		X		x
12 F	18-26°	S	NE		X		x
13 S	18-27°	S	NE		X		x
14 Su	15-25°	S	NE		<u>Médoc</u>		
15 M	12-28°	S	SE		X	x	X
16 T	13-29°	S	SE		X	x	X
17 W	11-30°	S	W		X	x	X
18 Th	15-29°	S	SE		X	x	X
19 F	17-30°	S	SW		X	x	X
20 S	18-32°	S	S		X	x	X
21 Su	18-32°	S/R	S	) 04-07mm		x	X
22 M	14-23°	R/C	W	)	X	X	XX
23 T	14-20°	C/S	W		X	X	XX
24 W	10-21°	S	NE		x	X	XX
25 Th	07-24°	S	NE		x	X	XX
26 F	12-23°	S	NW		x	X	XX
27 S	13-23°	R/C	NW	) 01-02mm	x	x	x
28 Su	16-20°	R/C	NW	)	x	x	x
29 M	09-22°	S	E		x	x	x
30 T	13-22°	S/R	SE	) 01-02mm		x	x
October							
01 W	17-26°	S/R	SW			x	x
02 Th	15-25°	S/R	SW			x	x
03 F	14-21°	S/C	SW			x	x

S = Sunny
C = Cloudy
R = Rainy

Temperatures are for the town of Bordeaux

Rainfall is represented as the spread of rainfall over the Bordeaux vineyard area

Bill Blatch, November 16th- December 23rd 2003