2003 bordeaux - drink up!

8 Oct 2010 by Jancis Robinson/FT though this is longer

See my full tasting notes on all the wines on Purple pages.

The heatwave vintage 2003 has always been controversial, especially for red bordeaux. In fact so diametrically opposed were the views of leading American wine critic Robert Parker and me on one particular wine produced that year that in the world of wine 'Pavie 03' became shorthand for a perceived mid-Atlantic rift in wine appreciation.

Having previously been friendly enough to have dined in each others' homes, Parker and I retreated into our entrenched positions respectively pro and anti Pavie 03 for years and buried the hatchet only in 2008 when we found ourselves in the same breakfast room in Bordeaux. As the photograph in Parker and Robinson in clinch shows, we quite literally kissed and made up, with Parker volunteering, 'That Pavie thing? I overreacted.'

It is probably not surprising that a growing season never seen before or since would engender strong feelings. In Bordeaux, as elsewhere in France, the grapes were picked earlier than ever before, since 1893 anyway. The levels of sugar, and therefore resulting alcohol, reached record levels, but the grapes did not go through the normal ripening process. Many of them literally shrivelled on the vine rather than building up nuanced flavours, so that what was picked was more like a raisin than a grape. Such dessication tended to produce dried fruit flavours and the resulting wines too often lacked freshness and juiciness. The tannin levels were relatively high, so that in the exceptional cases where there really is some interesting fruit to preserve, 2003 may prove exceptionally good, but to judge from a major assessment of 2003 red bordeaux at the beginning of this month, few wines seem to have a glorious future.

We assembled at the Battersea offices of leading fine-wine trader Farr Vintners and spent a day tasting about 100 wines blind but in appropriate flights. Since the most successful 2003s are on the left bank of the Gironde rather than in St-Émilion and Pomerol, we concentrated on the Médoc and Graves (so no Ch Pavie 2003). The previous evening I had attended, with a clutch of the most powerful men in the City, a charity dinner at the French ambassador's residence in Kensington. The theme was Bordeaux and I found myself sitting next to the owner of Ch Angélus in St-Émilion. I noticed that he hardly touched the trio of 2003s served with the cheese. 'Not a good vintage', he said disapprovingly.

But when the wines were offered, perhaps because high-alcohol wines were then considered the height of fashion in some quarters, they were widely talked up. The result is that many Bordeaux collectors have 2003s in their cellars. My advice for the great majority of 2003 bordeaux is to drink them before the fruit recedes altogether. I bought only the likes of Dame de Montrose and Ch Marbuzet, wines from the two top properties in St Estèphe where deeper, damper soils seem to have yielded above-average 2003s, and have been enjoying their exotic richness.

At Farr we began with the best wines of Graves, those carrying the Pessac-Léognan appellation. As usual, Chx Smith Haut Lafitte and Pape Clément and Domaine de Chevalier were the most impressive in a blind tasting. In general this group had the most disappointing lack of perfume for expensive red Bordeaux that had spent six years in bottle, and many of them displayed the dominant characteristic of the vintage: drying tannins on the finish that showed every sign of always dominating what little fruit character there was.

The very mixed and even more disappointing wines carrying the appellations Médoc and Haut-Médoc (plus one Premières Côtes because it is the house wine at Crystal Palace, now part-owned by Farr Vintners' owner Stephen Browett) were noticeably darker than the Graves, but the acidity was even more marked. Unripe, green seeds may have been a factor. Bernard Magrez, owner of Pape Clément, scored another goal when his La Tour Carnet proved the top performer in this range, although I also lost my heart to Château Pichon Lalande's sister property Ch Bernadotte. Most of them were well into their ideal drinking period.

The flight of lesser Margaux was particularly depressing: as though the winemakers had leant too heavily on artifice and the misguided hope that oak might compensate for the deficiencies of the fruit. (With Ch Batailley of Pauillac, Ch Giscours was badly affected by cork taint and we had no back up.) The smarter Margaux were a little bit more impressive, with Malescot and, for once, Rauzan Gassies, showing better than most. We had a very strange bottle of Ch Palmer that tasted as though it had been aged in popcorn-infused oak; its stablemate Alter Ego smelt of butterscotch. (Thomas Duroux was appointed in time to make the next, 2004 vintage.)

With the St-Juliens, things looked up considerably. For the first time, these wines had some fruit and fluidity, and some of them even seemed to have a future. At last my scores included a few 17s out of 20, and there were no duds. And, rather to our surprise, both of the most winning wines came from the same stable: the relatively lowly ranked Chx Gloria and St-Pierre – although I liked Ducru Beaucaillou too. Léoville Las Cases was its usual obdurate self.

In comparison with the St-Juliens, the non-first-growth Pauillacs were actually less succulent and a teensy bit of a disappointment. The sweetness that characterises some 2003s – sometimes literally the result of residual sugar, so difficult was this very high-sugar crop to ferment – was particularly evident in these wines. And many of them had the telltale hot finish of a high-alcohol wine. I gave them generally lower marks than the St-Juliens.

So, did the vaunted St-Estèphes stand the test of time? They did indeed. These were the most youthful wines – at last, wines with a real future! The two stars, Montrose and Cos, acquitted themselves extremely well, as did Meyney. There were one or two rather dry, dour wines - but then that is the fate of St-Estèphe in any vintage.

As for the first growths at hundreds of pounds a bottle, Ch Latour was the single most outstanding wine of the tasting – more successful relatively than its usually dependable stablemate Les Forts de Latour. Oozing length, depth and glamour, this wine manages to be both fresh and well balanced. It should still be drinking well in 20 years' time, which is more than can be said of most of the wines we tasted.

BEST BUYS
(The best-value 2003s, with average price according to Wine-searcher)

Bernadotte £16
Dame de Montrose £30
Gloria £27
Haut-Bages Liberal £23
La Tour Carnet £22
Les Pagodes de Cos £26
Meyney £21
St-Pierre £29

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