

First class, first growths

BORDEAUX'S first growths are constantly in the limelight but sadly the attention that they get is more often than not about their prices rather than their quality. Over the last 10 years the price of these wines has grown beyond any reasonable calculation, and to a certain extent beyond any relation to their quality *visa vis* other great Bordeaux wines. No sensible wine lover can question the superior quality of Latour, Lafitte, Petrus, etc., but when one includes their price in the equation, well, that is a different story.

The problem with the price of the first growths today is that it has unnaturally been hiked up by demand from people who would better suit the title of wine investors than wine lovers. Mainly as a result of the huge growth of the wine media and by the general increase in wine interest from all over the world, these speculators started buying up first growths with no intention of ever drinking them, but for eventual reselling. And who can blame them, when one thinks that only 10 years ago Petrus was selling in Malta for Lm30 a bottle and the same wine from the same vintage could sell for Lm800 a bottle today? Most first growth producers know the danger that all of this could bring but sadly there is little that the producers themselves can do to rectify the situation.

During the *en primeur* tastings of the 2004 vintage last month, I was having a discussion with the owner of Chateau Ripeau precisely on this subject. She was commenting and asking if Cheval Blanc, which is 200 metres away and today sells for about Lm120 (*en primeur*) and Petrus, 800 metres away, which sells for about Lm200 (*en primeur*) are 15 or 10 times better than her wines which sell for about Lm12.

I suppose that given the opportunity, Mme de Wilde will not object to selling her Ripeau for the prices of Petrus but, as she said, "I make wines for people to drink"... and what she makes is a very good, affordable wine indeed!

One other important Bordeaux producer, Gildas d'Ollone from Chateau Pichon Comtesse Lalande in Pauillac, recently told me that in his opinion his wine has achieved the highest price without damaging the long-term progress of his wine with most still bought by people who actually drink them.

One other interesting aspect to this is the appearance of a number of so-called super wines that have managed to attract the attention of

the speculators and, with them, high prices. These wines generally come from small properties (restricting supply) which with clever use of modern viticulture, vinification

new world concentration. Very fruity (dark berries) lots of spices and very ripe tannins. Still young, needs five years minimum.

We then moved swiftly to Bordeaux and Cos d'Estournel 1994. This is not the greatest offering from this St Estephe second growth showing the difficulties of the vintage. A bit tight and austere, lacking in generosity.

First in the line of first growths was Lafitte Rothschild 1997. This premier grand cru classe from Pauillac is always a joy to drink. The 1997 is at present showing quite well - very aromatic, rich but approachable, with a fine balance of ripe currant fruits and soft tannins. An ever evolving, complex finish.

Also in the same category and from the same commune, Latour 1996 followed. I always love Latour. Big, powerful and concentrated, handling its grandness with elegance, balance and charm. Lovely ripe black fruits and sweet spices, well integrated oak and a huge, long finish. Visit again in 10 years' time.

and more importantly marketing techniques have managed to build a name in the wine media. Something very similar happened here in Malta with a Marsovin wine.

The difference between these and the traditional first growths is that wines like Cheval Blanc, Latour, Petrus, etc., have built their reputation on sheer excellence and quality which goes back many years. In some cases hundreds of years. Not by a clever marketing campaign. Indeed, speculative wines created purposely for the speculators whose future is very uncertain!

Prices for the rest of Bordeaux have also gone up, albeit more reasonably, with most properties investing their newly found higher profits in their vineyards and wineries, giving us better than ever quality and to a certain extent real value for money. Indeed, the vast majority of Bordeaux wines today are of exceptional quality and are still the quality benchmark for many other French and non-French wines. The high prices I mentioned earlier apply to only a handful of wines.

Putting the financial aspect aside, I still love drinking the first growths and if you forget the cost no one will argue that they are some of the most sensational, mind-boggling wines anywhere. I am lucky enough to have a lot of like-minded friends who occasionally, recently becoming more regularly, meet and open some great wine, not worrying much about their value. Let me tell you about the most recent occasion.

We started the evening with Almaviva 2001, the joint venture Chilean vineyard by the Rothschilds of France and Concha y Toro. This is a super blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Carmenere. Very Bordeaux in style but with a



WINE TALK

by Michael Tabone

Finally we crossed over to the right bank and finished off with Cheval Blanc 1995 and 1975. The 95 was excellent, drinking very well now but will easily handle another 10-20 years.

I know this wine very well, having tasted it on a number of occasions including a barrel sample in 1996. It has evolved into a beautiful wine, velvety in texture with an amazing elegance and breed. Lovely ripe, red fruits with lots of tobacco and spices and a very long, complex finish.

The 75 did not handle its 30 years as well. Slightly drying out, with lots of tannins and tobacco but lacking in fruit. 10 years ago it was much more generous.

To finish we had a fantastic Port, Croft 1963 - still very much alive. Lots of prunes and nuts and a lingering sweet richness helped along with

a nice refreshing acidity.

A truly first class evening.

Finally a word on 2004. From what I tasted, I can confirm the early reports that in 2004 Bordeaux returned to its more classical style after the extremely hot and concentrated vintage of 2003. Across-the-board yields were very high so the best sited vineyards with warm soils and those who practised green harvesting produced some very ripe wines with an acidic backbone.

The traditionalists will make wine to drink in the medium term but the modernists aimed for early approachable wines, a trend which seems to be catching on. Mark my words, we shall be hearing a lot about micro oxygenation. But that is another story. Maybe next time.

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