Ch Carignan, Premi□res C□tes de Bordeaux

23 Oct 2006 by JR

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There is, as we all know, a huge problem with Bordeaux. The quality of the most basic stuff is so lacklustre that the authorities recently accepted that it should be sold as Vin de Pays de l'Atlantique rather than carrying the Bordeaux appellation – a sensible move. But that still leaves thousands of châteaux below classed growth level in terms of both classificaiion and price whose quality varies between dire and outstanding. I think any thoughtful wine lover suspects there are many bargains to be found in red bordeaux but how on earth are we to find the over-performers in this vast category?

One good clue is personnel. We might suspect that **Ch Marjosse** is a better wine than its location (the far north of the Entre Deux Mers) and appellation (Bordeaux) suggest because it is home to Pierre Lurton of Ch Cheval Blanc and Ch d'Yquem. The Premières Côtes de Bordeaux on the other hand is an appellation with obvious potential, a hilly strip along the right bank of the Garonne just across the river from the Graves. **Ch Lezongars** is an overperformer here, a property revitalised by a British family, as is **Ch Parenchère**. But the clue to the likely performance of **Ch Carignan** comes from the surname of the winemaker, Mitjavile, familiar from Ch Tertre Roteboeuf of St-Emilion. François' son Louis who has already established his own track record both in Bordeaux and the Languedoc.

I have recently tasted three different Carignan wines from each of 2001, 2002 and 2003 and have been thoroughly impressed. **Ch Carignan Prima 2001** is the top offering of that year yet is still only £14.66 from its UK importers Corney & Barrow (these independents have such crazy prices!). It's made from 65 per cent 55 year-old Merlot with 25 per cent Cabernet Sauvignon and 10 per cent Cabernet Franc and shows seriously impressive intensity and complexity. Already quite developed, it is truly sumptuous now, without any excesses of alcohol or extraction. The only downside is the weight of the bottle – naughty. **Ch Carignan Prima 2002** (£14.57 from C&B) is just slightly less opulent but very much in the same mould: smooth, rich, satisfying and drinkable any time over the next three or four years. The second wine **L'Orangerie de Ch Carignan 2003** is a steal at £7.75 from Adnams and £7.93 from Corneys, the offcuts from the exotic 2003 vintage. (**Orangerie 2004** is £6.99 from James Nicholson of Northern Ireland on special offer til Christmas.) This is absolutely ready to gulp now with rich, smoky overtones and no shortage of richness on the palate – truly a well-balanced representative of this extraordinary vintage and, like many 2003s, already delivering lots of pleasure. **Ch Carignan 2003** *tout court* (see below) is the regular bottling which I have not tasted recently.

Nov 10: James Nicholson, that excellent merchant based in Northern Ireland but who sells widely in both Ireland and throughout mainland Britain, is currently offering **L'Orangerie de Ch Carignan 2004** at just £6.99. It's a bit more austere than the 2003, as you would expect, but a very good buy at the price. I note that the back label, unusually, gives the varietal breakdown (60% Merlot, 20% of each of the Cabernets) and also proclaims, 'No Residual Sugar, No Added Acid'. Fighting talk.

Dec 22: Private Cellar is offering Ch Carignan 2003 at £9.98 until the end of this month. It's a little rusty nail but perfectly pleasant and now, I think, is the moment to drink it.

Ch Carignan, bought by Philippe Pieraerts in 1981, is in the process of switching to DIAM technical corks, specially treated to avoid TCA. See www.chateau-carignan.com for details of distribution which seems pretty effective to me. Winesearcher lists retailers in the US, UK, Germany, Holland and Canada.

Who says I don't like Carignan?

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