

DECORUM
VINTNERS
wine merchants

2009

Bordeaux

initial musings....

2009 BORDEAUX

We're back from, without doubt, the most strenuous week in the wine trade diary - for all of you who might envy several days swanning around Bordeaux, tasting 140 odd wines a day soon puts a different sheen on the whole experience. Half the passengers on our return flight on Good Friday, were either merchants or journalists, and all looked rather broken and weary...Easter week-end has been perfect for detox and recovery.

So, what to report and should you buy these wines? OH YES YOU SHOULD! Of that there is no question. However, selection is the key and that is precisely why we spend a week in Bordeaux sorting the great from the merely good and discarding the bad from the equation altogether. What of the vintage across the board? Well, it's perhaps not a great vintage in the true sense of the word: **GREAT** vintages tend to exude quality throughout the card, from Cru Classé to Bordeaux Supérieur (with 2005 the perfect example), and 2009 does not have the necessary consistency across all appellations to be given that status. But hold on: where the wines are good, they are **STELLAR**; stupendous; stunning, some of the most superb young red wines we have ever tasted. They exhibited quite extraordinary freshness, balance and harmony, where the concentration of fruit easily held in check the high alcohol and tannin. Meanwhile, at the other end of the scale, we tasted plenty of claret that was unhinged, where harsh, unripe, and green tannins swamped the fruit on the mid-palate, and, more importantly, on the finish.

Why was this? It became clear that one of the more crucial elements to the growing season was the date of picking: all our favourite wines were those when the grapes were picked from the last few days of September through to the middle of October. This allowed the grapes to absorb some heavy rain in mid-September, bringing some freshness to offset a very dry and warm August; and it also enabled the grapes to reach perfect phenolic maturity - the fruit was always there (hence its intensity, and the accompanying alcoholic content), but the tannins required the extra days to ripen and soften.

We also came across the predictable run of over-extraction (mainly focused, as per usual, on the right bank), where too much contact with the skins during fermentation reminded one of what it's like to suck on a tea-bag, and it was often leaning more towards PG than Lapsang Souchong.

Consequently, the over-riding impression is that 2009, in clichéd sporting terms, is very much a game of two halves - we can already imagine Alan Hansen shaking his head, the word "poo-er" being used to describe various right bank offerings, while Andy Gray would be beside himself with excitement at the quality in Pauillac and Saint Julien. And perhaps a quick caveat at this point: we felt that the vintage was not particularly weighted to one side or other of the Gironde, it was merely an issue of the wine-making quality. We found delicious things in Pomerol, Saint Emilion, and even in some of the satellite communes.

But enough of all this, we know what it all comes down to...quite simply, price. Sterling. The euro. And on top of this, how will our Asian friends view this “en primeur” lark? They have been used to buying physical stock, as their thirst for claret has dramatically increased, yet they won't see their purchases for a couple of years. And will they stick to their favourite 1st growths (one shudders at what they might cost), thereby leaving us to get on with the “lower” end, where we hope the vintage is really going to count? And we haven't even begun to factor in a certain American wine critic from Maryland...

Anyway, enough conjecture, here are a few thoughts that sprang to mind, now that the dust has settled...

Pomerol

One always expects this legendary name to cough up total gems, and that is probably the reason that one has felt much underwhelmed all-too-often. So, very good news to report that there were indeed some proper stars, alongside the usual suspects such as VCC. Clinet had found some succulent fruit to balance its traditional sturdy style, while Conseillante provided a perfect contrast in its understated elegance. Beauregard, we hope, will be at a more affordable ‘tariff’! We also very much liked Nenin, and its ‘second’ wine, Fugue.

Saint Emilion

The old school of Canon and Figeac were on very good form, especially the latter. Of the more modern styles, Angelus, Pavie Macquin and Troplong Mondot were excellent, although the latter was a cause for contention: some thought it over-blown - yes, there was plenty of stuffing and extract, but it was also packed with unbelievably intense fruit. The Jonathan Malthus stable at Teyssier was impeccable (watch out for Teyssier itself, and Vieux Chateau Mazerat), and we found plenty of superb things slightly below the radar: Bellefont-Belcier, Larmande and Yon Figeac, to name but three, and there was a welcome return to the table for La Couspaude. And one wonderful wild-card popped up, Chateau Milens...

Right bank satellites

There were some good things in Fronsac: we've shipped Chateau de la Riviere in the past, and we've always liked Chateau de la Dauphine. One surprise was La Vieille Cure, showed well at two tastings, packed with rich blueberry fruit. From the Cote de Francs, we liked Chateau de Franc's top blend (“Les Cerisiers”), hardly surprising when the Bouard team of Angelus are now involved. We're hoping to find some excellent value here.

