

Some like it hot!

THE MEDIA charade for Bordeaux's top chateaux in the 2003 vintage is now nearly over. Journalists and wine commentators descended on Bordeaux to taste the *primeurs* of this much hyped-up vintage.

Parker gave his comments and eventually his blessing two to three weeks later than usual and since then, his followers bought up more or less the whole vintage. It took Chateau Angelus (St Emilion 1ère GCC*) seven and a half minutes to sell their entire production and Grand Puy Lacoste (Pauillac 5ème GCC) not much longer – with a 47 per cent increase in price. Mouton Rothschild (Pauillac 1ère GCC), one of the best performers, and Cos D'Estournell (St-Estephe 2ème) also sold out.

I have been travelling to Bordeaux around this time for well over 10 years and I must admit I find the whole business of early tastings (*primeurs*), which are barrel samples of basically unfinished wine, a bit of a farce, designed more for wine speculators than wine lovers.

Sure, you will find lots of fruit and lots of sweet-tasting oak. Some will be stronger and richer, some will have more staying power. In extreme cases some will be blended specifically to taste one way or the other. But the fact remains that these are wines that have a long way to go before being finished, blended and bottled.

Many wine people in Bordeaux are sceptical about the way the whole business of wine is developing. John Kolassa of Chateau Rauzan Segla (Margaux 2ème GCC) and director of one of the most important merchant houses, said that the importance given by the media as

well as the trade, to the *primeur* tastings is way overestimated. Of course, one might argue that this is good for business. It moves the wine and cash quickly from the producer, to the merchant to customer within three years.

But the biggest danger to all is that while the demand for hyped-up vintages is growing all the time, other less hyped vintages are left and forgotten. This has two important results: it hikes up the prices of the so-called good vintages while leaving relatively good vintages in the shadow.

And let's face it. At this level there is no such thing as a bad wine. Vineyard/winery technology and knowhow has now moved to such levels that one can almost be guaranteed a good result at the end.

Eventually I think that the Bordeaux producers and merchants, and why not, real wine lovers, will come out of this dangerous spiral. I have already noticed that more and more merchants and even individual chateaux are repositioning their whole trading structure giving more importance to direct sales and marketing.

Still, here is a brief general report on 2003. This was the hottest and earliest vintage since the end of the 19th century. Flowering took place in mid-May, a week earlier than average. Some problems with *couleur* and *millerandage* brought estimated yields down by as much as 30 per cent but not much significant worries until the end of July.

Both June and July were dry and very hot as was August. In mid-August the vines were terribly under stress and a lot of grapes were burnt. Some canopy management helped to protect the bunches. The harvest

WINE TALK

by Michael Tabone

started in mid-August for whites and early September for the Merlot – three weeks earlier than average.

Wines from well established vineyards with clay soils or sub-soils are typified with excellent ripeness, high alcohol, good colour and extract. Where the soils have a small content of clay or are sandy, the grapes suffered from the extreme heat of July and August and especially the Merlot came into the wineries a bit grilled/raisined with somewhat low acidity.

In the ten days I spent in Bordeaux I visited and tasted a number of properties and wines. I am just going to tell you about some of them...

Let me start in St Emilion. *Angelus* has been one of the top performers over the last 15 years or so. Their 2003 as well as the owner's new wine in Lalande de Pomerol, called *La Fleur de Bouard*, were the stars in their respective appellations. The former did particularly well due to the high content of old Cabernet Franc on clay soils. Thick, rich and dense, dark purple with lots of extract, dark fruits and colour. Spicy and full bodied with very ripe tannins.

Here we also tasted 1997 and 1995. 1997, which is considered a lesser year, is drinking very well now. Great smoothness and integration of fruit and tannins. The 1995, a bigger wine altogether, needs more time to give its full potential.

At *Chateau Laroze* (GCC) the emphasis is in natural viticulture and selection of the very best grapes to go into the Grand Vin. New, state-of-the-art equipment has been put in to facilitate three selections: very best, good and not so good. The best will obviously go into making Laroze while the good will go into making Laroze's second wine. I have a feeling we will be seeing a lot more of this in Bordeaux! 2003 at Laroze has a deep colour, lots of fruit on the nose, if slightly raisined. Tannins are firmer than usual giving a more structured Laroze than usual.

Chateau La Serre (GCC). There was a tasting of this wine at the Radisson earlier this year. The wines here are consistent and rather traditional in approach. Not overextracted, supple with a fine aroma in their youth and a mesmerising, gamey bouquet when mature. Their 2001 is very drinkable and highly enjoyable. Of course with a lot to go.

Chateau Soutard (GCC) is a wine made for traditional wine lovers too. The 2003 varietal samples of different size and wood barrels (oak and acacia) was a learning experience. François de Ligneris, one of the most colourful and controversial wine growers in St Emilion, is well in balance with his land, his wine and customers. The philosophy here is to

make supple wines that are easy to drink and that have the staying power to develop a real sense of place. "That way", he says "we can truly be united for as long as possible".

