



**Written by**  
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## Bordeaux 2015 reassessed at Southwold-on-Thames



*A version of this article is published by the Financial Times. Here are overall comments on the 261 bordeaux 2015s tasted blind in this year's Southwold-on-Thames review of the vintage. See also [Bordeaux 2015 - the guide](#) for links to the three tasting articles on which these comments are based.*

It's that time of year again. When my teeth are assailed by the onslaught of more than 250 smart bordeaux that are less than four years old during the annual Southwold-on-Thames horizontal tastings. They started off in the Suffolk seaside town but now take place in the Thames-side offices of fine-wine traders Farr Vintners, where, even if the wines are disappointing, the views certainly aren't. Most of the châteaux kindly provide sample bottles that are collected and ferried over to London by Bordeaux specialists Bill Blatch and Hamish

Wakes-Miller.

Over two and half days nearly 20 of us wine professionals this year assessed wines from the 2015 vintage in flights of up to 12 similar wines, knowing what was in each flight but not which glass contained which wine. And, as you can see from the picture of the team at work, we take it Very Seriously.

At the end of each of these assessments we're all asked to rank the vintages of this century in order of quality. The consensus, after tasting all these 2015s, was that the vintage was not as good as 2010, 2009, 2005 or 2000 but it managed to pip 2001 and then 2014 to take fifth place.

There were few absolute knock-out wines among the 2015s, even though we were lucky enough to taste all the left-bank first growths and those wines on the right bank of the Gironde (St-Émilion and Pomerol) that are regarded as, or regard themselves as, their equivalents.

Among these most famous names, those that impressed me most on the day were Chx Ausone, Cheval Blanc, La Mission Haut-Brion and Mouton-Rothschild. But there were some quite lowly names whose wines showed extremely well when tasted blind. They are listed below and include such bargains as Ch Capbern, from a St-Estèphe property run by the same capable team as Ch Calon-Ségur. The 2009, made when it used to be called Ch Capbern Gasqueton, incorporating the name of the previous owner, was another **stunning bargain** that is still holding up well.

Another St-Estèphe taken for a very much grander one – not for the first time in the Southwold blind tastings – was Ch Meyney, part of the portfolio of **wine properties owned by the bank Crédit Agricole** and clearly very well run. Owner of Farr Vintners Stephen Browett reported that Justerinis were selling this wine for under £200 a case in bond just after many tasters had mistaken it for the much grander Ch Montrose 2015 (well over £1,000 a case in bond). Meyney 2012 was a **wine of the week** in 2017.

Popular wine lore has it that in 2015 quality is markedly higher in the southern Médoc (Margaux in particular) than in the northern Médoc (St-Julien, Pauillac and, especially St-Estèphe) because of some particularly heavy, diluting rain in the north close to harvest. In fact the St-Estèphes performed better than expected, and it was the St-Julien flight that was most consistent and most impressive – even more so than the Pauillacs. Margaux were indeed much better than they have been in the past, with several properties that used to be disappointing firmly on the right track, whatever the rainfall pattern of a particular year.

On the right bank, the encouraging signs evident in last year's tasting of the 2014s that **St-Émilions were calming down** and were tasting less extracted, alcoholic and exaggerated were not, alas, replicated in the 2015s. There were even some horrors among the higher ranks of St-Émilions, although in general the higher-ranking examples were less obviously extracted than the lesser wines.

The effect of 2015's particularly hot, dry midsummer weather on Merlot grapes may be part of the explanation rather than wilful retrograde steps on the part of the winemakers. These were wines high in alcohol, many of them more than 14.5%, although admittedly overt oakiness is no longer evident. In contrast to what we saw with the 2014s, the 2015 Pomerols were generally more impressive than the St-Émilions, following the general rule.

Too many of the red Pessac-Léognans suffered from the same rather grating, drying finishes as the less successful St-Émilions, but the really thrilling aspect of this year's tastings were the

white wine flights, two of them based on white Pessac-Léognans.

My first Southwold tasting was in the 1970s (even if there have been gaps) but I cannot remember another vintage in which the three-and-half-year-old dry whites were quite so impressive. There have been other vintages – 2013, 2011 and 2007, for example – when the sweet whites outshone Bordeaux's famous reds by quite a margin. And 2015 was a great, great year for the better sweet whites too, but the dry whites were also exceptionally good.

The very first flight of the session was a collection of the better dry whites. We usually expect to work up towards a crescendo on the first day but with the 2015s, we enjoyed the highest-scoring first flight ever. The two top whites from the Clarence Dillon stable – Haut-Brion Blanc and La Mission Haut-Brion Blanc – were distinctly superior, as well they might be at the price.

On the other hand, Champs Libres, the ambitious Fronsac-grown Sauvignon Blanc from the Guinaudeau family best-known for Ch Lafleur in Pomerol (another top scorer in 2015) belied its lowly AOC Bordeaux appellation and gave every sign of having a long and glorious future. Alas it is not underpriced – but it stood its own ground along with much more famous names.

As for the sweet wines, the best 2015 Sauternes were the best wines we tasted, with Yquem, Rieussec, La Tour Blanche, Lafaurie Peyraguey and de Fargues being truly outstanding. Surely the spotlight of fashion will once more shine on these marvels? Silvio Denz, owner of Lalique crystal and the right-bank properties Chx Faugères, Péby-Faugères and Cap-de-Faugères, certainly seems to think so. He has recently converted Ch Lafaurie Peyraguey in the middle of the hardly lively Sauternes countryside into a luxury hotel. To celebrate the 400th anniversary of the property he has apparently installed a copy of an oak barrique made of Lalique crystal there.

The 2015 whites may be exceptional but the reds are probably less so, and not destined for the very long term. Having tasted a wide range of the smart 2016 bordeaux last October – though not as many wines and not the first growths as at the Southwold tasting – I was left with the impression that 2016 is a better, brighter and more intense overall vintage than 2015, certainly for reds. It will be interesting to see how it is ranked after next year's Southwold tasting.

### **2015s TO LOOK OUT FOR**

Few of these 2015 reds are cheap, but they all outperformed their status and prices in my recent blind tastings.

#### **BY THE BOTTLE**

##### **Ch Saintayme, St-Émilion**

£17.20 Tanners

##### **La Chenade, Lalande-de-Pomerol**

£20.95 Lea & Sandeman

##### **Ch Capbern, St-Estèphe**

£22 Averys, BBC Good Food Wine Club, Laithwaites, Sunday Times Wine Club

##### **Ch Meyney, St-Estèphe**

£26 Averys, BBC Good Food Wine Club, Laithwaites, Sunday Times Wine Club

#### **BY THE CASE**

**Ch Carignan, Cadillac**

£84 a dozen in bond, Farr Vintners

**Allées de Cantemerle, Haut-Médoc**

£135 a dozen in bond, Farr Vintners

**Ch La Garde, Pessac-Léognan**

£165 a dozen in bond, Berry Bros & Rudd

**Farr Vintners Pauillac**

£180 a dozen in bond, Farr Vintners

(2015 vintage of The Wine Society's Exhibition Pauillac will be the same wine)

**Ch Les Cruzelles, Lalande-de-Pomerol**

£100 for six in bond, Justerinis & Brooks

**Baron de Brane, Margaux**

£240 a dozen in bond, Goedhuis