Blatch on 2009 □ the wines

4 Feb 2010 by Bill Blatch

Bill Blatch runs Bordeaux negociant Vintex and is one of the members of the Bordeaux wine trade who is most fascinated by how wines actually taste. For some years he is widely acknowledged as being responsible for by far the most detailed analysis of each Bordeaux vintage and kindly gives us a preview. See Blatch on 2009 - the vines for the first part of Bill Blatch's report.

2009 reds

The high alcohol levels are of course the main defining feature of the vintage. These are strong powerful wines, stronger than any Châteauneuf-du-Pape and as strong as any Oz Shiraz. Modern vinification know-how and temperature-control have seen to it that the sugars got totally fermented out, in itself a big difference from 1947, when the famous Cheval Blanc is reported to be slightly sweet and some of its peers didn't make it into bottle. Generally the Merlots came in at around 14° [Baumé] potential alcohol on the left bank and 15° or more on the right bank, whilst the Cabs were around 13° and 14° respectively. Generally, this was considered to be the absolute limit of what Bordeaux red wines can or should achieve in terms of concentration - but then we said that in 2000, in 2003, and again in 2005.

Yet there is much more to the 09s than just alcohol. Indeed it would seem that there is so much else in these wines that all this alcohol even appears necessary to balance all their other components. The tannin levels are extraordinarily high, often registering at well over 100 points on the IPT scale, sometimes as far as 135, especially on the Médoc Cabernets. This is way more than we have experienced in any previous reported vintage, and all this in spite of the vinifiers' generally gentle maceration policies. Then, the acidity levels are quite reasonable - not as high as the more robust 05s but in stark contrast to the considerably lesser acidities of the softer 1990s and 1903s. The 2009s seem to have a 'togetherness' that will make them at once approachable in their youth but also probably, as for the 1929s, unexpectedly long-lived. The wines are far too young to be sure of that but certainly that is the impression they give right now. They will be lovely young and certainly lovely old.

Of course there will be the annual contest between left and right bank. It's a difficult call to say which is better. The wines of the right bank, by dint of its heavier soils (which are said to have made it the winner in 1921, the hottest, driest vintage of them all) and predominance of Merlot, are clearly more powerful in all aspects, especially in alcohol, whilst those of the left bank balance the equation through the most concentrated Cabernets they have ever experienced; these Cabs got more blocked by the aridity of the Médoc and Graves summer than their right-bank Cabernet Franc equivalents, but then made a wonderful come-back, after most of the right-bank Merlots were in, during the end-of-season October heat-wave, often ending up with alcohol as high as their Merlots. Finally, the northern Médoc, with its predominance of Merlot on heavier soils, has produced some very concentrated wines which hopefully will become the best values of 2009.

So much for the positive aspects of this extraordinary vintage. But the story would not be complete without mentioning the significant variations within it. First, we have already noted the disparity between the earlier- and later-budding vines, which got assimilated to a certain extent during the summer - especially on the moister clay and chalk soils - but still accounted for irregularly ripe bunches at the end. Then there were many growers, mostly in lesser areas, who got frightened by the abnormally high September sugar readings and who picked there and then, before true phenolic ripeness, often realising their mistake afterwards and trying to catch up with longer macerations, which just made it worse. There will be some examples of these rather hard and bitter wines in the spring tastings. Then, at the other end of the scale, the habitually very late pickers, especially on the right bank, have certainly sometimes made wines that will be incredibly alcoholic, very dryly tannic, ultra low in acidity and maybe prone to brett. We just have to hope that the counter-trend that we have noticed in our tastings of the bottled wines of such estates since the 2004 vintage towards more balanced wines will have continued.

Overall, of all the great vintages of the last 100 years, 2009 seems to have more in common with the silky concentration of 1982, 1947 or 1929, rather than the more robust tannic balance of 2005, 2000 or 1928. Yet it does not seem to have all the warm, exotic softness of the extreme heat-wave vintages 2003, 1990 and 1921, nor the more traditional style of the 1945 and 1961 (which got their concentration primarily from the tiny yields caused by freak late May frosts).

Comparisons with other vintages are proverbially difficult to make, but maybe we can say that 2009 is what 1982 or 1985 would have been if the vineyard and the yields had been managed as today, or what the 1947 would have been if the

vinification had been controlled as today. All of those historic vintages seem to share the same sweetness of concentrated fruit as the 2009, but in those days, 12.5° for the Cabs and 13.5° for the Merlots was the absolute maximum. These 2009s have, in addition, far higher alcohol levels, which make the vintage - so far - unique. Better? We'll see.

2009 dry whites

These are totally different wines from last year. The 2008s had been steely and citrus flavoured, whereas these 2009s are fat and rich with a roundness of peachy fruit, as one would expect after such a summer. The alcohol levels are high, but Bordeaux whites rarely go as high as the reds, and, like the reds, their acid balance and strength of fruit seem to demand such a strong base. Their acidity is generally lower than in 2005 but greater than in 2000 and especially than in 2003, giving the wines a gentle balance that should make them approachable very early but certainly capable of holding that balance for many years.

