



Thinking About Bordeaux

The City, the Wine Region, the 2010 Vintage, etc

by Charles M. Bear Dalton



This last week has found me in Bordeaux, driving around a lot, tasting everything in sight, eating too much, and sweating a lot. Huh!? Did he write “sweating a lot?” He did. And all that stuff is connected. During what is generally referred to as “UGC week” (after the Union des Grandes Crus) or “premieres week” (since it is the “official” first showing of the new vintage – in this case 2010), members of the fine wine trade from around

the world land in Bordeaux to taste as many new wines as possible to evaluate the new vintage so as to decide what and how much to buy. The driving comes into it because you are constantly shuffling between the organized open tastings and various appointments at negociants’ offices and chateaux. A lot of the big name properties are part of the UGC so their wines are at the organized tastings, but the biggest names (and the most ardent wannabes) show their wines only at their chateau by appointment only. The eating too much comes in because we are all trying to taste over 100 wines a day and stay relatively sober – at least sober enough so that we can do our jobs. And the sweating? That comes into play because this week has been unseasonably warm – which means the closed tasting rooms (mostly un-air conditioned work spaces in wineries) can get quite warm. Cars in Bordeaux have air conditioning but many if not most buildings do not - but I expect, if global warming is a fact, that will change. In any case we were tasting in less than ideal conditions under brilliant blue skies (high barometric pressure) with temperatures in the 80s in hot rooms with often times warmish samples. Some of the worst of the tastings felt like a fully clothed sauna treatment.

After seven days of hectic (heroic? nah.) tasting – I begin writing this on Saturday evening in the Bordeaux airport while waiting for a flight to London – I have made some observations and reached some conclusions.

OBSERVATIONS

1) Wines almost always show and taste better at the chateau than at a UGC tasting. And if they don’t, it is easier to get a new sample at the chateau than it is to get a new, hopefully better, sample at a tasting. Also, samples are more likely to be fresh and on-temperature at the chateau than at a large tasting. All the logistics – other than getting me there – are better at the chateau.

2) Some chateaux and negociants provide a great convenient, well-lit, well-ventilated, comfortable tasting environment but many do not. And it has nothing to do with price range. I have tasted cheap wines in a great environment and nobody beats tasting at Ch. Haut Brion for a great environment. At the other end of the spectrum, I tasted a warm sample of Ch. Lafite standing at a low table (closer to my knees than my waist) in a hot, un-air conditioned room (at least the windows were open) at the chateau. This is their opportunity to make a great impression and they don’t seem to care. Most of the time when I requested a cooler sample, I got a shrug or an “eez naw posseebal”. When I tasted Ch. Doisy Daene at the Sauternes tasting, I told the pourer that the wine was warm (it should have been at worst cool but it was spit warm). He replied “I know” and continued to text on his cell phone. I dumped out the sample and moved on.

3) The city of Bordeaux in the springtime is a great place for “bird watching” but not so great for driving. Those young birds in question often have long bare legs and are often spotted riding bicycles. (Just looking at the menu, dear. Wouldn’t think of ordering anything.) Which makes driving in that city tolerable. I love driving in the countryside around Bordeaux but not in the city itself – too many narrow roads that are not well marked and too much traffic.

4) Even though there are over 50 sub-appellations of Bordeaux with over 8,000 producers, during this time of year as few as a dozen of the appellations and fewer than 300 of the producers matter at all to the vast majority of Bordeaux visitors. I am not part of that vast majority but there is a limit to what you can taste. Nevertheless, it seems like every time I come here, I uncover a few jewels and this year is no exception. (Please see “Discoveries” below for more on this.)

