

2010 - the Shakira vintage?

12 Apr 2011 by Jancis Robinson/FT but this is longer

See our [guide to Bordeaux 2010 coverage](#), including hundreds of tasting notes.

I find it hard to imagine that I will ever again encounter such successful consecutive vintages in Bordeaux as 2009 and the infant 2010s I have just been tasting. But then climate change may mean that the summer droughts largely responsible for the ripeness of these two vintages will become more common.

What is clear is that, while the likely appeal of the voluptuous 2009s resulting from steady ripening of grapes through a warm, dry summer and autumn was never in doubt, the 2010 vintage might have been very different indeed. If, as Bill Blatch of Vintex points out in his [detailed annual vintage report](#), September's hurricane Otto had followed its predicted path and brought wet, stormy weather to the Bordeaux region for the first week or so of October, we might not have seen the lovely just-ripe, concentrated Cabernets that characterise 2010. And if there had not been a usefully rainy June, the vines could have suffered from a serious lack of water during the vital ripening season of midsummer.

As it was, the defining climatic influence on the 2010 vintage was the unusual combination of a coolish summer and autumn with drought or, as semantically sensitive Bordelais like to call it, 'hydric deficit'. If the summer had been hotter, the fact that there was virtually no rain at all between the unsettled weather of mid June that affected the flowering and mid October would have stressed the vines so much that the ripening process would have shut down, and evaporation would have left the vines suffering seriously, as they did in 2003. But July and August were pretty cool and grey in Bordeaux so the vines just continued to build up sugars, flavour, tannins and pigments.

Both 2009 and 2010 have massive, record-breaking amounts of alcohol (thanks to the high sugar levels in the grapes), tannins and colour. The big difference between the vintages is in the acid levels. Thanks to the cool nights and generally lower temperatures, 2010s have much higher levels of acidity and, in some cases, the tannins taste much drier. This makes the 2010 vintage much more structured, more refreshing, and it will almost certainly demand a much longer time in bottle before the wine has softened enough to be broachable. The 2010s may well go into a shell in their youth, and several producers admitted that they happened to be tasting particularly well during last week's sunny peak primeurs tasting season. The 2009s, on the other hand, with their lower acids, taste much sweeter and gentler, and may well continue to do so throughout their lives.

Knowing in advance that the 2010s had very high levels of alcohol (Ch La Mission Haut-Brion 2010 crosses the 15% alcohol Rubicon) and notably high levels of tannin, I was rather dreading a tasting assault on my three trips to Bordeaux in the last couple of months, but in fact in the best wines the balance between all the elements seemed so convincing as to make tasting these nascent ferments quite a pleasure. In many cases the relatively high acidity brought freshness to the whole. I tasted some wines I suspected had been deacidified and they seemed strangely lifeless.

It was at the usual blind tasting of the classed growths of Margaux that any doubts I may have had about 2010 were dispelled. This collection has so often been disappointing in the past - a collection of wines that were either thin and underripe or over made-up - but the 2010s are in the main a range of confident, ripe, well-balanced wines with real vitality to them. Their counterparts from St-Julien and Pauillac to the north were, as relatively often nowadays, confidently, distinctively (and occasionally obdurately) made for the long term.

It was notable that most of the blends for the top left-bank wines were heavily dependent on Cabernet Sauvignon at the expense of Merlot. Even the restless Bruno Borie of Ch Ducru Beaucaillou has returned to a much more savoury, firm style in 2010 - and describes the last two vintages as Beyoncé (2009) and Shakira (2010). His new label for La Croix de Beaucaillou will be launched next month - at Annabel's nightclub, of course [see [Borie is Jaggered for a first-hand account](#)]. (The picture above shows a giant, four-foot-high crouching frog installed in the salon in which we tasted at Ducru, Bruno having heard that we were no great fans of his nightclub-like tasting tunnel off the cellar.)

At the far north of the Haut-Médoc there could hardly be a greater difference between the two most famous wines, however, with Ch Cos d'Estournel displaying a magnificent return to classicism with 78% Cabernet Sauvignon in the final blend, while Ch Montrose has had to absorb the 22 hectares (55 acres) of substantially Merlot vineyard acquired from Ch Phélan Ségur last year so that the proportion of Cabernet Sauvignon in Montrose's grand vin has fallen from 65% last year to 53%. But if these two properties seem to be in full evolution, Madame Capbern-Gasqueton's Ch Calon-Ségur (86% Cabernet Sauvignon) seems as immutable a monument as she does. Ex Ch Margaux winemaker Vincent Millet is

particularly proud of how he has absorbed the tannic qualities of the 2010 without diminishing the qualities of the terroir.

The least successful wines are those substantially based on right-bank Merlots grown in well-drained gravelly soils, where April to October rainfall that was only half the norm really had a serious effect. The Merlots grown on clay and limestone with their much better water retention were generally notably more successful, as at Ch Pétrus and Ausone respectively. This year Ch Cheval Blanc reverted to the old formula of Cabernet Franc dominance, to convincing classical effect.

The relatively cool August and September meant that the phenolics struggled to ripen fully and grape pips were often still green. The high alcohols encouraged extraction, so it was vital not to over-do it and leech greenness from the pips into the wine. There are too many St-Émilions and even Pomerols with painfully drying tannins on the finish, even if general winemaking practices on the right bank are less extreme than they once were.

The characteristic freshness of the 2010 vintage has translated into some really successful, nervy dry white wines. Perhaps bordeaux can take advantage with this vintage of current connoisseur disaffection with white burgundy? And this crispness, and frequent citrus-peel character, is also evident in a very particular style of vintage for sweet white bordeaux, much racier than most but, at the best properties, with no shortage of noble rot. Those who made their selections based on the very best pickings should make thoroughly satisfying wines, even if without the sheer weight and exuberance of the 2009 Sauternes.

Those are my impressions based on hundreds of samples tasted in Bordeaux this spring. Now let's see how the wines and their pricing develop.

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