Bordeaux 2008 □ last affordable vintage revisited

9 Feb 2012 by Jancis Robinson/FT but this is longer

For my tasting notes on all these wines, see Southwold 2008s – right bank and ?Southwold 2008s – left bank, and for the dinner wines, Avery-underwritten La Mission dinner.

For such a small seaside town, Southwold in Suffolk (pictured) is extraordinarily famous. The dominant company, Adnams, must have played a part in this, thanks to both the affection inspired by its ales and the company's independent ethos, which has helped to retain Southwold's individuality.

Not being a beer drinker, I enjoy an intimate relationship with this East Anglian jewel with its beach huts and butter buns for very different reasons. Like Michael Palin and countless others, I spent my teenage summer holidays here, necessitating two-day journeys to and from Cumbria in those pre-motorway days. Even today my pulse starts racing whenever I see the great ship of Blythburgh church on the horizon and know that the Southwold turn off the A12 is just around the corner.

I never thought as a teenager that I would find myself back on the greens overlooking Sole Bay in the middle of winter as part of my work, but every January an upper room at the Swan Hotel is the scene of a major reassessment of the Bordeaux vintage four years before, a chance this year to see how the 2008s have been settling in to bottle.

The wines are kindly donated by the producers themselves – the bottles sacrificed costing more and more each year – and are assiduously gathered and despatched to Southwold by Bordeaux négociant Bill Blatch of Vintex. What makes this particular tasting special is that all the wines are served blind (in suitable flights), thanks to some very hard work by Rob Chase of Adnams and Aidan Bell of DBM Wines, and are tasted and scored by a crack corps of wine merchants and writers. This year our 16 tasters included six Masters of Wine, my fellow wine writers Neal Martin and Steven Spurrier, and experienced buyers of Bordeaux from many of Britain's top wine merchants and wine traders.

Unfortunately I had to leave before the white wines were tasted but I was left with the impression that with the reds, the disparity between the top wines and the rest is particularly marked in 2008, and certainly much more than in 2009 and 2010. And although top bordeaux has become a luxury, the 2008 prices are not as silly as some, considering the quality. If you wanted to put one case of very smart red bordeaux in your cellar for consumption (how sad that I have to add this rider), 2008 is worth considering.

The left bank first growths all cost four-digit sums in pounds per dozen bottles but you could get a case of second growth St-Julien Château Leoville Poyferré, a wine that impressed us all, for £600 a dozen, or the high-flying second growth Château Pichon Longueville (Baron) for £800, when the two subsequent vintages of these wines cost up to twice as much.

What all Bordeaux lovers are now wondering is by how much the Bordelais will reduce their prices for the 2011s, made in a 'challenging' vintage, to be shown in April. I polled members of my website on what price level might persuade them to buy 2011s and most felt that the 2011s should be offered at prices lower than current 2008 prices. With a massive proportion of the 2010s unsold, this is surely one of those years when the château owners will have to eat humble pie.

The 2008 growing season was not easy either and the harvest was one of the latest ever as growers waited and waited for the grapes to ripen fully. To judge from many of the lesser wines we tasted in Southwold, full ripeness was never achieved in many cases, with many less exalted wines pretty light and austere, some with distinctly green, underripe notes. But, as always, there were exceptions. Some less expensive 2008 red Bordeaux did actually smell fully ripe and had decent fruit weight on the palate – even if they are lighter and tarter than the sumptuous 2009s and 2010s.

Left bank over-performers from the lower ranked Châteaux included Branas Grand Poujeaux, Chasse-Spleen, Grand-Puy Ducasse and Haut-Bages Libéral. I don't think they will continue to improve into the next decade but they should provide solid, classic claret to enjoy over the next eight years or so for under £250, sometimes well under £250, a dozen.

On the right bank, although winemaking has become increasingly sophisticated, there were still instances of oak and toast being used to attempt to disguise less-than-perfect fruit. It was interesting to see two wines, Châteaux d'Aiguilhe

and Joanin Bécot, from the supposedly lowly appellation Côtes de Castillon (recently renamed Castillon Côtes de Bordeaux) perform so well. Both admittedly have the advantage of being run by top St-Émilion properties, Châteaux Canon La Gaffelière and Beau-Séjour Bécot respectively, and so presumably they benefit from very superior oak and the means to make sacrifices in terms of yield and selection. Financial pressures presumably explain many disappointing 2008s among the lower ranks.

Higher up the ranks on the right bank in the Pomerol and St-Émilion appellations, both Château Pétrus and Le Pin showed particularly well, but these wines are strictly for plutocrats. I found all the wines from the J P Moueix stable – the likes of Belair-Monange, La Fleur Pétrus, Hosanna and Trotanoy – to be especially delicious and well-balanced in Southwold's blind tasting and, looking back at what I wrote about the Moueix 2008s in April 2009, I see that this confirmed my original impression.

Another early impression that was confirmed last month was that in general the Graves and Pessac-Léognan reds were particularly successful in 2008. In any tasting one flight has to come last, when palates can suffer tannin fatigue. But even though we tasted these wines at the end of a very demanding day of tasting, many Pessac-Léognans shone out. The range included some of the freshest, fruitiest, most beguiling wines, with the structure to develop well over the next 10 to 20 years. Châteaux Haut-Brion and La Mission Haut-Brion, at the very top of the tree, both compared beautifully to other first growths, while in the Pessac-Léognan flight, Branon, Carmes Haut-Brion, Domaine de Chevalier, Haut-Bailly, Malartic Lagravière and Pape Clément all showed extremely well.

In fact there was no disappointing first growth in our blind tastings. All of them, with the exception of our single bottle of Ausone, which was presumed to be in poor condition, performed as luxury goods should. I have therefore omitted first growths from my list of favourite smart red bordeaux below.

If you were looking to buy a case of big-name red bordeaux, but could not afford a first growth (nor a 2009 nor – heaven forfend – a 2010), these 2008s are all worthy of consideration.

MÉDOC
Beychevelle
Calon-Ségur
Cos d'Estournel
Dames de Montrose (second wine)
Ducru-Beaucaillou
Duhart-Milon
Lagrange
Léoville Poyferré
Lynch Bages
Malescot St-Exupéry
Palmer
Pavillon Rouge de Ch Margaux (second wine)
Petit Mouton (second wine)
Pichon Lalande
Pichon Longueville (Baron)
Pontet-Canet
Rauzan-Ségla

GRAVES
Branon
Carmes Haut-Brion
Domaine de Chevalier
Haut-Bailly
Malartic Lagravière
Pape Clément

RIGHT BANK
Angélus
Canon
Certan de May

Clinet
Clos L'Église
La Fleur de Gay
La Fleur-Pétrus
Le Gay
Hosanna
Tertre Roteboeuf
Trotanoy
Valandraud
Vieux Château Certan