5) There is a trend to a) labels that were second wines becoming defined properties and a concurrent trend to b) making so called “second wines” from the cuts from multiple properties. As to case a), former “2nd wines” now sporting their own dedicated source vineyards include Clos du Marquis (formerly 2nd of Leoville las Cases), Moulin Riche (Leoville Poyferre), and Croix Beaucaillou (Ducru Beaucaillou). At one time Marbuzet was a second wine for Cos d’Estournel but now Pagodes de Cos fills that role. While Les Forts de Latour is in fact still a second wine, it does come (generally) from particular well-defined plots within the Ch. Latour estate and seems, from both market acceptance and price standpoints, more of a second growth than a second wine. As to b), the white second wine of Haut Brion Blanc and Laville Haut Brion used to be known as Plantiers de Haut Brion (but things have changed – see item 7 just below). The second wine of both Leoville Barton and Langoa Barton has long been Lady Langoa. The second wines of both Leoville Poyferre and Moulin Riche is Pavillon de Poyferre. Leoville las Cases has a new second wine called La Petite Lion but I am not sure whether any of the Clos du Marquis culls get into this. The Las Cases folks are not overly communicative but that could be because I referred to their grand vin as “Leoville Lost Cause” in reference to the proprietor’s seemingly futile efforts to become a first growth.

6) The Name Game has come to Bordeaux. It has gotten to where you can’t tell the players without a program. First, Bahans Haut Brion became le Clarence de Haut Brion - which honors Clarence Dillon, the American who bought Haut Brion in the 1930s and is the late grandfather of current owner Price Robert of Luxembourg. Then Lynch Bages changed the name of its second wine from Ch. Haut Bages Averous to Echo de Lynch Bages. Maybe it really started when Palmer changed its second wine from I-can’t-remember-what to Alter Ego. In any case, Bordeaux chateaux are reinventing themselves and especially their second wines in ways large and small. All the changes in item 5 above are part of this trend. Rauzan Segla reclaimed its zede (Z) when in the 1994 vintage they stopped spelling their name “Rausan”. Now Domaines Clarence Dillon (owners of Haut Brion and La Mission) has again jumped into the changing closet as the name “Laville Haut Brion” is no longer being used for the white wine of La Mission Haut Brion; rather, it is now “La Mission Haut Brion Blanc.” At the same time, what used to be called Plantiers de Haut Brion is called (beginning with the 2009 vintage) La Clarte de Haut Brion. Is all of this marketing? Well, no, not all - but a good part of it is. There have been some style and philosophy changes announced to go with some of these changes but it is too soon to tell how much of it is lip service and how much is substantive. Nevertheless, hang on to your programs.

7) The general wine industry wide movement to Organic and Biodynamic Farming is finally making headway in Bordeaux. A lot of properties are going organic and two of my favorites, Ch. Falfas (Cotes de Bourg) and Ch. Pontet Canet (Pauillac) are now certified Biodynamic. Look for more and more chateaux to certify as organic although they are more likely to mention it on their web sites than on their labels. Biodynamic is another step (some would say a step too far) but, whether you buy into Biodynamics or not, it is hard to argue with the quality of the fruit produced using these methods.

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8) Following another mini-trend in the greater wine industry, the return of the horse has begun in Bordeaux. Tractors compact and compress soils; horses do not. Fine wine producers all over the world are returning to using horses to pull plows through vineyards and Bordeaux is no exception. Horses can be seen working at Ch. Smith Haut Lafitte, Domaine de Chevalier, Ch. Pontet Canet, and Ch. Latour and I believe at Ch. Haut Brion. Added benefits are that horse pulled plows can work closer to the vines and, rather than diesel exhaust, the horse leaves some beneficial organic matter in his wake.

9) I love going to France and especially feel at home in Bordeaux and Burgundy. I love the wines and the food and the places and the people. I love the Hotel Le Cep in Beaune and I love the Hotel Burdigala in Bordeaux. I've been staying at both for 15 years running and they are my home in France. I love the gift shop at the Marseille airport where I buy my wife Provençal oil-cloth tablecloths. But the thing I love most about France is coming home. Right now, I'm dreaming of a Margarita. I can almost taste it.

