Sweet white bordeaux vintages

3 Sep 2008 by Jancis Robinson

2012 will not be remembered fondly by the Sauternais. Headlines were made when Yquem, Rieussec, Suduiraut and Raymond-Lafon announced they would not be making any grand vin. The Barsac region had slightly better conditions, but nobody is pretending this will be a sought-after vintage.

2011 Where red Bordeaux failed, Sauternes triumphed in 2011, giving opulent, rich, fresh wines of excellent quality.

2010 Botrytis was late and irregular this year, giving more delicate and restrained styles than in 2009 and featuring generally lower residual sugar with higher acidity.

2009 Tremendous conditions for the sweet wines; plenty of heat and humidity at the right time have made fantastically rich and concentrated examples, with plenty of complexity and promise.

2008 A pretty ignoble year for noble sweeties, unfortunately: yields were devastated by April frost. The pittance that remained, however, was high quality with plenty of botrytis influence.

2007 Complicated year requiring great precision with both picking schedules and selection. The top properties succeeded yet again.

2006 Not that much botrytis influence.

2005 No shortage of noble rot and almost as much sweetness as 2003 though not quite so much finesse as 2001.

2004 A very difficult year where the strictest selection was needed. Avoid at lower levels. And even the best tend to be pretty light.

2003 Extreme(ly sweet) but not particularly botrytised wines from this extreme(ly hot, dry) growing season.

2002 Vineyards near the rivers were blessed with botrytis. Small crop.

2001 The rain that spoilt the reds encouraged botrytis to such an extent that this is a truly magnificent, long-term vintage, helped by a greater degree of selection and cellar expertise than ever before. Perhaps the greatest Sauternes vintage in modern times.

2000 Some pretty, bumptious wines for relatively short-term drinking but there was too much rain after the red wine harvest for the development of botrytis.

1999 Those producers who used only the very rich, botrytised grapes picked first produced some exciting wines but quality is extremely variable as later-picked grapes suffered somewhat.

1998 Rather loose, early-drinking wines without strong botrytis influence.

1997 Some very attractive, if not especially heavy, wines from the top producers. Ready to start drinking.

1996 Very slightly less successful than the 1997 vintage.

1995 Best Sauternes vintage since 1990 - so probably initially overrated. The noble rot developed so rapidly that most of the grapes were picked by early October. Not the most complex vintage.

1994 Grey rot in September, so choose the châteaux that could afford to be fussy.

1993 Another pretty dreadful autumn, hardly anyone made interesting wine.

1992 Endless rains ruined the crop. Many estates declassified altogether.

1991 After the April frosts a tiny crop was eventually harvested, but not bad.

1990 Massive rich wines that presently seem a shade less complex than 1989 and, especially, 1988.

1989 Huge, almost corpulent wines that are dramatic and exciting.

1988 Of the fabulous trio of vintages this shows more botrytis and elegance and may live longest. The least flashy, a slow burner?

1986 A very strong year, plenty of botrytis and beautifully balanced, though some are a little soft.

1985 Rich and elegant but too little noble rot to add the magic.

1983 The best since 1976, with similar power and size. Good value too!

1982 Overlooked as a white vintage. Limited botrytis but Suduiraut and Yquem were more successful than most.

1980 Much better than the reds, the top châteaux are delicious and affordable.