

Food & Drink

A tasting that gave me so much pleasure



Jancis Robinson
Wine

As you read this I may well be in Bordeaux, almost certainly with my nose deep in a sample of the highly touted 2009 vintage. I will report on whether the hype is justified in a couple of weeks but I had the most delightful reminder last week of just what the fuss over red bordeaux is all about.

Tasted young it can be a bit of an assault, chock full of astringent tannins, blackening colour and marked acidity. But the point of red bordeaux at all levels except the most basic is that it has to be aged in bottle before it provides real drinking pleasure – if you're lucky. At the very top level, first growths and the like, there are rarely disappointments nowadays because the proprietors can afford to cosset the vines and choose only the *crème de la crème* of what was produced each year for their signature wine. But lower down the ranks it is not difficult to find some pretty boring wines, especially in lesser vintages. Mid and lower range 2007s, 2006s and 2002s are usually competent, for example, but rarely inspiring. The real excitement of bordeaux for me comes from vintages that are so consistently successful that you can find delicious wines at virtually all prices and quality levels.

I liked 2000 bordeaux from the start and found many of the well-priced Haut-Médoc minor châteaux really rather inspiring when I first tasted this vintage in April 2001, and again in 2003 just after it had gone into bottle. At a more elevated level, 2000 has tended to show well in vertical tastings (different vintages of the same château) ever since but it was only last week that I had a chance to participate in a really wide-ranging horizontal tasting (same vintage, various different châteaux) of top quality 2000 bordeaux now that it is 10 years old and has benefited from at

least eight years' bottle age. Fine wine traders Bordeaux Index called in or bought samples from 48 of the top addresses – from Château Pétrus down to Château Chasse-Spleen – and showed them in London to assorted wine commentators in the morning and 50 of their best customers in the afternoon. Rarely has such a tasting given me so much pleasure.

What I love about this vintage is that in almost all cases the grape obviously ripened properly (unlike so many Bordeaux vintages) and yet it has delightful freshness (unlike 2003), gentle tannins (unlike 2005) and seriously impressive harmony.

Even my least favourite wine in this selection, Château Belair in St-Emilion, which has since been taken in hand by JP Moueix of Libourne whose team also make Château Pétrus, is a perfectly nice drink at this advanced stage in its life. It is less intense than most 2000s and is very definitely in the ancient rather than modern style of winemaking on the right bank of the Gironde but it should please traditionalists looking for a fully mature, subtle, if not exactly wondrously complex 10-year-old wine. It contrasted dramatically with its near-neighbour Château Angélus, one of the more successful exponents of a more modern, fruit-driven, glamorous and attention-grabbing style – although Angélus is selling at almost four times the price of Belair.

Though I knew the identity of the wines I was tasting, I had the pleasure, and advantage for true objective assessment, of tasting them without a record of their prices to hand. While there was a strong correlation between my scores and current prices, with most of what I felt were the most exciting wines selling for depressingly high prices (Château Lafite

2000 at £17,000 a dozen, anyone?), there are still some underpriced 2000s.

Most obvious is Château Lagrange, the renovated St-Julien property, which is currently trading at around £480 for a case of a dozen bottles and can be found in the UK for as (relatively) little as £45 a bottle at Davy's of London. This was the epitome of non flashy claret with beautiful balance and still serious potential to age and gain even more complexity.

Even more discreet, and perhaps aimed more at classicists, is Domaine de Chevalier whose track record is such as to reassure anyone who finds a slight lack of fireworks in the 2000 at present. Summertown Wine Café of Oxford is offering it at £49.95 a bottle – not quite

such a bargain as the Lagrange, I think, but all six of the Pessac-Léognans shown in this retrospective tasting were looking delightful, with Haut-Bailly and Smith Haut-Lafitte also offering reasonably good value, albeit at slightly higher prices than Domaine de Chevalier. It's hard to see why the flashier Château Pape-Clément should cost almost twice as much as they do at nearly £900 a case.

At first growth-or-equivalent level, the two most famous Pessac-Léognans, Châteaux Haut-Brion and especially its stablemate La Mission Haut-Brion, look like the best value, trading at below £6,000 a case whereas all the Médoc first growths (apart from the China-inflated Lafite) are around £8,000 a case. But then, at this level, much of the wine is being sold to investors rather than drinkers.

Let us return to what wine is for: drinking. Most of the wines in this tasting were beginning to drink well, even if their life expectancies varied hugely. The only wines I would firmly stash away before even thinking of broaching them were Châteaux La Conseillante and Clinet in Pomerol (a very successful appellation); Rauzan-Ségla and Margaux in Margaux; Branaire-Ducru, Langoa-Barton, Léoville-Barton and, definitely, Léoville-Las Cases in St-Julien; Grand-Puy-Lacoste, Lafite, Mouton and Latour in Pauillac; Montrose and Cos in St-Estèphe; Ausone in St-Emilion; and La Mission and Haut-Brion in Pessac-Léognan. But not all of these still-tight wines were necessarily the best wines. This vintage seems to have produced some great wines that could already give pleasure but will still clearly be doing so in 20 or 30 years. Start to open any lesser examples you own. Gloat over the rest.

More columns at www.ft.com/robinson

Best Bordeaux 2000s

Top scorers

Pétrus
Latour
Lafite
La Mission Haut-Brion
Eglise Clinet
Cheval Blanc
Léoville-Las Cases

Best value

Lagrange
Langoa-Barton
Grand-Puy-Lacoste
Domaine de Chevalier
Haut-Bailly
Smith Haut-Lafitte
Du Tertre

See Purple pages of www.jancisrobinson.com for full tasting notes and scores and www.winesearcher.com for international stockists