2012 wine books - Bordeaux

23 Dec 2012 by Paul O'Doherty

As in previous years Irish broadcaster and writer Paul O'Doherty reviews the year's wine books. All his views are his own - JR

Looking back over the past year on the wine bookshelves, two of the big themes have been Bordeaux and the arrival in the New World of immigrant winemakers looking to make a new life, free from political tyranny or economical hardship, or as part of the colonising crusade that united conquistador, priest and vine. Bordeaux features heavily, from encyclopaedic blends to site-specific overviews, some of which are tomes requiring coffee tables rather than shelf space. Other areas of interest include Germany, Italy, Portugal, Spain and California, along with a couple of manifestos. As usual, the pocket guides still have a place, while a couple of books have been revised and republished. And, of course, it was the year of Jancis Robinson, José Vouillamoz and Julia Harding's *Wine Grapes*, which has been extensively covered already on this site and will not be included here.

It's also noticeable that while publishers such as Bloomsbury, Mitchell Beazley, Penguin and Random House are selling multiples of cookery books, their wine selection is in the low single figures and dropping year-on-year. Now this is perfectly understandable when celebrities such as Jamie Oliver are capable of selling Christmas number ones to beat the band, and where cookery books in general are hugely popular and successful. And it is unfair to assume we are treating like with like. But, traditionally, wine books have held their own, relatively speaking, on publishing catalogues where cookery also had a significant presence. The trend nowadays is for wine books to be spread much more evenly across a wide number of publishers than find a home with one particular house. That said, it's uplifting that quality abounds with, for instance, the university presses of California, Texas and New York producing gems, while the 'vanity press' has taken up much of the slack, although I don't necessarily use 'the slack' pejoratively.

Has it been a good vintage? Well, there are some fascinating reads that grab the attention and suck you in. And some of these will become classics over time. While Bordeaux has attracted a lot of attention this year (it was Burgundy last year), newer more up-to-date books are required for other parts of France along with modern takes on Italy, Spain, England, Eastern Europe and Chile, to name but a few. And is it time, finally, for a book on China?

So, without further ado, here is a selection of the wine books of this year.

Pomerol
Neal Martin
Wine Journal Publishing
£50/$81

Neal Martin begins his excellent bumper book on Pomerol with a prologue question-and-answer session to himself that begins with the following: 'Is Motörhead an appropriate way to begin a book on Pomerol? Granted, the sentiments of *Ace of Spades* might not gel with the solemnity of its historic vineyards and deep ecclesiastical roots. But hey, why not start with a bang?' It's a weird beginning that doesn't make sense even if you know Motörhead is a British heavy metal band whose lyrics in *Ace of Spades* begin 'If you like to gamble, I tell you I'm your man. You win some, lose some, it's all the same to me. The pleasure is to play, it makes no difference what you say. I don't share your greed, the only card I need is The Ace Of Spades'. It's a risky beginning and it doesn't work, although I kind of think I know what he wants to say. From this poor start it only gets better with a history of the area researched from the few books that have been written down the ages, taking in the Romans, Knights of Malta, crusaders, the birth of monoculture, being overlooked in the 1855 classification, the early importance of the Belgian market, the legendary vintages of 1945, 1947 and 1949, the influence of Madame Edmond Loubat at Petrus and the killer frosts of 1956. The more recent history and geography provides an overview of where Pomerol is, a map of the estates and their locations, the terroir, soil, and the supremacy of Merlot along with mention of the minor players such as Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon, Malbec and Peitit Verdot and the essentials of Pomerol viticulture and vinification. All of this comprises the first section of what is essentially a book of four parts.

In the second section, Martin takes the reader through the main châteaux in alphabetical order from Beauregard to Vray

Croix de Gay with the author extremely honest in his assessment of what he finds, in a travel-writing style written in the present tense on the spot, describing what he sees and hears as he turns up and departs from each château. Each profile includes a history, what has happened in the vineyard, its take on the vinification process, what sort of wines it makes from which grape varieties, vineyard area and assessments of its wine.

The third section is another A-Z, this time thinner, documenting all the châteaux including the lesser known châteaux, second labels, and former names for some châteaux. Lastly, there is a vintage guide from 1945 to 2011 and an epilogue, returning to the question-and-answer style of the prologue, with another musical metaphor. Overall, this is a fabulous (self-published) book that's written in a relaxed easy-going style that gives weight to Martin's honesty that shines through with plenty of off-the-cuff remarks and asides, and word-for-word conversations he has heard along the way that make this one of the best books of the year.

Bordeaux Legends
The 1855 First Growth Wines
Châteaux Haut-Brion, Lafite Rothschild, Latour, Margaux and Mouton Rothschild
Jane Anson
Éditions de la Martinière
£35/$56

After a short prologue outlining events surrounding the elevation of Château Mouton Rothschild to first growth status in 1973, and a foreword from Francis Ford Coppola, Jane Anson (*Decanter*'s Bordeaux correspondent) in her introduction captures the tone and the pace of life in Bordeaux during September as the arrival of the new vintage gets ever nearer. Evoking this nervousness and anticipation she quickly assembles the blend: the seasonal rise in employment, the caravan of migrant pickers, the meteorologists, oenologists and consultants stoking the fires of expectation, and the caterers keen to feed the mouths that will pick what could be the perfect vintage. Despite the manic activity throughout Bordeaux and its environs, home to a multitude of vineyards whose employment supports much of local workforce, it is, as Anson acknowledges, the first growths who 'dominate the psychological landscape'.

