2005 bordeaux - how do they look in bottle?

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See tasting notes on 123 2005s in bottle, and many more on 2005 St-Emilions.

The 2005 vintage marked a turning point in the history of bordeaux wine. Always the most obvious wine to invest in, for anyone other than the super-rich (who are popularly presumed to have no palate) top flight red bordeaux definitively moved out of the drinking category and into the trading arena when the 2005s were offered. Opening prices to consumers were around £4,500 a dozen for the first growths, which, despite the weakened state of the dollar, sold like hot cakes and are now valued at around £7,000 a case of a dozen bottles.

Opening prices for 2004 first growths had been closer to £1,000 a case, so when these record opening prices were announced, there was much huffing and puffing from American wine collectors that they would give this vintage a miss to teach the greedy Bordelais a lesson. However, any shortfall in US demand seems to have been more than made up for by enthusiasm for collectible red bordeaux in 'new markets' (Asians mainly and some Russians) as well as the wine investment funds which have emerged, notably in the UK, to the discomfort of many a wine drinker.

The most prestigious châteaux – Ausone, Cheval Blanc, Haut-Brion, Lafite, Latour, Margaux, Mouton Rothschild and Pétrus – represent a remarkably small group who between them claim to produce on average only about 100,000 cases a year. The total volume produced has probably fallen over the past few years since perceived performance and scores are so vital now to how well a wine sells. Winemakers and proprietors know that they will only achieve the latest daring price if the wine delivers top quality, which generally means omitting some vats which in the old days would have gone into the grand vin but is now put into a second or even third wine.

But apart from this crème de le crème, plus a handful of 'super seconds' on the left bank of the Gironde such as Châteaux Cos d'Estournel, Ducru Beaucaillou, Léoville Las Cases and La Mission Haut-Brion and some of their counterparts on the right bank such as L'Evangile, Le Pin, Valandraud and Vieux Château Certan, most of the wines made in this quite exceptional vintage are still available for well under £1,000 a case. (In the fine art market this would buy you little more than a catalogue.)

Indeed the great advantage of this vintage is its consistency throughout the ranks. It is not just the first growths that made great wines in 2005. My tastings of this vintage en primeur back in April 2006 suggested that there would be some quite delicious wines at third, fourth and fifth growth level and below which would be selling for just a few hundred pounds a case. So I was particularly keen to re-taste the wines now that they have had some time to settle in to bottle. (Mind you, some of the best wine bargains in the world are 2005s from much less glamorous châteaux with the simple Bordeaux appellation.)

The Union des Grands Crus de Bordeaux tour the world showing off the latest vintage to be bottled in the autumn of the second year after the harvest. This year they are not just visiting Paris, New York, Toronto, Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles, London, Brussels, Geneva and Milan as usual, but also, significantly, Beijing, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Osaka, Tokyo and Seoul. The French have for years been past masters at getting to new markets first. Japanese gastronomy for example is still in some senses a French outpost.

For obvious reasons I usually attend the annual tasting in London but this year was on the wrong side of the Atlantic to coincide with this particular caravanserai (which must be hard work – I would not like to have to stand, pour and be polite for hours on end). I therefore travelled to Milan last week to catch up with the 2005 vintage in its bottled glory. (Yes,I have started to offset my carbon emissions.)

I was delighted with what I tasted. Admittedly my tally of tasting notes from Milan, supplemented by those that my assistant Julia Harding MW managed to make in the crowds that thronged the London tasting, total a mere 123 as opposed to the 600-plus 2005s we managed to taste out of barrel in Bordeaux in April 2006, but they are enough to get a good idea of how the vintage is progressing. The dry whites are just coming into their own and some of the sweet whites are outstanding.

The one word that kept cropping up in my tasting notes was 'succulent'. These wines, made from beautifully ripe grapes, have the most lovely juicy fruit yet also great freshness - a vital factor if a wine is to be appetising - but no shortage of tannins to keep them going for a long life. The great distinguishing mark of the 2005s is that in the best, not all, wines the tannins are wonderfully ripe so that instead of these young wines tasting tough and astringent, they envelope the palate in velvety fruit until only on the finish does the taster notice really rather a lot of tannin buried under there.

The tasting showed the widening division between those wines made in super-modern style – concentrated, relatively alcoholic, often toasty oak and fairly low acidity – and those made in a more classical style, unabashed by their relative dryness (as opposed to sweetness – nothing to do with the drying sensation on the palate that some of the more forced modernistic wines can leave) and the fact that they need food to show their best.

The modern wines, largely but not exclusively from St-Emilion, are typically pretty flashy and easy to appreciate even as young as six months, straight from the barrels in which their malolactic fermentations took place in order to imbue them with early appeal. A typical classical wine on the other hand may look a bit austere en primeur and many need years before they really show their best. Ch Canon 2005 St-Emilion, for example, shows much better now than it did to me at six months old. In 2005 you might choose Châteaux Angélus and Figeac as examples of 2005s at respective ends of the modern-classical spectrum.

This is a stylistic bifurcation evident in just about every sophisticated red wine region in the world today but seems particularly marked in Bordeaux. Although my doddery old heart belongs to the classical style which I simply find more appetising and useful in my own life where I tend to want grand red wines during rather than before a meal, I tried to bend over backwards to give modern wines the benefit of the doubt while tasting them, signalling which they were clearly in my tasting notes.

Several times in Milan, notably when tasting the Pessac-Léognans reds made in the Graves region south of Bordeaux, I found myself writing, "It's difficult to imagine another vintage of Château X that could possibly taste better than this." I do hope I am proved wrong.

Tasting notes, scores and suggested drinking windows on purple pages of www.jancisrobinson.com

Some best buys among smarter 2005 red bordeaux

Prices (from winesearcher.com at the time of writing) are given per bottle in France and the US where wine lovers are lucky enough to be able to buy by the single bottle; UK prices per dozen in bond

Rahoul so (relatively) obscure that no stockist could be found via winesearcher.com but see * below

de France currently stocked by one Bordeaux negociant at £44 a case according to www.Liv-Ex.com

Bouscaut 13.80 euros Auchandirect, $26.99 Zachys

Belgrave from $26.99 Zachys, £130 Bordeaux Index

Grand Puy Ducasse from $29.99 K&L and £175 (magnums) Bordeaux Index

Cos Labory $33.95 Sokolin, £190 Dunell's Premier Wines

Durfort Vivens $33.95 Morrell, £205 Dunell's Premier Wines

Phélan Ségur $35 MacArthur Beverages, £220,Uncorked

Clerc Milon $44.99 The Wine Room, £275 Richard Kihl

*Andrew Nicoll of Champagnes & Chateaux wrote to me to point out that they represent Rahoul in the UK and, although they have not yet shopped the 2005, they sell to a wide range of independent merchants.

See full tasting notes on all 123 wines.