Saint Estephe

The abiding memory will be of tasting at Cos and then immediately afterwards, at Montrose: the differences were extraordinary, the former a blockbuster (like Troplong, we feel this wine will divide opinion), the latter softer, and yet both having 65% of Cabernet Sauvignon in their

respective blends. Terroir, eh? Lafon-Rochet did its job, as always, while Les Ormes de Pez was glorious, one of the finest examples from this Cazes-owned (Lynch-Bages) estate. NB: Montrose own Tronquoy Lalande in Saint Estephe, and their second wine, Sainte Anne, was completely delicious for early drinking.

Pauillac

The superstar commune? Quite possibly. Difficult to know where to start! Both Rothschild teams showed brilliantly, with the lower orders of Duhart, Clerc Milon, and d'Armailhac holding their places effortlessly against their sibling 1st growths. Francois-Xavier Borie's duo of Haut-Batailley and Grand-Puy-Lacoste oozed class and sophistication, while Lynch-Bages and Pichon-Baron slugged it out with buckets of fruit, complexity, and length, Pichon Comtesse looking on serenely (very poised, very elegant and restrained, just as it should be). But perhaps our favourite wine was Pontet-Canet: utterly sublime.

Saint Julien

Ducru or Las Cases? We think it's about time we rolled out the Jacqueline Bisset/Charlotte Rampling comparison once again, it's been a few years...Ducru just a bit more showy, Las Cases reserved, even stern. Both parties' 'second' wines were also top drawer, although Jean-Eugene Borie was keen to stress that La Croix de Beaucaillou is now made from certain plots, just like Clos du Marquis. NB: Las Cases now has a proper 'second' wine called Le Petit Lion. Moving on, the Bartons: more flesh and juice than usual, which made us like them enormously, less traditional severity, whereas Branaire was much more classic, as was Poyferre. Talbot and Gruaud Larose were spot-on, no change of plot there, leaving us with Beychevelle: their best effort since 2005, indubitably.

Margaux

This was an easy commune to sort. Firstly, Palmer was exquisite, and the Alter Ego vies for the greatest 'second' wine of the vintage. Secondly, there were some superb wines made in a more muscular style than might be 'typique' to Margaux: Giscours, Malescot, and Rauzan-Segla hit the back of the net with ease, with d'Issan hard on their heels. Thirdly, there were two properties that had produced elegant, feminine claret, as befits etc., namely Brane-Cantenac and du Tertre. But, as for the remainder, there was nothing with which we felt comfortable.

Haut-Medoc, Medoc, Moulis, Listrac

Breaking news: Poujeaux and Chasse-Spleen both came back with a vengeance in 2009. Meanwhile La Lagune and Cantemerle were also very good performers. Chateau Cissac made a typically chunky, spicy wine: no great subtlety, but the tannins were ripe and supple. There were three pleasant surprises: one was Beaumont - yes, it's a staple glass of claret, but often a bit hollow, yet the '09 really had some proper weight of fruit; likewise, La Tour de By (we

cannot believe we've just written those words...); and finally, Sociando-Mallet - this has often been like chewing on a plank, such is the grip it can exert, but in '09 was characterised by layers of soft blackberries. Oh, and we mustn't forget Potensac, that old stalwart.

Pessac-Leognan

Without doubt, our most disappointing afternoon. First, the whites: they seemed to lack acidity, coming over as rather flat, clumsy, flabby even, the one exception being (predictably) Domaine de Chevalier. Having said that, Denis Dubourdiou managed to get some freshness and zip to his Clos Floridene blanc. As for the reds...we found ourselves going back to taste several wines, thinking that perhaps they weren't quite as bad as feared...they were! Dry, austere, unripe tannins abounded, and only one wine is a cast-iron candidate for purchase: (predictably) Domaine de Chevalier.

Sauternes, Barsac

Quite easy here: alas, it's not a great year for our favourite stickies - the wines are good, solid, steady, but very few stood out. For us, Doisy-Vedrines edged out its neighbour, Daene, while Rieussec was beautifully made, as always. Lafaurie-Peyraguey and La Tour Blanche were good efforts. The best two wines were the two "Yquem-esque" properties: Raymond-Lafon and de Fargues, both with wonderful concentration, yet neither cloying.

All wines will be offered subject to our standard PRIMEUR terms and conditions
and wines will be offered at opening prices subject to remaining available, until 30th September 2010.

Minimum order: 1 case

Carriage, duty & vat will be due upon shipment, spring 2012.

E&OE.