Everyone seems just as pleased with their Sauvignons as with their Sémillons, except with regard to the yields, which were generally lower for the former. So expect more Sémillon in the final blends. The aromas of both are already well-evident yet complex and will certainly respond well to oak.

Then we have to spare a thought for all those Entre-Deux-Mers, Blayais and Graves growers, often the same ones who suffered from the spring frosts of 2008 and who, in 2009, were at the centre of the devastating May hail-storms. There are many with less than half a normal crop, and supply shortages are already appearing, especially for Sauvignon.

Yields

These hailed white vineyards and many red ones in the St-Émilion, Blaye, southern Médoc and Graves produced a very small crop, sometimes even none at all. A few estates on both banks also lost yield by excessive green harvesting in early summer, but, for all the rest, the crop was quite large, usually at or close to the maximum permitted yield.

2009 Sauternes

Last year, the Sauternais had caught the thick end of the wedge with that nasty spring frost, but this time, after such a summer, by mid September, the prospect of a great and plentiful vintage was at last within their grasp. There had been more water in the 3 Aug showers than elsewhere (45 mm in Sauternes, only 5 mm in Pauillac) and, as elsewhere, the showers of 2-4 Sept had reinvigorated the vine, so the hot 30 °C days of 6-10 Sep sent the ripening galloping ahead. The grapes were already going golden and at 14° potential by mid-September. All that was needed was some botrytis to finish the job off.

Many estates had some pickers out as early as 14 Sep, cleaning up the bunches rather than actually picking (they call this *nettoyage*), but all the same a small quantity of fresh-scented and beautifully sweet wine could be made from the occasional botrytised or shrivelled bunches. Compared with the volume that was to follow, this was almost nothing, but at the time, remembering what had happened in 2000 (when that was all they would get), at least now there was some must in the cellar.

The first picking proper didn't start until after the quite heavy rain (33 mm) of 18-20 Sep (see Appendix 2 at the end of Blatch on 2009 - the vines). This brought a surge of botrytis development but it took a few more days for it to progress from *pourri plein* stage to *rôti*. The nights had been just too cool and the afternoons too hot and dry. However, there had been some foggy mornings, creating the perfect medium for this to happen, and on Monday 28 Sep, all estates were out. That day, the pickers took their time, but the botrytis was concentrating so fast that the musts were already too rich, and this first picking had to be accelerated in order to keep the sugar at a reasonable level. The concentration continued apace, and the second picking kicked in immediately, with no let-up for the weekend of 3-4 Oct.

With the musts now averaging 22 - 26° potential, and with little hope of averaging the sweetness back down on the later pickings, some decided to call in all their reserve troops for the Monday and to spend the whole week harvesting whole bunches: everything, *rôti*, *pourri plein*, half-botrytised, golden grapes, the lot. This week of 5 Oct became one of explosive activity in the vineyard accounting for ¾ of the harvest by the Friday night. It reminded everyone of those three other vintages where the same thing had happened: 11-21 Sep 1990, 15-36 Sep 2003 and especially 12-17 Oct 2001.

With the days getting hotter and the nights warmer, there were a few outbreaks of bad rot and mould, which slowed

pickers down over the weekend of 10-11 Oct. But by then most had finished. Just a few estates lingered on into two final pickings during the much cooler week of the 12th - there was even a light frost on the Friday morning - and there were still some die-hards out up to the rainy period starting 20 Oct, but these final pickings were of botrytis that had not really evolved for some time due to the cold nights.

The general conclusion is that this is indeed a great vintage: the extreme richness is nicely balanced by acidity, with final blends typically at 14° alcohol, 7-9° of residual sugar and a refreshing 3.8 g/l or so total acidity [roughly 5.8 g/l tartaric]. This suggests a very different kind of wine to the fatter, softer but similarly very sweet vintages like 2005, 2003, 1990, 1976, and (I am told) 1947, 1929 and 1921, and a similar style of wine to the more vibrant but just-as-sweet and complex wines of 2001, 1989, 1975, 1959, and, I am told, 1858 and 1847…

The aromas are already very interesting, with beautiful complex flavours of all sorts. Many châteaux - and not the least - managed to balance out their sweetness by doing a bigger early pick, so obviating the need to pick non-botrytis grapes later. Maybe these will turn out to be more true-blue Sauternes than the rest. We will see.

Conclusion

Is the concentration of the 2009s the result of global warming? The answer is quite clearly yes: the average temperature in South West France has risen by more than 1 °C over the past 50 years, and, as we have seen, the changes in the transatlantic air currents are provoking wetter springs and drier summers. However, there seem to be other cycles at work too: the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s were cooler in Bordeaux, and the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s warmer. So it's quite possible that for the next 30 years, there could be a battle between global warming on the one hand and a return to a natural cool period on the other. Wine makes for optimism but let's not forget those two decades of poor vintages from 1901 to 1919, which followed the two legendary vintages 1899 and 1900.