Southwold 2005s - what a tasting!

15 Feb 2009 by Jancis Robinson

See my full tasting notes, scores and suggested drinking dates:
Right bank
Left bank
Overview
Dry and sweet whites

Last month, just before flying off to New Zealand and Australia (about which I have much, much more to write), I took part in an annual ritual in one of Britain's most distinctive seaside towns.

Southwold on the easternmost tip of England is where my family took its summer holidays throughout my teens, so I have a special affection for this little nucleus of a certain sort of Englishness with its lovingly preserved beach huts, lighthouse, windswept greens, handsome 15th-century flint church, Sailors' Reading Room, butter buns, and Adnams, the much-admired brewers and wine merchants. One of many bold moves undertaken while Simon Loftus (author of *Anatomy of the Wine Trade*, *A Pike in the Basement* and *Puligny-Montrachet*) was chairman of Adnams, was its expansion as hoteliers. It is partly because of this - the fact that a friendly wine merchant can provide the necessary organisation, space, bed and board - that a group of wine merchants has met there every January for many years to look at a very wide range of top bordeaux from the vintage four years before. (The bleariness of our image of Southwold here is perhaps appropriate.)

I have been lucky enough to re-taste the vintage several times (as you will see from this section of the long Tasting articles by region lists) but this was the first time since the primeurs tastings in April 2006 that I had the invaluable opportunity to taste the wines blind. Well, not completely blind. The approximately 200 wines, most of them generously donated by their producers and painstakingly amassed and despatched to Southwold by Bill Blatch of Vintex in Bordeaux, were put into 20 flights of similar wines according to appellation and price.

Rob Chase of Adnams and Aidan Bell of Averys then decanted them into numbered bottles in a completely random order. Stephen Browett of Farr Vintners had devised a punishing timetable which had us galloping through these 20 flights between Wednesday and Friday lunchtimes, with most of Wednesday afternoon largely devoted to the (sometimes disappointing) wines of the right bank and Friday morning devoted to the white wines. The two most exciting tastings on the Thursday were of flights of left then right bank 'first growths and challengers'.

Later this week I'll publish more thoughts on the vintage as a whole, together with the average marks for each flight, which are very revealing, and show a massive leap upwards for these top two flights. It would have been interesting to have conducted a further blind tasting mixing up the firsts with some of the top also-rans, but to be quite honest we had quite enough on our plates, or rather in our glasses, and no spare tasting capacity at the end of this marathon, alas.

We tasted each flight in as close to silence as possible, in a light, airy first-floor room in the Swan Hotel overlooking Southwold's main street with the grey North Sea in the distance. After each flight we yelled out our scores for each wine in turn so that Aidan could enter them into his database, and provide a ranking and average score almost immediately – a considerable advance on previous systems that relied on pencils and pocket calculators, I gather.

The very slightly rotating group of up to 16 tasters (one bottle's worth) included five Masters of Wine, the wine buyers of several leading UK wine merchants and wine traders and wine writers Neal Martin of *The Wine Advocate* and Stephen Brook, blogging for www.decanter.com

Simon Loftus recently reminded me that, unlike any of those who attended this year's Bordeaux horizontal tasting as far as I remember, I had been present at the very first one of its kind, a look at the 1976s in 1980. Since then it evolved into a

tasting group of which Clive Coates was chief recorder and the late Bill Baker one of its stalwarts. Now that Clive lives in France and has wound up his newsletter *The Vine*, and Bill is no longer with us, I suspect its character has changed considerably. Nevertheless, there is still an understandable determination to drink well over our meals at the Crown Hotel in the evenings, to which end we all brought fine bottles to share. The following were the outstanding dinner wines for me.

Wednesday night:

Dauvissat, Vaillons Premier Cru 1990 Chablis
Ch Pape Clément 1990 Pessac-Léognan
Ch Trotanoy 1990 Pomerol
Dom Ponsot 1990 Gevrey-Chambertin

Thursday night:

Fritz Haag, Fuder 10, Brauneberger Juffer-Sonnenuhr Auslese 2004 Mosel (magnum)
Dom Coche-Dury, Enseignières 2000 Puligny-Montrachet
Ch Lynch Bages 1988 Pauillac (magnum)
Ch Margaux 1989 Margaux (magnum)
Ch Margaux 1985 Margaux
Ch Margaux 1983 Margaux
Dom Armand Rousseau, Grand Cru 1993 Chambertin
Dom Huet, Cuvée Constance 1989 Vouvray

So, as you can see, it wasn't all work.