Bordeaux 2002s - best buys

13 Oct 2009 by Jancis Robinson/FT

See my tasting notes on almost 120 bordeaux 2002s.

On the face of it, the 2002 vintage of red bordeaux looks a rather attractive prospect. The wines were never going to be particularly long lived, so many should be starting to drink well now. The vintage was this century's least expensive on release and prices have not exactly soared since.

It had a difficult birth. Not only was the growing season fraught with problems, resulting in a much-reduced crop of Merlot and dangerously late-ripening Cabernets, it was launched on to the market just when SARS had shrunk Asian demand and the Iraq war and associated 'freedom fries' issues had shrivelled the American market for French wines to such an extent that the powerful US critic Robert Parker did not even make his usual spring trip to Bordeaux to taste the new wines being shown 'en primeur'. Indeed, so slowly did these late-picked wines develop over the particularly cold winter of 2002/3 that powerful merchant and château owner J P Moueix, based in Libourne on the right bank of the Gironde, did not even offer the 2002s until well into summer.

For two or three years after release, the vintage was viewed as one of a pair with 2001 between the much more glamorous, and expensive, vintages 2000 and 2003 but with every tasting 2001 has looked better and better, in some cases trumping 2000, while 2002 has struggled to find an identity. So I was pleased to have a chance to taste almost 120 red bordeaux from the 2002 vintage blind last week at a tasting organised by fine wine traders Farr Vintners in London (pictured here and in this video).

I would love to be able to say that the tasting revealed that the 2002 vintage had been underestimated all along, but I'm afraid I cannot. Too many of the wines are still in general rather ungenerous, with more acidity than average and in some, but not all, cases some pretty austere tannins. However, a great deal of work clearly went into making the top wines worthy of their status and, since prices are more modest than for more recent vintages, this could be a year worth splurging on.

What was exciting, however, was that a handful of more modest wines unexpectedly emerged as excellent buys, impressing not just me but the group of 17 professional tasters from the UK and the Bordeaux trade. (It is always heartening to see those whose living depends on the quality of red bordeaux subject themselves to the exercise of judging how it tastes without any clues from the label.)

One wine that surprised me for its price–quality ratio was Ch Bernadotte, a modest Haut-Médoc property now owned by Louis Roederer champagne in tandem with second growth Ch Pichon Lalande in Pauillac. According to the wine search engine www.wine-searcher.com, it is possible at the time of writing to find this wine at €7.80 a bottle in France and £12.95 from the Fine Wine Company of Edinburgh, which is not bad for a wine I thought showed as well as my other favourite in that flight, classed-growth Ch Calon Ségur of St-Estèphe (and better than Calon's neighbour Ch Sociando-Mallet, profiled recently on these pages). Indeed the fact that Bernadotte is in the hinterland of Pauillac and was compared blind with a range of wines from the more austere terroir of St-Estèphe may have played a part in how well it showed, for the Pauillacs were undoubtedly the stars of this vintage.That said, be warned that Ch Fournas-Bernadotte is the second wine of Ch Bernadotte and some retailers may confuse the two.

We tasted wines in flights of between 10 and 12 related wines, starting with two flights of St-Émilion and then one each of Pomerol, Margaux, Pessac-Léognan, St-Estèphe, St-Julien, Pauillac and then a range of 'super seconds' (second growths and left-bank equivalents that can sometimes perform as well as first growths) and then a flight comprising the five first growths of Médoc and Graves together with Le Pin and Chx Lafleur, Pétrus, Ausone and Cheval Blanc from the right bank of the Gironde.

Apart from the first-growth equivalents, no right-bank wine really dazzled us. The St-Émilions were, as usual, the most varied group, so great a variation in wine-making technique is there here. Gérard Perse's Ch Monbousquet was the most obvious example of the modern school and smelt so sweet, I thought someone might have smuggled a particularly aromatic Pinot Noir into the first flight. In the second flight of St-Émilions, his Ch Pavie-Decesse stood out for me, having somehow successfully shed the huge charge of oak that marked it in its youth. Many other St-Émilions and even

Pomerols were disappointments, with notably drying tannins on some of the Pomerols, although the failure of the Merlot did put huge pressure on right-bank winemakers in 2002.

Among the better wines of the Graves, those from the Pessac-Léognan appellation (which are curiously difficult to find in the UK), Ch Malartic-Lagravière was particularly popular with the group for its unusual succulence, although it is not inexpensive. De Fieuzal was another over-performer from this appellation and vintage, and very much better value. Bernard Magrez's ambitiously priced Ch Pape-Clément was included with the super seconds and therefore - perhaps automatically? - garnered a significantly higher score than the wine with which it is often compared, Ch Smith Haut Lafitte – but the latter is a much better buy. Domaine de Chevalier will doubtless prove the longest-distance runner of the appellation.

In the Médoc, I found the Margaux wines generally reassuringly Margaux-like – reasonably silky and perfumed – in this vintage, when it was difficult to concentrate Margaux fruit into a copy of a Pauillac. The St-Juliens were much more solid – sometimes too much so – whereas the Pauillacs seemed to have the best balance of all. Langoa-Barton was looking much more attractive at this stage than its stablemate Léoville Barton. In Pauillac, the wines from the Mouton stable – Chx d'Armailhac and Clerc Milon, Petit Mouton, the second wine of Ch Mouton Rothschild, and Mouton Rothschild itself – all showed very well. It was around this time that Philippe Dallhuin took over as technical director from Patrick Léon for all three properties.

Ch Grand Puy Lacoste and, especially, Ch Lynch Bages also put in a very solid performance in 2002, as did both Chx Pichon Lalande and Pichon Longueville, but perhaps the best-value Pauillac that we tasted was Ch Haut-Bages Libéral, currently on offer at Total Wine & More stores in the US at under $30, and available in the UK for not much more.The second wine of Ch Pichon Lalande, the super-sweet Réserve de la Comtesse, can be found for under £25 a bottle in the UK at the time of writing.

As for the first growths, Mouton looks under-valued, while Latour may be over-valued to judge by its performance in our blind tasting. But the variation in average score out of 20 was no more than 0.8 within the first growth flight, and our impressions were based on one (necessarily fairly swift) tasting of one bottle of each wine. What was truly shocking was the number of wines spoilt by some sort of taint, most probably cork-related. Five bottles out of our 120 were deemed too badly spoilt to be worth marking.

There are certainly bargains to be had from the 2002 vintage, even if there are few heart-stopping thrills.

Best buys in 2002 red bordeaux

Ch Bernadotte
Ch de Fieuzal
Ch Grand Puy Lacoste
Ch Haut-Bages Libéral
Réserve de la Comtesse
Ch Smith Haut Lafitte

For full tasting notes, scores and suggested drinking dates on nearly 120 red bordeaux 2002s, see 2002 bordeaux at seven – tasting notes