2005 - a vintage to remember?

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Whenever I conduct a tasting or give a talk about wine, I try to give the audience something useful but easy to remember to take away with them. This is usually my shortcut to choosing good vintages from a wine list. Always remember, I say, confessing that even I as a wine professional can't carry a vintage chart for every single wine region in my head, that the last few vintages divisible by five were pretty good for most wines: 2000, 1995, 1990 and 1985. (The rule breaks down at 1980 but people who choose to drink 25 year-old wine in a restaurant need no help from me.)

I am delighted therefore by the flood of reports suggesting that 2005 will be an exceptionally good vintage. Anyone with a child born in the year that ends tonight should have no trouble at all finding a suitable wine to lay down for them.

The only problem in some cases is likely to be affording them. The hype machine is currently in overdrive in **Bordeaux**, the region with the most volatile pricing for its finest wines (which, alas for us consumers, seem to be sold in a completely different commercial sphere from what may be the terminally depressed market for its more ordinary wines). Those of us who go to Bordeaux to taste the new vintage en primeur every April are looking forward to the liquids but dreading the prices likely to be asked for them.

The most famous and most active international winemaking consultant Michel Rolland of Pomerol is reported as saying that he has never in his 35 years of making wine in Bordeaux seen such a combination of perfectly ripe and perfectly healthy grapes. The Bordeaux merchants are of course thrilled by what they gleefully see as compensation for sluggish demand for the large crop in 2004, which may yet turn out to be one of Bordeaux's rare bargain vintages.

Growers in and around St Emilion and Pomerol on the right bank of Bordeaux deserve a seriously good vintage and 2005 sounds like their best since 2000 – although I must emphasize that I have not personally tasted a drop yet. Left bank producers are also thrilled by 2003 and conditions were very auspicious for 2005 Sauternes too apparently. Bordeaux merchant Bill Blatch of Vintex has described 2005 as 'what 1995 would have been if it hadn't rained' at the last minute' – although in 2006 the vineyards will need generous rainfall to replenish the water table.

Burgundy's growers are also reporting exceptional quality from the grapes picked last September, although unlike the Bordelais they have a track record of steady pricing, as we will all hopefully remind them when we taste their 2004s next month. The only downside associated with all of Nature's munificence in 2005 is that 2004s everywhere may be unfairly overlooked.

Much has already been made of the 2004 vintage in the southern **Rhône** (on which I will be reporting next month, before writing about those 2004 burgundies in early February) and many growers there profess themselves even more excited by their 2005s.

France's other great wine valley, the **Loire**, seems to have experienced a great vintage at last across all wine types, not just Chenin Blanc but the region's beautifully digestible reds and Sauvignons too, perhaps bringing us a seriously exciting Sancerre and Pouilly Fumé vintage for the first time in three years. There is also some enthusiasm in **Alsace** where dry, warm weather in October meant that some fine late harvest wine was made.

Water was the main theme everywhere this year. France in general had too little rain throughout the year but was saved by early September showers. **Spain** suffered and **Portugal** suffered their worst drought since record s began, which meant that the crop was much reduced and many wines made in the south and east may be unbalanced. Some producers in Rioja and Ribera del Duero, Spain's most significant wine regions, report stunning quality. Key regions in **Italy** however had rain at the wrong time, during or just before harvest. Piedmont in the north suffered rain just before the growers' precious Nebbiolo was due to be picked so 2005 is unlikely to be a stellar vintage for Barolo, and rain also affected the Tuscan harvest.

A wet August and September caused considerable rot in **German** vineyards and severe selection was needed (the final crop is reported to be 40 per cent below average), but that same Indian summer as saved Alsace did the trick for many German wines too apparently. Egon Müller in the Saar reports record concentration in his wines, with nobly rotten treasure in quantity and no fewer than four different Trockenbeerauslesen but average yields of just 15 hl/ha, one third

the level now common on this flagship estate.

In **California** a cool September had growers biting their nails about whether their all-important but late Cabernet Sauvignon would ever notch up the required ripeness levels and the harvest was not finally completed until mid November, but what is in barrel by now is reported to be notable in both quality and quantity - almost embarrassingly so. The 2005 crop is the second biggest ever, and much of the 2004 produced is still looking for a home so California bargains, once an oxymoron, should be increasingly common. West Coast growers were surprised that for once an exceptionally wet spring was followed by such a successful fruit set that the crop is so heavy overall – although there is a shortage of Pinot Noir, most unfortunate in the post Sideways era, from some of the cooler parts of Sonoma. Central Coast (the region portrayed in Sideways) is bullish about 2005 however.

As David Graves of Saintsbury in Carneros reports, “the other big question was whether those who wait for hyper-ripeness would be permitted by Mother Nature to get to the levels of said hyper-ripeness they have come to expect. After many sleepless weeks and much staring at weather maps on websites and reading prognostications by those who sell weather forecasts to nervous growers, I think patience was rewarded for almost everyone. A great sigh was heard issuing from Oakville north in late October, as it became clear that there would be no repeat of the shunned 1998 or 2000 vintages”.

The **Australians** are also very happy with the health and quality of 2005 grape crop but embarrassed by its record size – substantially up on 2004 despite a significant proportion of grapes’ being left on the vine or on the ground. Such is the grape glut in Australia that one market analyst claimed recently that Australia would be producing a surplus of wine until well into the next decade. Let us hope that we wine drinkers can benefit.