

1995 left bank revisited

1 Mar 2011 by Jancis Robinson/FT

It is a real problem that most of the fine wines that are written about in detail are years, sometimes decades, away from being ready to drink. When offered the chance to sample a mature vintage by the Conseil des Grands Crus Classés, the association of the smartest Bordeaux properties, I jumped at the chance.

Even better, I was allowed to choose the year. I looked at my collection of [53,000 tasting notes](#) and saw that the only collection of notes I had on the 1995 red bordeaux had been assembled on their tenth anniversary when many of them were still a bit obdurate. I thought it would be particularly interesting to have another look at them now that they are approaching their prime to see which ones are blooming and when they might best be drunk.

The 1995 vintage, which was initially offered at prices that seemed completely outrageous at the time, could be said to have been the first of the current era of maximum commercial opportunism. I see that the sentences the sub editors chose to highlight from my coverage when they were first offered in May 1996 was 'The 1995 clarets? Me, I'm off to Marks and Spencer'. My article opened with a quote from a London wine merchant describing the 1995 primeurs campaign as 'the nastiest I have ever known. You have people screaming down the phone at you because they want 10 cases of one of the top wines and you can't even let them have one.'

It is salutary at this stage, just before the 2010s are offered, to compare primeurs hype with the reality of the growing season and how the wines themselves taste today. The 1995s were talked up in 1996 because this was the first really dry, unfrosted vintage for five years. But in fact it was arguably too dry. The vines suffered such drought that leaves turned yellow before the harvest even in such favoured spots as Château Latour's vineyards. June, July and August were very hot and dry so that the vines did not have enough water for photosynthesis to proceed smoothly. This was one of the earliest vintages when Bordeaux's growers had to get used to a lack of phenolic ripeness no matter how high the sugar level. Some had seen 1989 and 1990 as oddballs. The 1995 growing season showed them the shape of things to come.

The drought meant particularly small berries with thick skins (no need to bleed off surplus juice from the fermentation vats in 1995) and this doubtless helps to explain the firm, chewy tannins that dogged them in the past and are still perceptible in some of the wines – although the fine June meant that the flowering was very successful and the crop was one of the biggest on record. Cooler, wetter weather arrived in September and some of the grapes were picked in the rain which was viewed as potentially disastrous but in fact probably helped the final ripening of Cabernets. 'We learnt that it's better to pick ripe grapes in the rain than to pick underripe grapes in the sun,' according to the agricultural engineer drafted in to Ch Margaux in 1990, Philippe Bascaules.

It was interesting to go from property to property in the Médoc last month tasting and reminiscing over a vintage that is over the hill in only the slightest of cases and not yet ready to drink in some. In fact at the base level of Haut-Médoc, only one member of the Grands Crus Classés, Ch Cantemerle, was prepared to show me their 1995 at all. At this level there have been so many changes of ownership and winemaking policy that the likes of Belgrave, de Camensac, La Lagune and La Tour Carnet are not sufficiently proud of their 16 year-old manifestations to pull the corks – or perhaps they simply do not have any left in the cellar. This was the first vintage Cantemerle was offered en primeur, at the princely opening sum of eight euros a bottle (the 1995 is still on the market at around £30 a bottle). It was drinking well - sweet with fully dissolved tannins - but certainly won't improve.

The Crus Classés humoured my request for blind tastings within commune – with the usual highflown exceptions such as the first growths which I visited individually. The mid 1990s were not the Margaux commune's most glorious era. Too many producers were trying to make heavily extracted, almost right bank garagiste wines from the 1995 vintage when those fierce tannins needed a particularly light touch. Dauzac tasted like a particularly ripe Tempranillo; d'Issan a bit like a good Puente Alto Cabernet from Chile. Brane Cantenac was the most elegantly Margaux-like in my blind array, while Palmer, tasted individually, proved the short hand theory that 1995 was a vintage in which the early-ripening Merlot triumphed. The more Merlot-influenced Ch Palmer is already delicious but seems far from its peak, whereas I would keep Ch Margaux - with Ch Lafite arguably the wine of the vintage - for a few years before even thinking of opening it.

Among Pauillacs below first growth rank, it was the most Merlot-dominated of them all, Ch Pichon Lalande, that was the

star in an extremely starry line-up. The concentrated Pauillacs, from the most successful 1995 left bank commune, were suppler and more luscious than they might be in a typical 21st century vintage. 'We weren't as clever at ripening Cabernet Sauvignon then as we are now, and there was lots of more Merlot planted then', Jean-Michel Comme of Ch Pontet Canet explained the relatively high proportion of Merlot in the 1995 Médoc classed growths.

But I was also impressed by how the St-Julien showed. Anthony Barton, whose Ch Léoville Barton shone particularly brightly, told me he has not even started serving this vintage at his own table but I think it should give pleasure from now until at least 2025. The reticent Léoville Las Cases was the only serious omission in my tastings, but the third Léoville, Poyferré, was also very winning.

The St-Estèphes perhaps suffered a little by lacking the flesh and concentration of the Pauillacs, and it was particularly difficult to work out whether they will improve with age.

None of the 1995s from the Médoc and Haut-Brion stable that I tasted were past it, and all five first growths should provide rewarding drinking well into the fourth decade of this century.

See [my tasting notes](#), scores and suggested drinking dates for all 60 wines on Purple pages.

I rated the **first growths** between 18 and 19 out of 20, **Ch Pichon Lalande** 18, and all the following wines 17.5 out of 20:

Ch d'Armailhac

Ch Calon-Ségur

Ch Ducru-Beaucaillou

Ch Duhart-Milon

Les Forts de Latour

Ch Léoville Poyferré

Ch La Mission Haut-Brion

Ch Palmer

Ch Pontet-Canet

Ch Rauzan-Ségla (although in the topical interest of full disclosure I should say that I feel guilty about that last score because the Grands Crus Classés lodged me for my two nights at Rauzan. See here for the [sad tale of this visit](#). I did of course pay my own travel expenses and could have insisted on staying in a hotel, but they are relatively few and far between in the Médoc and I'm not sure we could have squeezed everything in had I been staying in Bordeaux itself.)