Which bordeaux vintages to drink now

26 Mar 2012 by Jancis Robinson/FT

For full tasting notes, see Purple Pages of JancisRobinson.com - in particular Bordeaux 2002 at 10 years old and Bordeaux 2001 gets better and better.

I'd love people to suggest topics I might write about, but just about the only subject I am, frequently, asked to tackle is which bordeaux vintages are ready to drink.

This is a pertinent question since bordeaux is the single most popular type of wine in so many collections, and good red and sweet white bordeaux is expressly designed to age. In fact one of the (very) few ways that the high price of young bordeaux can be justified is to argue that what is being hawked is potential, and that the wine will be so much better in 10 years or so. Conversely, it's arguably a waste to open most bottles of bordeaux costing more than £20 when they are less than five or six years old - unless you are French and genetically programmed to enjoy chewy young reds.

So, which vintages of red bordeaux are drinking well now? If I had my pick, I would head of course for 1990, 1982, 1961 and 1945 - but only if I knew exactly where they had come from, these being the vintages of choice for counterfeiters thanks to their high value. Although many of the super-ripe 2009s are rather delicious already, it's a waste to drink any of the grand ones at this early stage in their doubtless long lives - though do choose 2009 if confronted with basic Bordeaux Rouge.

The youngest vintage I would contemplate opening - say in a restaurant where I knew I was paying over the odds for every bottle - would be a representative from the relatively weak 2007 vintage. The 2006s have much further to go and the 2005s need a very long time. There is simply no point in even considering the great but tannic 2005 vintage for the moment.

The mild-mannered, fairly reasonably priced 2004s are another story. I have not tasted them en masse for four years but individual bottles can provide solid pleasure, even if the lesser crus bourgeois have little more to give. La Lagune, Beychevelle, Batailley and Grand-Puy Lacoste should please without breaking the bank. La Conseillante is that rare thing, a particularly successful 2004 from the right bank - famous for St-Émilions and Pomerols - and it seems to be tasting better and better every time I encounter it. Canon is also pretty good.

I would suggest this is not a great time to be drinking wines from the freakish heatwave vintage 2003. Those without real ballast and fully ripened grapes were best enjoyed in the first, fruity flush of youth, whereas the relatively few really successful wines, generally of first-growth quality, still need lots of time.

But, all things being equal, this should be just about the right time to be broaching smarter 2002s and 2001s, both of which vintages I had a chance to re-examine en masse this month. They followed the immensely successful, well-balanced and satisfying 2000 vintage and were initially bracketed as huddling together in the shadow of the beautiful millennial year.

As time has gone on, however, the 2001s have more and more convincingly outshone the 2002s. Last week's major 10-years-on tasting of nearly 60 2002s, including all the first growths, hosted by fine-wine traders Bordeaux Index and pictured above, was disappointing. The wines, even the smartest ones, tended to have marked acidity and to be a bit lean in terms of fruit impact on the mid palate. So light is the vintage in general that, even after more than eight years in bottle, very few of these 2002s actually smell of very much. The amount of tannin evident in the wines varies enormously - presumably because of different extraction regimes - which makes it particularly difficult to generalise about how ready they are to drink.

The prices of the top 2002s look way over the top, with Chinese-inflated Lafite at around £7,200 a dozen in bond looking particularly overpriced. Best value were, I thought, in declining quality order, Domaine de Chevalier (£300), Clos du Marquis (£300), Langoa Barton (£300), Grand-Puy Lacoste (£360), Lagrange (£340), Barde-Haut (£221), La Grave à Pomerol (£220), Haut-Bergey (£180), La Tour Figeac (£168) and, another wine from the Las Cases stable like the Clos du Marquis, Potensac (£150). But these last were not particularly high-scoring wines for me - just 16/20.

My three top 2002s were all right bank, and in general the St-Émilions and Pomerols were slightly more attractive - perhaps simply because fleshier - than the more meagre norm in the Médoc and Graves on the left bank.

At the beginning of the month I also had the chance to re-taste 26 top red bordeaux and three top sweet whites from the 2001 vintage, but in very much more difficult circumstances - in a scrum in fact, just before The Wine Dinner, a luxurious annual charity fundraiser organised by wine merchant Johnny Goedhuis and his wife. I did feel a terrible nerd trying to balance my laptop on a table at the Savoy surrounded by gift bags and evening dresses. But my readers come first! Or do I mean my vinous curiosity?

In any event, however challenging, the pre-dinner tasting confirmed the quality of the vintage, even if it focused more precisely on the most famous names. In both 2002 and 2001 tastings, Domaine de Chevalier's red wines were beautifully balanced and nuanced, even if light years from blockbusters in build. They were also relatively well priced. Another over-performer in both vintages is Vieux Château Certan, which is not cheap but compared with the most sought-after Pomerols looks relatively good value.

In fact for some properties, the 2001s are currently showing better than the 2000s. This has long been true of many right-bank wines whose Merlot grapes were more adversely affected by the dry summer of 2000 than the Cabernets on the left bank. But whenever I have the chance to compare the 2001 and 2000 vintages of an arch exponent of Cabernet Sauvignon, Château Latour, the younger vintage has also been the more impressive.

As for the 2000s in general, they are delightful and quite consistent, with all but the grandest already starting to drink well. And of vintages in the last decade of the twentieth century, if I couldn't afford 1990 I would choose 1996, a vintage I examined in detail here last September. As for prices, the general absurd rule for fine bordeaux nowadays is: the older the vintage, the better the value.

The following were my favourite wines from these two recent tastings, in roughly declining order of preference, with guide prices for a dozen bottles in bond, though the 2001s listed are much better than the 2002s.

2002
Pétrus (£13,500)
Cheval Blanc (£3,000)
Vieux Château Certan (£750)
La Mission Haut-Brion (£1,250)
Margaux (£3,600)

2001
Yquem* (£5,500)
Latour (£4,800)
Rieussec* (£1,500)
Margaux (£3,800)
Lafite (£7,500)
Haut-Brion (£3,500)
Vieux Château Certan (£980)
Pichon Longueville (£950)
La Mission Haut-Brion (£1,700)

*sweet white

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