Her introduction aside, Anson's aim in this gorgeously produced tribute to Bordeaux's wine aristocracy (stylishly and atmospherically photographed by Isabelle Rozenbaum) is to understand why what's perfect about the five first growths has given them the power to dominate not only an entire wine region but also the world of fine wine beyond it. In an easy to follow style, she tells the story of Bordeaux from its time in short trousers to the flashy handmade suits who promote it and set the prices on the *place* today, beginning with a history of the various châteaux. Characters and innovators abound. For instance, Arnaud 111 de Pontac from Haut-Brion, who did some extraordinary work on pushing the limits of 17th century maceration and preservation and coming up with the idea of branding a château. Or Mouton's Jean Louis de Nogaret de La Valette, Duc d'Eperon, who had the brainwave of asking the Dutch hydraulic engineer Jen Leeghwater to draw up plans to drain the marshes of the Médoc in the same century. The narrative also explores the importance of the Garonne, the links with Ireland, the impact of the 1789 revolution, the need for deep pockets after the French Revolution, and the role of politics before the year zero of 1855. From the period surrounding the 1855 classification that reshaped Bordeaux forever, Anson untangles the politics of being a first or second growth, the Mouton question and how it took nearly 120 years of pushing and shoving from Mouton's owners to finally get its rightful place at the top table, much of it as a consequence of the Association of Four or Les Quatres Grands Noblesse Oblige's attempts to rub Baron Philippe de Rothschild up the wrong way by wilfully flaunting the symbolism of the 'magic quartet' when de Rothschild was clearly of the opinion that that number should be a quintet. In the final chapters, the focus turns to the five's unity, emphasising the effects of estate-bottling, the Club de Neuf – the realisation that Château d'Yquem and the right bank Cheval Blanc, Ausone and Petrus all share a common identity of greatness, research, soil mapping, en primeur pricing, and the future. If there is a mild criticism it is that the print is certainly on the faint side, but overall it's a thoroughly entertaining history that, at times, reads like a novel and is without doubt one of the books of the year.

The Complete Bordeaux
The Wines, The Châteaux, The People
Revised Edition
Stephen Brook
Mitchell Beazley
£45/$60

Five years on from its first edition 2007, Stephen Brook has a new version on the shelves reviving much of the high standard from the previous incarnation. In a similar size, Brook covers everything from the history of Bordeaux to

essential information on the 13,000 wineries that congregate in the region's 54 appellations, including updates on new owners, breakdown of grape varieties in percentage terms and overall production figures. One final observation, for what it's worth: the 2007 edition was £5/$8 cheaper.

Bordeaux
The Wines, The Vineyards, The Winemakers
Revised and Updated
Oz Clarke
Pavilion
£25/$40

On the Bordeaux revisionary vibe, Oz Clarke returns to one of his favourite subjects after the last revision in 2009. Covering Bordeaux is his own inimitable style, Clarke's book is less encyclopaedic and more succinct than Brook's as well as being far more colourful in design. Early on it covers sections on why Bordeaux matters, its grape varieties and wines, its regions, what happens in the vineyard and winery, Bordeaux as a business and wine tourism among other topics. Getting to the bulk of the book, the Médoc, Graves and Pessac-Léognan, the right bank, the Côtes and the area's sweet wines are all covered in greater detail. However, if you're happy with your 2009 copy, there's not a lot in this copy that's changed save for the odd photograph and the movement of a few lines. Not that that should be taken as anything other than as a recommendation. And, for what it's worth: the 2012 edition is the same price as the 2009 one.

Bordeaux St-Estèphe
The Wines of a Great Commune
David Copp
Inform and Enlighten
£9.99/$16
In a year when there are quite a few hearty books on Bordeaux, it's niceto come across one that's a little less of a leviathan and focused on just one area. David Copp, a wine journalist with background in marketing in the UK wine and spirits trade, has written a love letter to St-Estèphe that's personal, insightful and to the point. He begins with a history of Bordeaux covering the arrival of the Romans, the Dark Ages with the Vandals and Visigoths, the English connection via Henry Plantagenet and Eleanor of Aquitaine, Samuel Pepys' reference to Ho-Bryan, the planting of the Médoc, the expansion of markets, the connection to America, Germany, Holland and Ireland, revolution, estate bottled wines, the 1855 classification, the arrival of phylloxera, and the evolution to where we are now. He also discusses climate soil and grape varieties, how wine is made in St-Estèphe and gives his assessment of the 2009 and 2010 vintages.

In the later half of the book, Copp turns his attention to the châteaux around Marbuzet including Cos d'Estournel, Montrose, Cos Labory and Haut Marbuzet, those around St-Estèphe itself from Calon-Ségur to Ségur de Cabanac, those around Pez and St Corbain such as De Pez and Le Boscq, and finally those around Leysac from Lafon-Rochet to Léo de Prades. In the final chapter Copp offers general views on the future of wine before providing an analysis of St-Estèphe with the recommendation that those travelling to the area 'can experience at first hand some of the wines of the century at very sensible prices'. Overall, this is a handy ready-reckoner on an important Bordeaux commune.

Saint-Émilion
Philippe Dufrenoy and Jean-Maire Laugery
Féret
€50/$80
This is a somewhat unusual book that's full of the life and people of Saint-Émilion - including artists, stonecutters, chefs, artists and fishermen - as well as showcasing its churches, architecture, bookshops, rooftops, flowers, music and museums. It's also got short, sharp portraits of Château Pavie's Gérard Perse, Château Figeac's Thierry Manoncourt (who died in 2010), and Château Faugères' Silvio Denz among other mentions of wine-related topics such as Château Cheval Blanc and wine schools. This is a glossy, well-presented celebration of Saint-Émilion but is not of any real interest to wine enthusiasts.