Chateau La Bonnelle is well known in Malta. This small Grand Cru has been improving year after year. 2003 produced very ripe fruit which were handled very well in the winery. Lots of red fruits with ripe, supple tannins. Bigger and bolder than usual. More bite and extract. Their 2000 is possibly the best wine in bottle from this property yet. Just beginning to drink well. Round soft, fruity tannins and a fine aroma of red fruits and spices.

Leaving St Emilion heading westwards to the other side of the Gironde, our first appointment was in Pauillac. *Mouton Rothschild* (Pauillac 1ère GCC) needs no introduction to most wine lovers. Their 2003 is being called the most successful wine in the commune of Pauillac. Rich, solid, with a lot of extract and full, ripe tannins. This will definitely reward patience. A bomb of a wine with a minimum of 15 years to start opening up and a potential of well over 30 years.

Equally good, but in a softer style is *Chateau Clerc Milon* (Pauillac 5ème). This estate is also owned by the Mouton team and I must say they did a very good job in 2003. Very good value. Get some if you can.

Also in Pauillac, *Chateau Pichon Longueville Comtesse de Lalande* (Pauillac 2ème) consistently produce great wine. The style here is softer than the normal Pauillacs due to the high percentage of Merlot in the vineyard, but 2003 has a firmer structure than usual. Fine and elegant with velvety tannins. Their 1999 is equally interesting, slightly more advanced. Beautiful now and over the next eight to ten years.

Mme de Lencquesaing has also bought a property within the Haut Medoc Appellation called *Chateau Bernadotte*. This is also an interesting wine. We tasted it in 2001, a year not to be pushed aside. Soft and round, but with a firm, tannic structure. Good value too.

Let's just say that *Grand Puy Lacoste* 2003 is very good. Lots of fruit and spices, rich and for the long haul. The interest here were the many vintages that we tasted. 2001 once again proves how good this vintage is. 1999 softer and much more advanced. 1990 rich and gamey but the highlight was the 1985. Complex, earthy with a real sense of place. This is what wine is all about.

Further north in St Estephe, *Cos D'estournel* was one of the top performers in 2003. Stylish and elegant with silky tannins. Lots of ripe fruit,

For your diary

- December 7-10: Visit by the Jurade of Saint-Emilion, including a piano recital by Brian Schembri at the Manoel Theatre.
- March 2005: Visit by Jean Guillaume Prats (Cos D'estournel), May Elaine de Lencquesaing (Pichon Comtesse Lalande) and Hubert de Bouard (Angelus).

jam packed in a solid structure destined for the long haul. 2001 is also magnificent. The same silky tannins but with a softer structure. Very nice now and over the next five to seven years.

Moving south into Margaux and one of the highlights of the visit. The already mentioned John Kolassa received us at the magnificently, luxurious, newly restored *Chateau Rauzan Segla*. The owners of this property, as well as Chateau Canon in St Emilion, are the Wertheimers of Chanel fame. Since 1994, a non-stop programme of investment has taken this Margaux 2ème cru to the very highest level of quality. The commune of Margaux suffered greatly from the dryness and heat in 2003.

Parker was not over-enthusiastic about Rauzan Segla, but tasting the wine proves the point that good winemaking skills and respect for the vintage and grapes can achieve great wine. 2003 at Rauzan is not as powerful as other 2003 we tasted. The emphasis in the winery was to keep the finesse and elegance that Rauzan has become famous for. This was achieved at the expense of power but the wine is still lovely and will no doubt when bottled give much pleasure to many admirers in the short term. Here we also tasted 2001. Again a nice wine which I shall be putting in my cellar.

To finish off the visit to Rauzan and eventually to Bordeaux, we tasted their great 1983. Wonderful, complex and mature. A spicy and gamey bouquet with a full complete mouthfeel. A real identity card of the soils, commune and vintage of Margaux in 1983. Classic. Ready to drink.

Bordeaux has had its ups and downs and no doubt many more will follow, but if the truth be known, Bordeaux is still the greatest wine region in the world. At the lower end, great wine can be found which represents excellent value for money and at the top end some of the most sublime, individual wines are made. 2003 will help to prove this.

Most of the wines mentioned above are available from or through most reputable wine merchants in Malta. So as not to be accused of only talking about expensive wines, next time round I shall be talking to you about interesting wines that are available off the shelf in Malta for less than Lm4.

Happy drinking.

* GC = Grand Cru; GCC = Grand Cru Classé.
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MICHAEL TABONE (centre) at the *Jurade de St Emilion* this year, flanked by Mr and Mrs D'Arseville (Chateau Le Serre). Looking on is Jacques Capdimourlin (*Premier Jurat*)

Clearance
Sale



Just for the record ... Not Closing Down !!

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