

2020 Bordeaux: An introduction

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What a year it has been since we tasted the 2019 barrel samples this time last year! Covid 19 has had an enormous negative impact on the world but in tasting the 2020 barrel samples I can emphatically state the quality was not affected by the Covid situation. We should all take our hats off to those intrepid vigneron who have tirelessly worked throughout the difficult year to produce some amazing wines.

On looking back at my notes on 2019 I kept seeing the word "freshness." If one was to describe the 2020 vintage the word FRESHNESS again comes with every sample. Although the vintage is not as consistent as 2019, 2020 is a good to very-good vintage, but the chateaux with the best terroir have made exceptional wines. You have everything you want in a great wine. Very expressive fruit-laden aromas with a huge mid-palate richness and a very long finish. The fresh tannins and acidity make these wines so well balanced. I believe we are seeing a different style in Bordeaux, perhaps a move back to a more natural evolution of the wines with less extraction taking place. Most wines were tasted 2-3 times, many being at the chateaux where we could gain information from the wine makers.

This is my 36th year of tasting barrel samples and the freshness of the 2020 wines is extraordinary. Last year I was tasting alone but this year I was accompanied by Amelie Grant, Sales Manager of Terroir and Tradition, herself a 20-year veteran of En Primeur. Below are just a few of the highlights from our tasting of over 300 wines and our top picks from the different communes.

SUMMARY

What makes a great vintage or a great wine?

Let's review the weather pattern.

The winter 2019/2020 was mild but very wet with higher-than-average rainfall. With high rainfall in January and February this helped renew the underground water reserves. We experienced higher than average temperatures around 10 degrees Centigrade. This made budbreak on average between March 15th and March 28th which in turn led to early flowering. The months of April and May were variable but mild with plenty of rain the first half of May with some properties suffering mildew. The rest of May and June was cool and wet. July and August produced a heatwave with some rainfall mid-August which was welcomed with great relief. September saw some early rains which helped the stressed vines. However due to the smaller berries 2020 has produced a smaller crop than average.

TOP WINES BY COMMUNE

SAINT ESTEPHE

This is the most northerly commune in the Medoc with two properties ranked Second Growths in the 1855 classification, Cos d'Estournel and Montrose and Third Growth Calon Segur.

Calon Segur: One of our first 2020 wines to taste and WOW this is one of the best Calon Segurs I have tasted. Black color with aromas of caramel, chocolate and blueberry. It has a very rich ripe mid palate full bodied with great length. Super fresh tannins and lots of finesse! 78% Cabernet Sauvignon, 12% Merlot, 9% Cabernet Franc 1% Petit Verdot. 96-98

Cos D'Estournel: Black in color with aromas of new oak and cherry. This Cos has everything you want in a wine up front sweetness and super rich mid palate fruit fresh tannins and long, long finish. 62% Cabernet Sauvignon 38% Merlot 96-98

Montrose: This property has really been on a roll the last 3 years and competes with the First Growths. Black color with cherry and blueberry aromas that really jump from the glass. Fine sweet firm ripe tannins and blockbuster rich powerful fruit a very big boned wine but with plenty of finesse. The length is super long. 71% Cabernet Sauvignon 23% Merlot 5% Cabernet Franc 1% Petit Verdot 96-98

Phelan Segur: The best Phelan Segur I have tasted. Lots of work going on here and the results are showing. Dark ruby in color with cherry cassis aromas. It is a very rich and vibrant wine with lovely balance and succulent fruit. Worth seeking out for the price range. 93-95

Haut Marbuzet: Another wine that is very impressive. Dark ruby color, cherry and violets aroma. A strong effort with fine integrated tannins that are fresh and powerful. The wine as very approachable now which is always a sign of a very good wine. 93-95.

