

Bordeaux 2009 - right bank and white wine overview

14 Apr 2010 by Jancis Robinson/FT but this is longer

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Interest in the 2009 vintage recently shown off in Bordeaux to the trade and commentators is so great that when London's leading fine-wine traders Farr Vintners sent out an email a week last Thursday alerting their customers to the fact that they had just published their report on the vintage, Farr's website crashed and remained offline for several hours. See the picture below of Denis Durantou's plan of visitors' visits during primeurs week at Ch L' Église-Clinet in Pomerol for an indication of interest in this vintage - perhaps partly fuelled by the fact that no one was especially interested in 2006, 2007 and 2008 rather than purely by the quality of 2009.

This is the queasy, uneasy interregnum between the moment when cask samples of these infant, unbottled wines are shown off in the hope of adulation and high scores and when the château owners announce their prices. Thanks to unprecedented demand from Asia, not least China, where thousands of well-heeled newcomers to wine would happily pay vast sums for multiple cases of super-fashionable Ch Lafite, prices of the first growths are likely to be several thousand pounds a dozen. The rumour mill has it that most prices of the 2009s will be announced at the end of next month to coincide with the international wine fair Vinexpo to be held in Hong Kong then.

During the first quarter of this year, incidentally, Hong Kong overtook the US in terms of the total value of fine wine auctioned there. London, until recently the most important location for fine wine auctions, is now trailing ignominiously in third place - and many UK merchants and traders now depend heavily on their Hong Kong outposts for turnover.

Americans may be buying older trophy wines in the saleroom but they have largely withdrawn from the primeur market. The 2003 vintage was the last in which the US was a major player. There were a few American trade buyers in Bordeaux at the beginning of this month but, despite the strong dollar, few are confident that the US will represent a major market for 2009s, however delicious the wines may be, and however lavishly praised by the leading American commentator Robert Parker.

The signs are from all UK fine-wine merchants and traders I have quizzed that there is considerable demand for 2009s among British connoisseurs, however. I suspect that they, like those who chiefly sell to them, will be particularly interested in the better value, favoured left-bank reds below first-growth level, but this should be a year when everyone pays a little more attention than usual to sweet white bordeaux.

Growers in Sauternes and Barsac are cock a hoop over the quality of the 2009 vintage. Usually producing a fine sweet white in Bordeaux is a nerve-racking process of sending pickers through the vineyards time after time to pick individual grapes that have the desired level of concentrating botrytis mould on them. This is usually a stop-start process that can last into November but in 2009 the timing of showers, intense sunshine and warmth was so propitious that botrytised grapes were picked, often by the whole bunch, in one extended period of glorious concentration at the end of September and beginning of October.

As in almost all 2009s, acidity levels were quite refreshing enough too so that 2009, although super-luscious, is looking like a Sauternes vintage that may rival the great 2001. But, as usual, these sweet marvels tend to be overlooked by both amateur and professional buyers. The most famous Sauternes of all, Ch d'Yquem, is rather different from usual in 2009, no less intense than it is in a top-quality vintage, but much more tense and vibrant. I suspect this change of style has led some observers to decide that the 2009 Sauternes in general are not concentrated enough to be great.

The team in charge of one of the most famous dry white bordeaux of all, Pavillon Blanc de Château Margaux, have also tweaked the style of this wine in 2009. Having watched alcohol levels of this all-Sauvignon icon rise to over 15% in recent years, they deliberately took early steps in the vineyard to encourage full phenolic ripeness at an earlier stage so that Pavillon Blanc is also much more vibrant than usual. But it is an exception. In general the dry white bordeaux are just a little soft and lacking nerve in 2009 - very pleasing and ripe but probably not designed for a particularly long life, with the perennial exception of Domaine de Chevalier.

As for the hundreds of right-bank reds that are likely to be offered en primeur from the 2009 vintage, few generalisations

can be made about the very varied wines of St-Émilion and Pomerol. Unusually, the latter appellation seemed rather less successful than the former - perhaps because the early-maturing Merlot grape on which Pomerol is so dependent, ripened too fast to keep its definition and refreshment value.

The stars of the Pomerol appellation – the likes of Pétrus, Lafleur, Le Pin, Vieux Château Certan and Église-Clinet – all triumphed and made delicious wines, with VCC considerably fleshier than usual. But lower down the ranks, some wines were just too alcoholic and soft, even though, as Dr Alain Raynaud, founder of the Cercle Rive Droite association of mid-rank right -bank properties, reported, growers generally are picking earlier than they did in recent years. 'I have been making wine since 1964', he told me, 'and the only year like 2009 was 1982, although then we didn't thin the crop so yields were much higher then and the results were therefore quite different.'

Many mid-rank St-Émilions seemed to have benefited from the freshness and structure offered by their additional ration of Cabernet Franc - and although some wines seemed to have been made from grapes kept on the vine so long that there were unappealing raisined notes and sometimes the drying tannins associated with over-extraction, in general the proportion of extreme, 'caricature wines' seems to be in welcome decline. Having been notoriously critical of Ch Pavie 2003, also made in a particularly hot, dry summer, I was impressed by Pavie 2009. Tertre Roteboeuf continues to plough its own very distinctive furrow while Cheval Blanc seemed to have returned to a rather more classical expression of terroir in 2009, even if made in the shadow of not just one but two of the cranes currently hovering over many a well-funded Bordeaux château as considerable sums are invested in cellar improvements.

I particularly enjoyed what I tasted from the coolish Fronsac appellation in 2009, and there were many good surprises in the fringe appellations of the right bank carrying the appellations Bordeaux and Bordeaux Côtes. As with the simple Médoc appellation, this is the territory for bargain hunters, who will need all the luck they can muster.

RIGHT BANK AND WHITES

Top scorers

Reds:

Cheval Blanc
Église-Clinet
Lafleur
Le Pin
Pétrus
Vieux Château Certan

Sweet whites:

Raymond Lafon
Suduiraut
Yquem

Some likely bargains

Bordeaux and Côtes:

G de Grand Village
Ch Puygueraud

St-Émilion:

Clos La Madeleine
Ch La Commanderie
Ch Dassault
Ch La Fleur Morange, Cuvée Mathilde
Ch Louis

Pomerol:

La Fugue de Nenin
Duo de Conseillante

Fronsac:
Most wines

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