MAKING A LIST, CHECKING IT TWICE

In my fatherly role of Santa Claus, I am used to working from a list. When I come to Bordeaux, it seems like I'm checking off boxes on a list. Taste at Ch. Latour? Check. At Ch. Margaux? Check. At Ch. Mouton? Check. Ch. Rauzan Segla? Check. Ch. Palmer and Ducru Beaucaillou? Check and check. At the UGC Margaux tasting? Check. The UGC Pauillac-St. Julien-St. Estephe Tasting? Check. Vieux Ch. Certan. Check. Ausone? Check. Ch. Cheval Blanc and, while there, Ch. d'Yquem quietly and privately in another room? Check and check. At Ch. Angelus? Check. At Ch. Canon la Gafeliere? Check. Ch. Haut Brion and La Mission? Check and check. UGC Graves-Pessac Leognan tasting. Check. UGC Sauternes tasting? Check. What's missing? In years past I missed getting to taste at Ch. Petrus, Le Pin, and Lafleur. Chris Lano of Stacole set me up with all of the above starting 15 years ago. A few years ago, François Thienpont introduced me to his uncle Jacques Thienpont who owns Ch. Le Pin and so I now get to taste there. With an introduction from James Gunter of Glazer's, I got to visit Petrus for the first time last summer and general manager Elizabeth Joubert was kind enough to invite me back. This year, Gunter and François Thienpont opened the door to the Mouiex connection so I got to taste at JP Mouiex (Ch. Trotanoy, Hosanna, Lafleur-Petrus, etc.) and at Ch. Lafleur. Also this year, I noticed that my schedule was missing two wines I taste every year: Ch. Lafite (where we also taste Duhart Milon and Carruades de Lafite) and Ch. Pontet Canet. Nancy Rugus of Compagnie Medocaine arranged an entry to Lafite and Archie Johnston of Nathaniel Johnston arranged for Pontet Canet. Going down my checklist, I see that I missed the UGC St. Emilion tasting at La Couspade (there was a huge traffic jam there but I tasted most if not all of those wines in other venues) and Ch. l'Evangile. I may have to go back and taste l'Evangile when I'm back in France in June for VinExpo.

Why is checking off this list important? Tasting these wines every year gives me the opportunity to compare the vintages and see which areas were stronger and which were weaker in a given vintage. It allows me to see who the real stars are and who is coasting on reputation. Furthermore, it allows me to wave the Spec's flag in front of a number of chateau owners and managers. And you might say that my 30-plus years in the wine trade (actually, I started tasting Bordeaux when I was just 17 years old. It was those first Bordeaux wines that got me interested in wine in the first place) and 15 years of visiting Bordeaux at least once every year - each year checking off a longer list - to taste the premiers, helps establish my bona-fides as someone with the experience to assess a vintage. Do I taste everything? Absolutely not. No one does or can. I could come up with a list of some wines I didn't/don't taste regularly that would contain some chateaux you've heard of. Rauzan Gassies, Grand Puy Ducasse, Pavie, and Monbousquet were all skips this year.

CONCLUSIONS (but not yet The Conclusion)

The buzz coming into Bordeaux was that 2010 was a great vintage, maybe even better than last year's new "best vintage ever" 2009. Of course the previous "best vintage ever" was 2005 so three in six years is pretty darned impressive. At any rate, part of my job is determining whether I think 2010 is as good as or better than 2009 and 2005. The most obvious comparison is to compare the pair - 2009 and 2010 - to 1989 and 1990 (the most recent of the back-to-back "great vintages"). I heard comparisons to 1961 and 1959 - not quite back-to-backs but two close-together legendary vintages nonetheless. Paul Pontalier of Ch. Margaux pulled 1899 and 1898 out of his hat - which I will have to allow is a bit outside my range of experience and well above my pay grade.

There are a number of ways to get at this without making one broad generalization - as, unlike 2005, one broad generalization does not apply here. The conclusions I reached are a bit fluid because the wines are very young. Therefore, I reserve the right to have a blinding flash of the obvious in the coming years and reassess. Please note that "ass" figures prominently in reassess; I will try not to make one of myself. Nevertheless, I have been doing this awhile so here goes.