Marquis de Calon: Second wine of Calon Segur: This is a stunner for the price. Black color with cherry and cassis aromas. For a second wine this hits all the spots lovely fresh ripe fat fruit with fine integrated tannins and a lovely long finish. With alcohol level of 14.6% though you really do not feel it. A must buy!! 50% Merlot 49% Cabernet Sauvignon 1% Petit Verdot 92-95

Capbern: The very first 2020 we tasted apart from our own Chateau Carignan. Made by the winemaking team at Calon Segur. A very impressive Capbern and

one to seek out. Dark ruby color with blueberry aromas. Lovely fresh ripe tannins with good structure and layers of sweet ripe fruit. The best ever? 92-94.

Lafon Rochet: Situated across the road from Cos d'Estournel up to now an under achiever but changes are afoot here, and this is the finest Lafon Rochet to date. Dark ruby color with cherry tobacco aromas. Big boned structure and fine ripe fresh tannins with lovely rich fruit and a long finish. A wine to look for as it will offer great value. 92-94

PAUILLAC

The commune with the largest number of First Growths: Lafite Rothschild, Latour, Mouton Rothschild. This is one of the largest communes and the top wines are superb. Global warming/climate change, for the moment, is having a positive effect on the region of Bordeaux. We are seeing a trilogy of great wines from this region. The top wines have exceeded themselves in quality and many of the lesser growths have made their best wines.

Mouton Rothschild: I have had a like/love relationship with this property for almost 40 years! Now I am in LOVE. For both Amelie and me Mouton is a candidate for wine of the vintage. We were fortunate enough to be invited to Chateau Clerc Milon to taste the BPR lineup and what a great experience. This is the greatest barrel sample of Mouton I have ever experienced. This wine will surely compare with the great 1959,1961,1982,1986 and 2016, and dare I even say 1945, one of the greatest wines of the last century. It is rare that one is moved by a wine, considering that, after all, it is our business, and we taste thousands of wines every year. But when a wine bowls you over, you are left stunned. I am loath to give a perfect score to a wine because what constitutes perfect? This wine has the potential to be a perfect wine. Color is deep purple almost black. The nose is so floral with rich eucalyptus and floral tones but wait, the rich fat ripe fruit is gob smacking, so powerful yet restrained and oozing with freshness. So balanced and refined this is honestly one of the best barrel samples of an infant Bordeaux I have ever tasted. The length is extraordinary long—wow what a wine. 84% Cabernet Sauvignon 13% Merlot 2% Cabernet Franc 1% Petit Verdot 98-99+ Sorry cannot give an unfinished wine 100 Points but mortgage the house to get some of this wine.

Lafite Rothschild: We tasted the full lineup at their offices in downtown Bordeaux. Domaines Baron de Rothschild is undergoing a renaissance and boy does it show in their 2020 stable of wines. Lafite is another candidate for wine of the vintage. Now in their first year of organic farming. Black fruit with aromas of cherry, tobacco and anise with the hallmark fat rich ripe fruit and such a rich mid palate. There is a saltiness that enhances the fruit and gives you a very long finish.

Freshness of the tannins is a big part of this fantastic Lafite. 92% Cabernet Sauvignon 7% Merlot 1% Petit Verdot 97-99

Latour: No longer released En Primeur. One of my favorite First Growths. Always so masculine and massive. The color is black with the aromas of rose petal and cherries. Huge structure with very dense yet refined and fresh tannins. This has all the attributes of a great wine, freshness, rich ripe fruit and a very long finish. 97% Cabernet Sauvignon 3% Merlot 96-98+

Pichon Lalande: Since 2016 this property is on fire. Superb 2016,2018,2019 and now the superb 2020. Black deep rich fruit. Aromas of eucalyptus and black cherry. I love this wine, it has so much balance and sweet ripe fruit great acidity and freshness. One of the best Pichons in a long time and that includes the 2016 scored perfect by some wine writers. 77% Cabernet Sauvignon 17% Merlot 6% Cabernet Franc 96-98.

Pontet Canet: One of the leaders in organic viticulture. Often described as Bordeaux's Burgundy. Given the intense work and commitment to the environment and organic farming the Tesserson family have hit another 6 as we say in cricket, or for the American contingent, a home run. We were delighted to be hosted by Alfred Tesseron the owner. Color very dark ruby with an evocative chocolate vanilla aroma. This has rich creamy tannins with super rich ripe fruit on the mid palate and enormous finish. 96-98.

