Vintage reputations - the struggle for truth

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As I write, wine producers all over France are timidly, and sometimes not so timidly, expressing enthusiasm about their 2010 vintage. The reason some of them are not going overboard about its merits, however real, is that the 2009 vintage was so heavily touted and, in the hugely significant case of Bordeaux anyway, sold at prices so high as to have been unimaginable even one year previously. Can they really manage to sell two consecutive vintages at sky-high prices?

It may well be that in some places 2010 will turn out to be even better than 2009. The southern Rhône springs to mind as the most obvious example of a region as a whole, but it could even be true of some individual Bordeaux properties. Yet it will be very, very difficult to persuade the wine-buying trade and public that anywhere has managed to produce two great vintages in a row.

Every vintage's reputation is a function of the context in which it is released. The 1990 bordeaux vintage was underrated for years, even by such a consumer advocate as Robert Parker, only partly because it was released in the middle of an economic downturn. The main problem was that 1989 saw record temperatures in summer and was heralded as a great vintage. It was thought impossible that it could have been followed by another great one - however similar the summer weather was. As it is, comparison of these two years has provided enormous pleasure to wine lovers for at least the last 10 years, but the greatness of the 1990 bordeaux, one of my favourite vintages and one whose wines are currently showing even better than the 1982s in many cases, was not widely acknowledged until the late 1990s.

Vintages can be overrated because of their context, too. The 1995 vintage in Bordeaux was greeted with huge relief after a succession of no fewer than four disappointing ones (exactly mirroring the rapturous reception for the ultimately over-tannic 1975s). The 1991 vintage had been decimated by frost. Rain diluted the 1992s and 1993s, which were at best 'serviceable', while the 1994s were also affected by September rains. The Château owners and, perhaps more importantly, the Bordeaux trade, had been deprived of a decent, cash-generating vintage for four long years. It was little surprise then that the fruits of the much warmer, drier 1995 growing season were lauded to the skies and prices reached (then) unheard-of heights. I remember writing prissily in my column in *The Financial Times* that I simply refused to pay these prices - the first growths opened at under 40 euros a bottle! - and was going instead to buy Château Montus 1995 Madiran.

As it is, I don't regret not investing heavily in the 1995 vintage (the Montus is still not ready) as I suspect the (admittedly even more expensive) Bordeaux 1996s were more successful overall. What is bizarre about Bordeaux vintages, however, is the curse of seven. There has not been a great, nor even a particularly good, vintage ending in a seven in Bordeaux since the famous 1947, but that hasn't stopped the trade, swept up in an upward price gradient from the two preceding vintages, from asking quite ridiculously high prices for the 1997s and the 2007s. They must have been very grateful for the vast quantities of 2007s they managed to offload in Asian markets (notably Korea).

It may seem odd that I have concentrated so far on vintages in Bordeaux here, but the truth is that the reputation of a vintage throughout the whole of France and even sometimes beyond (Piemonte and Tuscany, for instance) has been directly influenced by the quality, or perhaps more accurately the perceived quality, of what is produced in Bordeaux. The superlative quality of 1991 red burgundy had a hard time being recognised - partly because the 1991 vintage was such a write-off in Bordeaux, and partly because of the problem I highlighted at the beginning of this article: people find it difficult to believe that there can be two great vintages in a row. The 1993 vintage in Burgundy was probably also generally underrated because it was so weak in Bordeaux.

Gradually a corpus of knowledgeable and well-informed connoisseurs of burgundy specifically has emerged this century, so I think that today Burgundy's vintage reputations are increasingly built on the more solid ground of tasting experience rather than on supposition and superstition. But of course weather patterns can be quite, quite different in Burgundy in the continental far east of the country from those in Bordeaux in the maritime south west - differences accentuated by the differing needs of the early-maturing Pinot Noir and Chardonnay versus those of the late-ripening Cabernet Sauvignon. You have only to compare the 2002 and 2000 vintages in each of these important wine regions to see that one can succeed brilliantly (Burgundy 2002 and Bordeaux 2000) while the other does not (Bordeaux 2002 and Burgundy 2000).

Incidentally, as someone who studied maths at university, I love the logically impossible way that the least successful vintages tend to be described by those who produce and sell them as 'average'.

That 2005 and 2009 were exceptional vintages in both Bordeaux and Burgundy seems beyond doubt. What is notable here is how the vintages share characteristics in both regions, with the 2005s marked by considerable tannins in both Bordeaux and Burgundy while the 2009s are almost dangerously easy to like in youth with a slight question mark, in Burgundy anyway, over their relatively low levels of acidity.

Then, even without straying outside France, there is the question of misleading vintage reputations in that other increasingly significant wine region the Rhône Valley. There is a huge difference in conditions and performance between the northern and southern Rhône, dependent as they are on two such very different varieties, Syrah and Grenache respectively.

On the basis of my extensive recent tastings, I would say that 2009 is very much more successful in the northern Rhône than in the south, but 2009 seems set to be regarded as a classic for Châteauneuf-du-Pape in the south, largely because 2009 is seen as a banner year throughout France.

Oh, and before you ask, yes, they are quietly thrilled with 2010 in both the northern and southern Rhône. But they reckon they had better concentrate on selling their 2009s first.

See our free detailed vintage guide.