

Bordeaux 2007 - how weird is it?

11 Apr 2008 by FT

The 2007 vintage is quite extraordinary - no exception in the 2003 heave-ho year but in an entirely different way. In fact it is almost its polar opposite.

The whites, both dry and, especially, sweet, are delicious, but what of the reds that comprise the vast majority of last year's Bordeaux grape harvest? Unusually, they are characterised by what they lack: alcohol, acid, ripe tannin, flavour. Indeed the only one of whom's vital statistics that the 2007s do not seem particularly short of is colour, even if the relatively high pH levels mean that the colours are not the brightest.

Because 2007 is so unusual, it seems almost presumptuous to be definitive about how these soft, light wines are likely to develop but this will surely be a year to drink early. Referring to their relatively low alcohol levels, twenty more than 12%, some have blamed them to the red Bordeaux of old. But traditional red Bordeaux was generally high in acid, unlike these wines.

The most positive thing to be said with certainty about the 2007 red Bordeaux is how bravely some producers have dealt with the most trying vintage many of them have ever known. Frédéric Engerer, profiled in last week's *How to Spend it* magazine as running the most consistently successful fine growth Châteaux Lésaux, acknowledged it as the most difficult of his era. And every one of the hundreds of producers I met in Bordeaux the week before last during previous week acknowledged the year's "challenge". Sylvie Guillaudoux of Château Lafleur in Pomerol put the most positive spin on 2007: it was "to have something to write home like they had to do in the vineyard in 'the disaster year' of 2005 when everything went right. The 2007 harvest she described as "one unlike another". Certainly only the fit survived, in terms of producers, vine and grapes.

As Paul Pomeroy of fine growth Châteaux Magesau pointed out, "My years ago we simply wouldn't have had a crop, and even twenty years ago it would have been much, much more difficult". Although April had been gloriously warm and dry, May was cool and wet with the first outbreak of the downy mildew that was to plague the vintage. June was very average, July rather cool and August absolutely miserable: much drier and cooler than average. The secret aspect was the pattern of rainfall. Rather than the usual warm, sunny weather punctuated by a few useful downpours to revive the ripening process in the summer of 2007 the rain was little and often, rarely allowing the vines a chance to dry out and keeping the canopy unusually damp most of the time.

This created the perfect conditions for mildew, which can cause leaves to drop off, thereby halting a ripening process already severely compromised by the cool summer. From the annals of today's agricultural business, only the systemic sprays available from the early 1950s were effective in the damp 2007 summer - and to those espousing organic viticulture, 2007 seemed like a bad joke. Alfred Tessaron, who has pioneered quite-biodynamic practices in the Médoc at Château Pomerol Cuvée, made 20% less wine than in 2006.

The other problem was that the high water table acted almost like constant irrigation, so in less well drained soils the vines took up unusually high levels of potassium, which resulted in the loss of flesh, ending tannic acid and almost dangerously high pH levels in the wines. Many of the 2007s tasted too low in acid to be refreshing.

The top and most carefully costumed vineyards benefited from all picking attention designed to maximise ripening and eliminate unevenness within the same parcel and sometimes even within the same bunch. Like the Guillaudoux, Jean-Guilhem Pons of Château Cox d'Establens in St-Estèphe removed his vines as early as June. By removing leaves to expose the most promising bunches to maximum sunshine as early, making sure that if the summer had been hotter, he has been rewarded by what he calls with some satisfaction "our most modern wine so far". Most producers of any note thanked their crop rather than usual after the generous, if uneven, July set.

At the end of August 2007, even on those properties which could afford rigorous vigilance in the vineyard and constant applications of the right products (Christian Moueix of Château Pétrus reports 15 treatments rather than five in a good year), the harvest looked disastrous, but the first two weeks of September saved the day. Fine, dry weather allowed the vines to dry out, the threat of complete capitulation to rot to recede, temporarily anyway, and sugar levels to climb.

The big question now was when to pick - ideally over an unusually extended period in this very heterogeneous vintage marked by the odd inconvenient shower at the end of September and beginning of October. On the left bank of the Gironde, the growers of the Médoc and Graves had little choice. The late-ripening Cabernet Sauvignon that dominates their vineyards was nowhere near ripe until the end of September (in fact Napa Valley growers of Cabernet with their resistance to prolonged 'hang time' would have laughed at the analysis of the Cabernet grapes picked in Bordeaux in 2007). But in Pomerol and especially St-Émilion the more precocious, 80-90-year-old Merlot demanded attention. What's better to pick while the acidity gave a reasonable amount of freshness, as Christian Moueix did from 15 Sep, countermanding his long-serving enologist Jean-Charles Bernaud, who urged him to wait until the phenolics (tannin, flavour precursors and so on) were fully ripe, or could growers afford to hang on in the hope of catching a bit more flesh, flavour and structure into the winter?

In St-Émilion it seems to me that for once Gérard Pezant's policy of picking Châteaux Pavie later than most paid off. Pavie was picked 8-13 Oct and stood out in a blind tasting of the top St-Émilion for its combination of interest and succulence. As usual in St-Émilion with its hundreds of small properties, too many hopes seemed to have been invested in the magical powers of oak. Painfully drying tannins plagued the flesh of the less successful St-Émilion, which combined 2007's cardinal sin of lacking flesh. Pomerol, ripening earlier, were in general much more successful.

The best wines from both right and left banks are distinguished by having a good core of juicy flesh. This was not a vintage to rely on structure or those underripe tannins for much support (although at Châteaux Lésaux, for example, a good 16% of press wine, three times the usual proportion, was eventually included to 'add muscle'). Microclimates had to be sharp. At Château Palmer for instance Thomas Duroux kept the Petit Verdot on the skins for only 11 days, less than half as long as usual. He also concentrated five cases out of their 42 by reverse osmosis to increase the overall alcohol level to a modest 12.5%. But for many other producers, this was the year when they returned to chaptalisation, adding sugar before fermentation to boost alcohol. Now in barrel, the fragile young wines are being exposed to relatively little new oak, fewer rackings from one barrel to another, and are likely to be bottled (and, surely, drunk) much earlier than usual.

Next week - the best wines and who might buy them.

