Primeurs 2010 - when to publish?

20 Mar 2011 by Jancis Robinson

You can follow what scores of others say in this thread on our Members' forum on Purple pages.

25 May - Look out for the very detailed Blatch report on vintage 2010 in Bordeaux to be published on Purple pages on Monday and Tuesday next week. Also, a detailed report on the 2001s 10 years on.

24 May - ***Guy Woodward, editor of*** **Decanter**, ***writes***: 'I think it's a really important, interesting topic, and one I'd love to explore. But I do think it needs a uniform approach from the press, and that may be difficult to achieve – certainly this year. And, as can be seen from Thomas Matthews' reaction, some publishers will always want to pursue their own agenda.

'To be honest, though, it would be difficult for us, as a magazine, to change our plans this year, since magazine schedules are all set. We'll most likely publish online mid-April. But I'd love to raise it as a topic with the main critics, and look at it for next year. There will always be some who look to profit by publishing early, but if enough high profile names agreed to hold back, we could make a stand.

'My main gripe, to be honest, is not that the wines are rated too early, but that they're tasted too early – before final blends are finalised etc, leaving room for manipulation further down the road.

'There's lots of issues at work here, and it's definitely a topic worth exploring – we'd certainly be keen to explore ways of combating the obvious exploitation of the press by those setting prices and selling the wines.'

Even later that day - ***Robert Parker*** is sympathetic but argues it's too late to change the status quo and that critics acting co-operatively would smack of 'collusion' - though admits it may be his lawyer's training kicking in. 'I prefer to remain independent of both the wine producers and the wine journalists....thanks for sending...', he signs off.

Later that same day, from Thomas Matthews, executive editor of **Wine Spectator - '**I enjoyed reading your thoughts on reviews and pricing with regards to Bordeaux en primeur, and the comments they have generated. However, I am not so convinced that critics 'are effectively used by the Bordelais to hype demand and inflate prices.'

'My point of view is that the Bordelais attempt to persuade -- even to force -- the wine trade and, ultimately, consumers, to purchase their wines en primeur; that is, while they are still in barrel and relatively inaccessible to the majority of purchasers. Many in the wine trade do travel to Bordeaux to taste the wines on site before making their purchasing decisions. But for most consumers, that's not possible. So consumers -- your readers, and ours -- are in a position where wines are offered for sale, but the only evaluations of their quality come from interested parties -- the sellers, whether producers or traders. I don't see that as a fair balance of power.

'The critics who take it upon themselves to visit Bordeaux to taste the wines en primeur are, in my opinion, acting as advocates for those consumers. Critics taste the same wines the producers are pricing and the trade is offering, but give consumers an independent assessment of those wines' quality. Then, when consumers are faced with the option of buying Chateau A at $X, or Chateau B at $2X, they can make judgments informed by some expert opinion that is not invested in either the châteaux' reputation or the price levels.

'I won't argue that the critics are perfect advocates. Not all are expert, experienced tasters, for one thing, so their evaluations may not be reliable indicators of true quality. Barrel samples are difficult to interpret, may be falsified, will generally change in character before bottling -- for these and other reasons, even expert tasters may not be able to predict accurately the quality of the bottle the consumer will purchase. And in my opinion, when the critic accepts the hospitality of the châteaux' and the trade, conflicts of interest may act on unconscious levels, especially if/when wines are not tasted blind. Still, an honest critic starts from a position of relative independence.

'You worry that high scores from critics tempt producers to set higher prices than, perhaps, they had intended or, in some measurable way, than the wines are worth. But critics are supposed to give honest evaluations. Frequently the scores are lower than the producers believe are fair; then critics are exerting downward pressure on prices, to the benefit of the consumer. So how, in that situation, are critics being 'used' by the wine trade?

'Wine Spectator makes every effort to ensure independence and objectivity in our en primeur tastings. We pay for our travel and lodging expenses and the services of the negociant who hosts our tastings. We solicit samples from our own list of châteaux, our own staff organise the tastings, and the reviews are blind with regard to producer (and, of course, price). Where a review results from a visit to a château and/or a non-blind tasting, that will be disclosed, and we attempt to keep those to a minimum.

'So I stand by the credibility of our reviews, and feel confident offering them to our readers, to use as they see fit in making their purchasing decisions. When the wines are poor, low scores will warn our readers to be cautious before buying. If a good vintage and successful winemaking result in wines that receive high scores, so be it, and so much the better for those of us who love fine wine.'

23 Mar *- I published this hand-wringing plea on Purple pages yesterday in our comment section, Don't quote me. Members clearly feel very strongly about this issue and we have so far had about 30 responses from around the world in this thread on our Members' forum, of which roughly one tenth advise us to wait before publishing, and several suggest that we publish notes but not scores before prices come out. Unfortunately this last could be difficult for merely technical reasons.*

Some Purple pagers make the excellent suggestion that we Bordeaux critics should try to act in concert and I certainly intend to contact many of my peers about this issue.