1) ON THE RIGHT BANK, 2010 seems a bit fresher than 2009. At this stage I prefer the 2010s from Petrus, Le Pin, Vieux Ch. Certan, Ausone, Cheval Blanc, Pavie Macquin, Canon La Gafeliere, La Mondotte, Angelus, Canon, and Grand Corbin Despagne to name a few, to the 2009s from those same properties. The 2010 Canon is the best young Canon I have ever tasted. About the only instance where I prefer a right bank 2009 to the same chateau's 2010 is Ch. Figec. 2009 is the best young Figec I have ever tasted; the 2010 is fine but it is not in the same league. That freshness lends the wines an early charm and my tasting experience says that that sweetness of fruit and brighter acidity will stay with these wines as they develop.

2) ON THE LEFT BANK (which for most people is the same as saying "in the Medoc"), I find the opposite to be true. Most of the top 2009s showed fresher than most of the top 2010s. I preferred all but one top left bank wine - Ch. Cos d'Estournel - in 2009. While the 2010 Cos is not one of my top wines of the vintage, I like it much better than the chalky, heavily extracted and still controversial 2009.

3) PESSAC LEOGNAN may be the real winner in 2010. Ch. Haut Brion is special and Ch. La Mission Haut Brion is not far behind it. Domaine de Chevalier rocks and Pape Clement (which seems to have dialed back the extraction) is better in 2010 than it has been in years. Ch. Haut Bailly and Ch. Smith Haut Lafitte round out a really excellent-to-outstanding top red group. Other Pessac Leognan winners include Ch. Carbonnieux, Ch. de Fieuzal, and Ch. Bouscaut and well as the second wines from Haut Brion (Le Clarence), La Mission Haut Brion (La Chapelle de la Mission), and Ch. Haut Bailly (La Parde).

4) There is in the wine trade and press a practical preference for wines from the right bank and the Medoc and prejudice against wines from Graves. Right bank wines (epitomized by the top growths of Pomerol and St. Emilion) are generally Merlot-dominant. The great Medoc (aka "Left Bank") reds are generally dominated by Cabernet Sauvignon. The biggest concentrations of the biggest names are on the right bank and in the Haut ("upper" as in "up river") Medoc. The Graves and its higher-rent subdivision called Pessac Leognan has fewer big names despite the fact that it was Graves in general and Ch. Haut Brion in particular that established Bordeaux's great reputation as a wine growing region (back when the Medoc was still a swamp). Graves wines tend to offer the best balance between Cabernet and Merlot. Rather than having one superstar player, Graves and especially Pessac Leognan wines tend to have two superstars - Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot playing off of each other. Add in up to 30% Cabernet Franc and you have a winning threesome. Consequently, Graves and especially Pessac Leognan tend to produce some of the most balanced and elegant red wines of Bordeaux. Unfortunately, it is hard to visit and taste in the Graves and Pessac Leognan on the same day you have been to either the right bank or the Medoc. Each takes at least a full day and Graves needs a day unto itself - which a lot of tasters don't give it. The best wines of Pessac Leognan - including the first of the four 1855 first growths: Ch. Haut Brion - just don't get the attention they deserve.

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5) UNLIKE 2005 and to a lesser extent 2009, 2010 is not homogenous from top to bottom. There is some under-ripe Cabernet Sauvignon and there is some over-ripe Merlot. And there were chateaux that went overboard on extraction. As in most Bordeaux vintages, there is variation in quality from appellation to appellation but even more so between the “have-nots” (those with limited resources and lower selling prices, “the haves” (those with good to ample resources), and the “have lots” (those with seemingly unlimited resources. The top three of my six price tiers (see item 6 below) are mostly “have lots” and they all should have made, and for the most part did make, Fine to Outstanding wines. Many if not most of the haves also made Fine to Excellent wines. It is the “have-nots” – the smaller chateaux in the lesser appellations you most likely have never heard of - where 2010 slips behind 2009 and especially 2005. The rising tide did not lift all the boats.

6) WHEN YOU LOOK AT PRICING, there will be definite tiers in the 2010 vintage and most of the wines will fit nicely into one of them. I think of the Bordeaux pricing model as having split into six tiers: the Luxury Wines, what I call No Man’s Land, the Blue Chips, the Up-And-Comers, the Best Of The Rest, and All The Rest.

