

Bordeaux 1996 - how do they look?

27 Sep 2006 by FT

See also [JancisRobinson.com](#) of 70+ top left bank bordeaux 1996.

Longstanding readers of the *Weekend FT* may remember that my predecessor Edmund Penning-Rossell instituted an annual report on how all the bordeaux first growths were tasting 10 years on from the year they were born.

This was based on a *Wineyard* dinner (the Penning-Rossell in the Cotswolds) attended by us two wine writers, Michael Broadbent of Christie's and our spouses. The wines, acquired courtesy of Edmund via a mysterious system known as 'jirs d'amis', were not served blind and, at Edmund's insistence, we finished every bottle even when the number of first growths deemed of interest had risen to eight.

Times change. Modern wine writers would surely be laughed off first growth premises if they tried asking for a 'jirs d'amis' row that such wines are benchmark, many months prior to bottling, shipping and paying taxes, at thousands of pounds a dozen - and still they sell out immediately. The modern way of evaluating wines, alas, is to look at dozens of examples at a time, blind, without food. So one bottle of each wine can be shared by 15 tasters with a generous pour, up to 24 with a more parsimonious one.

This is how I found myself one long morning earlier this month evaluating the 1996 red Bordeaux vintage 10 years on, attacking 70 different wines which had been assembled at the London premises of the wine traders Fier Vitienes. The 14 other tasters included fellow wine writers Steven Spitzer of Decanter and Neal Martin of [www.jancisrobinson.com](#).

all over the UK and one from Germany.

In the UK, James Suckling of *Wine Spectator* in the US, representatives of Bordeaux negociants Bordeaux M&Mannes and Mission Decooves who, with Fier and Four Thals Wine, had kindly provided the wines, and a crew of interested wine merchants from

It was decided to focus on the left bank, Médoc and Graves, as the 1996 vintage was so much more successful there than in St-Emilion and Pomerol.

The 1996 is an auspicious vintage to be examining now. It was exceptional when released after an unusual growing season and has the reputation of being pretty austere and backward. Not even the greatest claret lover, perhaps especially not the greatest claret lover, has been in a hurry to open these wines. Would they prove anything like ready to drink? Or would they follow the pattern of their predecessors in the previous decade and be as unapproachable as many 1996s still are?

We started with a flight of second wines which proved a bit of a waste of time quite honestly. With the exception of two of the Pichot, Les Fous de Labour and Réserve de la Comtesse (second wines of Château de Labour and Pichot Labarde respectively) they seemed marked by the lack of concentration that plagued many wines in this plentiful, non-effected vintage. Light aromas and fine tannins seemed to characterise the rest of this collection.

Underpinned was apparent in several wines in the next flight, Margaux and the southern Médoc, although there was one lovely wine, the 8th, that was seductively perfumed in the way classic Margaux is meant to be, fully evolved but with lots of quality-ripe enough fruit in evidence and ripe tannins well in retreat. I called this "a very complete, attractive wine, although it is far from overripe. For classicism." (I should point out that the first growths did not start in these communal flights; they were corralled in their own special flight at the very end, so this mystery wine was not up against Château Margaux.)

At the end of each flight we all called out our marks and there was remarkable unanimity that wine number five was the best of this flight (Mind you, Ch. Giscours, a relic from the previous regime that the current owners were reluctant to show, was marked by excessive volatility and adorned second growth Ch. Rauzan Ségla was so badly affected by a mouldy cork as to be untable-able. This was just one of at least four corked bottles we encountered, two of them containing first growths worth £400 a bottle. Another wine was oxidised. Not a good showing for the cork industry. (A bottle of Rauzan Ségla tasted blind subsequently was impressive and would almost certainly have been top wine of the flight.)

Wine number five, much to our surprise, turned out to be just about the most lively imaginable, Ch. Farnère, a tiny third growth properly resurrected from desuetude only in the 1980s, now run by Claire Villers-Luton along with Ch. La Gurgue and Haut-Bages Libéral, often ignored by commentators and hence available at a very good price. Francis Chavoin of Mission Decooves was particularly pleased by its showing as this had recently been in potential and virtually cornered the market in it.

While we attacked the next flight, some particularly toothsome Graves, Stephen Bouvet of Fier was notable by his absence. This was not too surprising since he had such a bad head cold he told us could not smell a thing. I did wonder whether he was after some more tangible reward for having spent the last 12 months organising this tasting and yes indeed, this wine-like buger came back in time for the Graves score gathering to report that he had been on the phone to Bordeaux rounding up every bottle of Farnère 1996 he could get his acquisitive hands on.

I gave no Graves, other than the corked Ch. Farnère, a score lower than 16 out of 20 and was generally very impressed (as I had been to the 1986s a year earlier). They seemed to have an attractively pliant, fruity red palate and real energetic freshness rather than rearses. Most, like the Margaux, are now ready to drink.

The St-Estephe, tasted 2004 with some outgoing Medoc, was, as one might expect, more austere. Many wines were still quite blue, as though they were just coming of their youth. Very little charm was in evidence though there was no shortage of tight-knit discipline. Only Ch. Cos d'Estournel, Calon Segur and possibly Chmes de Pez struck me as worth waiting for.

The St-Julien however I found even more dubious. One or two lovely wines seemed to be dying out and the supposed star, Ch. Lascaille Les Caves, currently selling for more than £1,000 a dozen, was far from outstanding. Les Caves scores were all over the place so, unknown to us, it was decided to serve a second, backup bottle alongside the first growth - where it fared no better. (I tasted it about a few days later and preferred Lagrange!) Some of these St-Julien were undoubtedly impressive, but I would hang on to them for several more years before attacking them in earnest.

We were expecting the Pauillac to please and were not disappointed - some were slightly exaggerated stylistically but most of them are ready to start drinking. The top first growth Pauillac that did best of all was Ch. Pichon Longueville (Baron) which was the favourite of eight out of 14 tasters, including me, beating Pichon Lalande and Lynch Bages (which I scored unusually meanly) into equal but definitive second place. I scored it more than Ch. Margaux and the same as its first growth neighbour Ch. Latour and Ch. Haut-Brion which almost always suffers when served alongside the first growths of the Medoc. But perhaps I was running out of grapes.

My conclusion? There are some excellent wines here at the very top of the tree, and a few excellent bargains, presumably where yields were held in check. But there are also many markedly light wines that will appeal only to lovers of the most classical Bordeaux. Hang on to the first growths and the best St-Julien and St-Estephe. Enjoy the best Graves and Pauillac from now.

See my detailed tasting notes, scores and suggested drinking dates in [this table](#).

Top left back 1996s

My favourites

Moulin Rotonde

Latour

Latour

Haut-Brion

Pichon Baron

Dom de Charville

Margaux

Lascaille Puyfere

Group favourites

Latour

How Do

Wines

Look

When

They

Are

Old

This article also appears in the *Financial Times*.