

All about Bordeaux!

Upheaval in St Emilion

WINE TALK

by Michael Tabone

IN RECENT WEEKS some St Emilion producers have spent more time in court than in their vineyards! Following months of speculation, the St Emilion classification has been suspended indefinitely by a court in Bordeaux after four chateaux which were demoted in last September's revision sued the authorities, arguing that their demotion was illegal.

The two main objections to the acceptance of the revised classification – brought by Chateaux La Marzelle, La Tour du Pin Figeac, Cadet Bon and Guadet St Julien – were that at least one judge on the revision committee was biased as he was at the time consultant to some Grand Cru Classe properties and that their properties were not visited by the committee as the regulations stipulate. They also quoted as a precedent last year's cancellation of the Cru Bourgeois revision of the Medoc.

The court's decision to suspend the classification, taken at the end of March, a couple of days later was challenged by the majority of the remaining classified chateaux as well as by the *Syndicat Viticole*, the official body representing all the vine growers in St Emilion, headed by the world renowned Hubert de Buoard of Chateau Angelus. Among the counter-arguments were that the court had no right to suspend, that the wines of the four properties in question had gone down in quality over the previous 10 years, and that the suspension would damage the image of the whole jurisdiction.

On April 13 the court rejected these arguments and confirmed the suspension until the conclusion of the original case, which might take up to a year. This means that at present St Emilion is without classification as the one of 1996-2006 is obsolete and the 2006-2016 is suspended.

This is going to create huge problems for the properties involved. For example, how are the chateaux that were promoted in 2006 supposed to label their wines? What about media, marketing and image campaigns which some have already embarked on? What about pricing structure?

As I have written on this newspaper and in a number of international wine publications before, the classification system in the region is not perfect. Indeed, some fundamental changes are needed. However, the general feeling among the St Emilionais is that the four chateaux are simply playing the legal game out of spite! For many years the St Emilionais have depended on their unity and collective responsibility to achieve worldwide success and recognition for their wines. One influential proprietor told me: "The recent events prove that in a small community like ours, one cannot wash one's dirty linen outside. Especially, if the lawyers are watching!"

Will keep you posted.

Primeurs 2006

BORDEAUX will soon be in full swing with this year's campaign for last year's vintage. In brief, this is when the previous harvest's most reputed Bordeaux wines are placed on the market for merchants and individuals to buy while they are still in barrel. The wines will generally be blended, bottled and delivered to the purchasers within the following two years. The prices are determined during this time and are generally linked to the opinion of wine journalists and merchants, expected demand and quantities produced.

I recently came back from a week of tastings and meetings both on the right bank (Pomerol, St Emilion, etc.) and the left (Medoc, etc.) and my feeling and of most other journalists and merchants I met is that this is going to be a difficult vintage to sell unless prices go down considerably. I have met a very big US importer who was advising top producers, including Jean

Michel Cazes, to lower the price by as much as 70 per cent on that of 2005.

Although this may sound extreme, I must admit that for properties which doubled or even trebled their prices from 2004 to 2005, a reduction of 70 per cent is really not enough. Based on the quality and expected demand, I feel that a fair price will be somewhere along the 2004 price. Most producers will, of course, argue that production this year is very low which, as explained later, is quite true for the big names with some properties producing around 30 per cent of the *Grand Vin* quantity of 2004.

As for the style and quality of the vintage, it is nowhere near the outstanding quality of 2005; 2006 will not go down in history as a great year. Although, from a technical point of view Bordeaux today does not make bad wine, there are a lot of over-extracted, overdone, over-manipulated wines. Some even with very bitter tannins. You see, the problem was that after a near-perfect growing season, a huge amount of rain fell in September, just before and even during harvest. In some places the September rainfall alone exceeded that for the rest of the year.

Excluding the Merlot and whites which were harvested before the rains, this meant that most of the red harvest was diluted and/or rotten, so that winemakers had to use all their skills and technology to produce a decent wine. This was the year of severe selection on the sorting tables with

some properties putting aside as much as half of the total harvest as well as 'tank bleeding' to concentrate the juice to skin ratio. Some even used evaporators and drying machines to dry out the grapes. All this means that 2006 is a manipulated vintage.

Because of this, it is difficult to say if it is a left or a right bank vintage, or if it is a Merlot or a Cabernet. Some properties which are typically Cabernet Sauvignon-based increased their Merlot content, as in the case of Rauzan Segla with 45 per cent in the sample blend, while just round the corner at Chateau Margaux the Merlot content went down from an average 20 per cent to just four per cent.

Still, it seems that on the whole, if pushed, one can say that as an appellation Pomerol fared best, but even here there seems to be a lack of mid-palate in some of the most successful wines as indeed is the case in St Emilion. On the left bank I found Margaux and especially St Julien to be the most successful appellations, with outstanding contributions from Chateau Margaux and Rauzan Segla and the Leovilles. Elsewhere there are good fruity wines but especially in Graves, St Estephe and Pauillac one has to be very careful. Of course the great properties (Latour, Lynch, etc.) made very good wine, with Latour being particularly successful. It is already being hailed as the wine of the vintage!

So, in a nutshell, 2006 was a difficult vintage to make and will probably be even more difficult to sell. After tasting about 200 wines, my

conclusion is that those properties with very good *terroir* (soil and exposition) and those that respected the vintage and grape conditions made good, fruity and fresh wine for the early to medium-term drinking, albeit lacking typicity.

The dry whites, which in general were harvested before the rains, are probably the best wines of the vintage, with the usual great white estates in the Graves producing great wines. Lots of ripe exotic flavours, good acidity and concentration that should see them mature well into the 2020s. Most of the sweet wines I tasted are diluted and quite light, but where severe sorting was done, there are very good wines, Chateau d'Yquem in particular.

From a demand point of view the key issue is and will be the price element. The worst thing that can happen to a recuperating Bordeaux and the French wine market in general is to have another situation as in 1998, where because of the interest generated by the 1996 vintage the release price for some 1997 wines went up while the quality was clearly lower than that of the previous year.

2006 will not be a vintage for the wine speculators and except for maybe new markets, (especially in Asia) the interest from the traditional wine collectors is not likely to be great. However, if the price is right,

there might well be considerable interest from the serious wine drinkers looking for an opportunity to taste great names at reasonable prices. And if this works out we will have wines to drink while we wait for the 2004s and 2005s to mature!

Brief tasting report

HERE IS a list of wines which I thought stood out among those I have tasted. Of course, as prices are not determined yet, I cannot judge their value for money but they are all good wines. As I managed to taste about 200 wines I had to exclude around 300 others.

Some dry wines are really excellent. Lots of fresh, clean fruit, nice concentration, lively acidity and well integrated oak where it was used. My favourites were De Chantegrive – Cuvee Caroline (Graves), Clos Floridene (Graves), Domaine du Chevalier (Pessac Leognan), Malartic Lagravere (Pessac Leognan), and Smith Haut Lafitte (Pessac Leognan).

In the commune of Margaux I found some nice, well-balanced wines. Here are some of my favourites: Chateaux La Bessane, Cantenac Brown, Dauzac, Durfort Vivens, La Tour de Mons, Labergorce, Lascombes, Rauzan Segla and, of course, Margaux.

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