The LUXURY TIER, wines priced in excess of \$500 per bottle, is the same as ever: Ch. Le Pin, Ch. Petrus, Ch. Haut Brion, Ch. Latour, Ch. Margaux, Ch. Lafite, Ch. Mouton, Ch. Ausone, and Ch. Cheval Blanc. La Mission makes its case and so do Chx. Lafleur and La Mondotte. If some of these wines’ styles appeal to you (and they are all unique) and you have the money (they will all be expensive and most will be VERY expensive), these 2010s are must-buys. Based on past vintages, it’s a safe bet that most of these wines will outlive anyone now able to buy them. They should be “ready” to drink after 12 or more years but many of them will be drunk well before then as they are delicious and consequently hard to leave alone. They are all fabulous wines but they’ve gotten so expensive that they must now be considered as high-end prestige luxury items rather than just as wine that at some point will return to the water table. For less than the current price of 24 bottles of 2005 Le Pin, you could drive off in a fancy new BMW (or in my case, a new Ford F-350 crew-cab dually nicely equipped). Or buy a whole lot of other excellent but more sanely priced wines.

NO MAN’S LAND is occupied by great wines from chateaux that are trying to move up in price but are meeting a lot of market resistance, at least in the US and UK. To my thinking, these wines include Cos d’Estournel, Ducru Beaucaillou, Angelus, Palmer, Leoville las Cases, and maybe a few more. These wines are priced at \$300 to over \$400. To varying degrees, I really like most of these wines but their owners are pricing them well above seemingly equally good wines in the Blue Chip range. They are trying to follow the first growths, etc. into a luxury tier of pricing or at the least establish a new pricing tier between the Luxury Tier and the Blue Chips. Maybe they are just trying to take over a price range once filled by the wines that are now in the Luxury Tier.

The BLUE CHIPS make up the most universally appealing range of price and quality. Most of the chateaux fall into the range of “have-lots” but some of the “haves” make it in here too. Prices here range from around \$40.00 to over \$150.00. The upper part of the Blue Chip tier (all “have-lots” includes the other Leovilles (Barton and Poyferre), Vieux Ch. Certan (which may this year step up a tier or even two – the wine is really outstanding), Gruaud Larose and Beychevelle, Rauzan Segla, Pavie Macquin, Canon and Canon La Gaffeliere, Smith Haut Lafite and Haut Bailly, Pontet Canet, Lynch Bages, Calon Segur and Montrose, and the two Pichons (Lalande and Baron). Second labels of the first growths (Les Forts de Latour, Pavillon Rouge (2010 is the best, maybe ever), Carruades de Lafite (if the Chinese don’t get it all), Le Clarence de Haut Brion) also fit here. Cantenac Brown goes here as does Brane Cantenac. Duhart Milon goes here as well, again, assuming the Chinese don’t buy all of it.

The rest of the Blue Chip range references Giscours and Ferriere, Batailley and Haut Batailley, Haut Bages Liberal, Lafon Rochet, Kirwan, d’Issan, Pontac Lynch, Branaire Ducru, Lagrange, Croix Beaucaillou and Moulin Riche (both of which used to be but are no longer a 2nd wines), Gloria and Saint Pierre, Grand Corbin Despagne, Beausejour Duffau, La Couspade, Larcis Ducasse, Durfort Vivens, Dauzac, Boyd Cantenac, Lalande Borie, and Malescot St. Exupery. This range also includes second wines such as Reserve de la Comtesse (Pichon Lalande), Tourelles de Longueville (Pichon Baron), Alter Ego (Palmer), Les Dames de Montrose, and more. All of these are wines to buy for drinking over the next 5 to 30 and in some cases more than 50 years. Thanks to Archie and Ivanhoe Johnston, I got to drink some 1953 Calon Segur from a double magnum at the Commanderie de Bordeaux dinner. It was amazing and delicious although not the best wine Archie served that night – which was a spectacular 1989 Haut Brion in the prime of its life. And thanks to Nancy Rugus, I also got to try a still living 1943 (not a great vintage but still a good wine) Pichon Baron and a vibrant and youthful 1955 Pichon Baron - among others - at a Compagnie Medocaine dinner at Ch. Pichon Baron.