Carruades de Lafite: The Second wine of Lafite Rothschild. Wow has this wine come along way and stands out on its own rather than a second wine. Dark ruby color with aromas of black cherry and cassis. The fruit is very balanced with finesse and elegance. Rich ripe fat mid palate and plenty of length. Bravo the best Carruades to date! 52% Cabernet Sauvignon 42% Merlot 3% Cabernet Franc 3% Petit Verdot. 95-96.

Pichon Longueville Baron: Color black with a cherry tobacco nose. Very rich fat ripe fruit with nice integrated tannins Fleshy fruit and long on the finish. 94-97

Duhart Milon: Another property of Domaines Baron De Rothschilds. I feel the property was neglected for many years but now there has been a huge investment and a desire to produce a great Pauillac. And indeed they have, this is by far the best Duhart this wine lover has ever tasted. A medium to dark ruby color with caramel and blueberry aromas. Lovely upfront fruit and an intensely rich ripe mid palate. Very long and sumptuous finish. It has all the attributes of being a great wine - in fact it will be the first Duhart to go into my personal cellar. 72% Cabernet Sauvignon 28% Merlot 94-96.

Le Petit Mouton: The second wine of Mouton Rothschild. Although a second wine it does not behave like one. This is a great wine and has produced one of the best

Petit Moutons I have tasted. Dark ruby color with a cherry banana aroma. Sharing some of the attributes of the Grand vin, very chewy ripe balanced tannins with lovely rich fruit and a long finish. 72% Cabernet Sauvignon 24% Merlot 4% Cabernet Franc 93-95.

Clerc Milon: The winery has been totally renovated and is very impressive. Dark ruby with black cherry and violet aromas. Very refined sweet ripe fruit lovely powerful mid palate and fresh ripe tannins. 53% Cabernet Sauvignon 37% Merlot 8% Cabernet Franc 2% Petit Verdot 93-96

Les Forts de Latour: No longer released En Primeur. Always considered the best of the second wines of the First Growths---but certainly it is a race to the top with the other Medoc second wines. This is a big boned well-structured Les Forts. Black in color and a lovely nose of violets and cassis. Rich ripe fruit and lovely harmonious tannins with great length. A wine for the future. 63% Cabernet Sauvignon 35.5% Merlot 0.5% Cabernet Franc 92-95

Armailhac: Another property very well run by Baron Philippe de Rothschild SA. A very dark ruby color with charcoal cherry aromas. The wine has great weight and density full bodied and seamless lush fruit in the mid and back palate certainly a wine to look for. 59% Cabernet Sauvignon 30% Merlot 8% Cabernet Franc 3% Petit Verdot 92-94.

SAINT JULIEN

This is always one of the most consistent communes. There are no First Growths, but they boast seven Second Growths including the three Leovilles, Ducru Beaucaillou, Gruaud Larose, Langoa Barton and Lagrange.

Gruaud Larose: A second growth with arguably the best terroir in Saint Julien. This property has a very long history, and the old vintages are some of the best examples of Bordeaux. Recently it has been an underachiever until 2018. Now the property is back and for us one of the best Saint Juliens! Black in color with effusive caramel and eucalyptus aromas. This is a stunning wine and the best young Gruaud I have tasted slightly edging out the fabulous 2019. It has everything you want from a wine, stunning rich fat fruit with succulent sweet tannins and extremely long finish. 79% Cabernet Sauvignon 17% Merlot 4% Cabernet Franc 96-98.

Leoville Poyferre: Always very consistent. Black intense color with a very exotic black cherry cassis aroma. Big fat ripe unctuous fruit with lovely powerful balanced tannins and a super long finish. 64% Cabernet Sauvignon 31% Merlot 3% Cabernet Franc 2% Petit Verdot 96-97+

Leoville Barton: Another property with a complete renovation of the cellars. Always one of our favorites. Dark ruby color with a very expressive bouquet. There is rich plump ripe sweet fruit with very refined and elegant, lush tannins. Very balanced and a long finish.