One of them, Anthony Rose of The Independent *in the UK, suggested on Twitter that I should share the article below with a wider readership so I am publishing it today in our Free for all section.*

It looks, against all odds, as though Bordeaux may just have another sought-after vintage on its hands with the 2010s (see Vintage reputations - the struggle for truth). Asian markets, with the tragic exception of Japan, seem to be on fire for classic, investment-grade wines. The Americans look ready to come back into the picture for Bordeaux primeurs, having sat out 2009s to a great extent. Many economies are in a much healthier state than the British one, and even in the UK there is no shortage of potential investors with, for example, bonuses burning to find an amusing home. No wonder the UK's fine-wine traders are in such fine fettle. This year they don't even seem to be bothering to demand reasonable pricing from the top Bordeaux proprietors - who are currently rolling in cash, as any visitor to the Médoc and its myriad building projects can attest.

I have already tasted some 2010s and can see that there will be considerable interest in them. I am going back to Bordeaux twice, once at the end of this month and once at the beginning of next, to taste this embryonic vintage as thoroughly as is possible as usual, but I really do wonder what to do with my tasting notes.

In the past, thanks to considerable hard work, not just on the part of my palate, but on the part of those such as Julia Harding MW and Tamlyn Currin who have processed and edited my tasting notes with incredible speed and efficiency, we have tended to publish the Bordeaux primeurs tasting notes as soon as possible on the basis that they might be useful to you.

But there is another side to all this. Of course the American critic Robert Parker, whose detailed tasting notes on each Bordeaux primeur vintage tend to be published slightly after mine in late April, is by a long way the taster with the most influence on the subsequent opening price of individual wines. But presumably château owners take notice of other opinions too, and have been known to use any enthusiastic note and score to justify a hefty price. Stepping a long way back from the whole business of being a diligent reporter, I can see that I play a part in a process that really does not benefit the consumer.

Setting aside for the moment the vexed, complex and extremely important question of the validity of primeur samples and how closely in each case they are likely to resemble the finished wine that is bottled so long after the primeurs showings, I do increasingly feel like a pawn in a game designed to part you with as much money as possible. At least when I publish my burgundy primeurs tasting notes, most of the prices are already fixed. And Burgundians operate in a world very distant from that determined by scores. In Bordeaux we commentators publish our assessments weeks and sometimes months

before opening prices are eventually decided upon, after long discussions between all parties involved (see How the most expensive vintage ever was sold). Although of course some other factors are used to determine individual prices, we commentators have become part of the bait. And it's a game played by the proprietors, the courtiers, the négociants, and not least by those who sell you the wines using our scores.

I sat next to Anthony Hanson MW of Haynes Hanson & Clark and Christie's the other day and he was strongly urging me to hold off publishing individual notes and scores until the prices had been announced. 'That way you can advise your readers what's a good deal and what's not. You could be a real consumer advocate.' There is certainly a strong appeal to this approach, even if it would be fiendishly difficult to accomplish, given that the prices tend to come out in dribs and drabs over a period of at least two months. As the one Purple pager to whom I happened to mention it commented, 'Great idea in theory, though I suspect hard to implement given staggered price release strategy of Bordeaux châteaux and the pace at which they subsequently get snatched up. You can either be the enabler of the Bordelais' evil, score-driven opportunism or an irrelevant lonely voice that opines after all the action has happened. Either way, you can't win!'

I floated the idea of publishing my general views on the vintage as usual but holding off publishing individual notes and scores until prices had come out to just one négociant. He also thought I would lose out. 'Everyone else certainly will [publish] and the négociants are all waiting for the scores in order to know what they think of the wines!'

I am seriously tempted to see if I can persuade some other commentators to hold off in a similar fashion. Perhaps if enough of us do it, we might have some deflationary effect. But it is already too late for some of them, notably Americans. Ex *Wine Spectator* James Suckling, who admittedly has a new website to promote, has timed his Bordeaux tastings long before anyone else's and seems determined to ignore the official Monday 4 April embargo on publication which I and others have been asked to respect. (When I was in Bordeaux last month some of the lowlier proprietors were almost fearful of showing me their 2010s ahead of the official primeurs presentation during the week beginning 4 April.) While I'm in no hurry to publish, I can't really see the logic to this embargo when, for example, the Cercle Rive Droite have shown their primeurs wines several weeks ahead at much vaunted tastings in the UK and US - but I suppose it is all part of the Bordeaux wine trade's desire to control the whole process so as to maximise revenue.

As Anthony Hanson commented in a subsequent discussion of tactics, 'Of course if you go out on a limb, there would be screams of horror from those who are happy to be riding the current tiger. What is the fine-wine traders' role today in Bordeaux? They're hard-working, ex-hexagonal, English-speaking extensions of the powerfully controlling Bordeaux sales machine. Do you know any other fields of activity in the worlds of art or commerce where the producers, traders or artists have so totally manipulated the media to pump up prices AHEAD of the products being put on the market? If Twitter can contribute to a revolution in Cairo, can it not be put to work in Chartrons-land ?'

What do you think? Am I just wringing my wine-writing hands, or is there the germ of a sensible idea here? I'd love to know and, as soon as I am awake (I am currently, briefly, in New York), I have started this thread on our forum where I would very much welcome your comments.