The UP-AND-COMERS are the wines that are on the rise. Prices are generally reasonably priced, usually between about \$15 and \$40 per bottle. Generally, these are “haves”. They make Very Good to Excellent wines priced for regular drinking and they are generally made to drink a bit sooner. These are sometimes new or revived wines from the top appellations and sometimes top wines from lesser appellations. Examples in the “top appellations” category would be Ch. Tour Sieu Jean (Pauillac), Ch. Laplagnotte Bellevue (St. Emilion), Ch. Beau Site (St. Estephe) or a 2nd wine like Sirene de Giscours (Margaux). Examples in the “lesser appellations” area include Ch. La Bernadotte (Haut Medoc), Ch. Pontoise Caburru (Haut Medoc), Clos Puy Arnaud (Cotes de Castillon), Ch. Puygueraud (Cotes de Francs), or Vieux Ch. St. Andre (Montagne St. Emilion). These wines can last from 12 to 20 years but most are best drunk much sooner when they still have a lot of primary fruit flavors. In this category, a lot of 2004s and 2005s are drinking great right now; I know because I’ve been drinkin’ ‘em. If I had any 1999s left, they’d be at the very front of the queue. (For more on these and other Up-and-Comers as well as some of The Best Of The Rest and a few Blue Chips, see “Bordeaux Discoveries” next week.)

THE BEST OF THE REST are those wines that rise out of the lake of the rest of the Bordeaux. In 2005 and to a lesser extent in 2009, the level of quality of pretty much that whole lake rose. In 2010, there are considerably fewer wines emerging from the lake and most of those are Merlot based. They will exhibit lots of fruit and some terroir character and be styled for pretty much immediate drinking. There will be a good number of wines that fit this tier and most of them will sell for \$10 to \$15 per bottle but these are not wines that will be offered as futures. They will not be sold until they arrive and actually make it to the shelf. These wines offer value as everyday drinking food friendly reds.

ALL THE REST of Bordeaux – these are the “have-nots” - is a hit or miss mess. There is a reason most wine industry professionals have heard of fewer than 300 of the over 8000 Bordeaux chateaux. Most of those anonymous wines aren’t very good. As noted above, 2010 is not 2005 and the same general across-the-board quality 2005s showed is not there. There are occasional gems that surface and when they stay up for a few years running, they move into the Best of the Rest. Most of these sorts of wines are sold in the French and other European supermarkets and most lack the fruit to be acceptable in the US market. None of these wines will be offered as futures and it is unlikely that any will even make it to Texas.

I will publish my tasting notes soon but here are some wines to think about ...

TOP WINES OF THE VINTAGE

Tied for top: Haut Brion, Le Pin, Petrus, Vieux Ch. Certan
 Could’a been a contender: Lafleur, Latour, Margaux, La Mondotte, Cheval Blanc, Ausone, La Mission Haut Brion, Pontet Canet

TOP WINES OUTSIDE THE LUXURY TIER

Leoville Poyferre, Rauzan Segla, Haut Bailly, Leoville Barton, Pavie Macquin, Canon la Gafelliere, Smith Haut Lafite, Canon, Domaine de Chevalier, Ducru Beaucaillou, Branaire Ducru, Cantenac Brown, Angelus, Pichon Baron, Petite Villages, Pavillon Rouge, Le Clarence, Trotteviele, Larcis Ducasse, La Couspade, Grand Puy Lacoste

TOO HARD TO EVALUATE BUT TOO GOOD TO IGNORE:

Lafite, Pichon Lalande

AFFORDABLE GEMS

Pontac Lynch, Batailley, Haut Batailley, Bouscaut, Haut Bages Liberal, Ferriere, Boyd Cantenac, Segla, Parde de Haut Bailly, Tourelles de Longueville, Daugay, Laplagnotte Bellevue

TOP VALUE PICKS

La Bernadotte, Pontoise Cabaruss, Clos Puy Arnaud, Caronne Ste. Ghemme, Cote Montpezat "Cuvee Compostelle". ✨

