2002 bordeaux - the bargain vintage

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For detailed tasting notes and scores on more than 150 2002 bordeaux retasted in bottle, see purple pages.

One of the questions I am most frequently asked about wine is whether you get what you pay for. No, no and again no, is my answer.

Many of the world's most expensive wines are expensive because they are rare rather than great, and many others' prices reflect ambition on the part of their makers rather than intrinsic wine quality.

To see how strongly wine prices are influenced by factors entirely unrelated to wine quality one has only to look at the 2002 vintage in Bordeaux, the region's most recently available in bottle for scrutiny as finished wines. This was the vintage launched on the market in the spring of 2003 when the Asian market was still depressed by SARS (remember that?) and Americans, already hindered by the bifurcation of the euro and dollar, were in high dudgeon that the French refused to join their Iraq adventure (you probably do remember that). The foremost American wine critic Robert Parker did not even make his usual spring trip to Bordeaux to taste the 2002 vintage en primeur, so some US merchants gave the entire vintage a miss. Many merchants all along Bordeaux's exceptionally long distribution chain still had embarrassing stocks of 2001, and the cellars of really keen bordeaux buyers were full of the much-touted 2000 vintage.

The result was that when released, the 2002 vintage was the most keenly priced for many a year, for reasons that had nothing to do with the liquid itself. Sandwiched between the unusually consistent 2000 vintage, given added glamour by those three noughts, and the 2003, accorded (sometimes misplaced) glory because of the summer's exceptional heatwave, the 2001 and 2002 vintages provide an opportunity for anyone thinking of starting a bordeaux cellar.

Both vintages produced some extremely good, generally sensibly priced, wines that will repay keeping. In very broad brushstrokes, 2001 is the better vintage on the right bank (Pomerol, St Emilion and so on) while most of 2002's best wines come from the left bank (Médoc and Graves), particularly the finest Pauillacs.

In fact 2002 is one of very few years when it has not seemed ridiculously extravagant to buy a case of first growth bordeaux – partly because the wines are so good and partly because they are relatively, and I stress this word, inexpensive. Wines such as Chx Latour, Margaux and Mouton-Rothschild were all extremely exciting in 2002 and should reward anyone prepared to invest around £1,000 in a dozen bottles that should represent the pinnacle of what red bordeaux can achieve through the teens and twenties of this century. (The equivalents made in 2000 and 2003 would cost closer to £3,000 a case.)

But for the majority of wine drinkers for whom such a sum seems either the height of folly or criminal, there are many other wines from these two (currently) overlooked vintages which can provide classic, refreshing and subtle drinking for a fraction of this if you know where to look. Neither vintage is particularly homogenous so I have been glad of the many opportunities there have been to taste the wines as the beleaguered Bordelais have hawked them around northern Europe in recent months.

Detailed reports of the growing seasons of both 2001 and 2002 have appeared on these pages before, as well as an indication of how the wines tasted from barrel (2002s giving us en primeur tasters a particularly tentative snapshot for this was a very late vintage).

Having tasted a wide range of the 2002s over at least three tastings in bottle at last, I can say that on the left bank at least this is a very respectable vintage. The underripeness that threatened to dominate the vintage before September's spell of fine weather has diminished in many wines, with the red Pessac-Léognans and Graves in particular having put on much-needed flesh since I tasted them en primeur in April 2003. The raspingly dry tannins that dominated wines such as Domaine de Chevalier and Ch Malartic Lagravière when they were embryonic liquids still in cask have been reduced to a savoury counterpoint to some thoroughly decent, though far from voluptuous, fruit over the last 18 months.

Perhaps the most dramatic improvement in bottle among 2002s has been Ch Gruaud Larose which has joined other successful St Juliens such as the Léovilles to be a thoroughly admirable example of appetising red bordeaux, expressing Cabernet Sauvignon at its most sappy. That said, the most notable successes among 2002s are in Cabernet's heartland, Pauillac, where the first growths and the Pichons, Chx Clerc Milon and Lynch Bages are all classic cellar candidates.

Wines produced in the communes of Margaux and even St Estèphe are much more variable, and on the left bank the quality gap between the top châteaux and those in more marginal appellations such as Haut-Médoc, Listrac and Moulis where grapes clearly struggled to ripen, seems to have widened.

A lack of full ripeness also dogs many a wine on the right bank. There is still an uncomfortably green streak and a lack of fruity ballast in too many St Emilions and Pomerols to allow any blanket recommendation of these appellations in 2002 – although many St-Emilions have developed a bit more flesh in bottle. I have upgraded my points out of 20 on many St-Emilions but still not to dizzy heights. Those that seemed to have improved most hearteningly on the basis of recent tastings include Clos Fourtet and Chx Figeac and Larcis Ducasse although none is among my absolute favourites of the vintage.

The shortcomings of the Merlot grape in 2002 are even more evident in Pomerol where 2001 is definitely the most successful vintage out of 2001, 2002 and 2003 although I found Ch La Croix de Gay 2002 much more charming in bottle than from cask, and the 2001 was even better.

The 2002 vintage on the other hand was good for two categories of Bordeaux wine that receive even less attention than the famous, if increasingly unfashionable, reds: dry and sweet whites. The vintage will probably always be overshadowed by 2001 in Sauternes and Barsac but the best wines such as Chx Climens, de Fargues and Suduiraut really are very good indeed. At Ch Climens for example there is more residual sugar in the 2002 even than in the 1990 to counterbalance the exceptionally high acidity, and yet the nose is extremely complex already.

No-one should buy 2002 reds if they are seeking an immediate and dramatic hit of super-ripe fruit (some 2003s can deliver that). But if they are looking for classic, well balanced bordeaux to drink in five to 15 or more years' time, they should buy the best wines they can afford from the 2002 and 2001 vintages.