96-97+

Saint Pierre: A small property situated in the middle of Saint Julien. Very black color exuding cherry blackberry aromas. Very sweet and ripe fruit with a hint of saltiness which seems to be the hallmark of this vintage. Balanced with fleshy tannins and concentrated long finish. 95-97

Ducru Beaucaillou: One of the top chateaux in Bordeaux a "super second" Ducru never disappoints—dark ruby color with an expressive cherry cassis nose. A powerful wine with bright tannins and seamless balance and very long finish. 81% Cabernet Sauvignon 19% Merlot 95-97

Leoville Las Cases: Massive works going on here building a new cellar. Very black color with an exotic nose of mixed fruit. This is a tannic and powerful wine with front mid and rear palate richness, as usual one of the top Saint Juliens. 81% Cabernet Sauvignon 11% Cabernet Franc 8% Merlot 94-96.

Beychevelle: One of the best Beychevelles for many a year. Black color and an expressive bouquet of violets and cherries. Very well structured and plenty of rich ripe fruit with sweet ripe tannins and good acidity. Lovely finish 94-96.

Brancaire Ducru: Sitting right opposite Chateau Beychevelle we are seeing great improvements here. Dense black fruit with aromas of cassis and violets. Sweet ripe tannins with plenty of lush precocious fruit. One of the best Brancaires for a long time 94-95

MARGAUX

The commune with one First Growth and five Second Growths.

Margaux: Tasted with Philippe Bascaules, Managing Director. It is always a privilege to taste at the iconic Chateau Margaux. Color black with aromas of caramel toast and cassis. This is a very big, structured wine with great fresh sweet ripe tannins, a gorgeous refined powerful wine. Balanced from start to finish. 89% Cabernet Sauvignon 8% Merlot 2% Petit Verdot 1% Cabernet Franc 96-98+.

Rauzan Segla: This wine is on a very hot streak. One of our favorites for the last few years. Black in color with violets and cassis aromas. Very sweet ripe fresh tannins

with massive rich succulent fruit. Easy to drink now but the power and length is there for sure. 96-98

Palmer: Biodynamic farming is practiced here. Deep black color with charming chocolate and cherry aromas. Everything you want - that upfront richness followed by fat succulent mid palate and long finish. A hint of saltiness, the hallmark of this vintage. 94-97

Brane Cantenac: This Second Growth has really improved over the last five years. Color black with aromas of cherry and blueberry. Very rich front and mid palate oozing with freshness and brilliant fine tannins. This is certainly a wine to go for given the price range. 94-97.

Malescot St Exupery: This wine has been on a hot streak for many years and represents great value. The 2020 has a dark ruby color with an intense chocolate and cassis bouquet. Very refined tannins but also powerful rich ripe fruit with a long finish. 94-96

Giscours: Third Growth always delivers pleasure. Black fruit with rather refined spicy oak bouquet. Lovely fine structure with succulent rich fruit and pleasant finish. 94-95.

Marquis d'Alesme Becker: There has been a lot of expense here by the new owners because this property has been a perennial under achiever. This is the best sample of this property I have ever tasted. Black fruit with a precocious racy cherry and blueberry aromas. A very balanced wine with fine mature tannins good structure and strong finish. 93-95.

Labegorce: The same owners as Marquis d'Alesme Becker. This is one of the great values of the Margaux appellation. Dark ruby fruit with an exotic mulberry bouquet. Balanced and well-integrated tannins that are ripe and fresh. The requisite mid palate fresh richness is there with a long finish. 93-94.

PESSAC LEOGNAN

Haut Brion: this is a candidate for wine of the vintage. Black fruit with a very expressive bouquet of cassis and wild cherries. This wine has massive structure and rich fat ripe fruit. Great balance and sweet ripe tannins and a tremendously long finish. 98-99

La Mission Haut Brion: This is one of the best La Missions I have tasted in barrel so much so that it reminded me of the great 1989 although different in style. Color

black with an expressive nose of cigar box and anise. Another massive wine with great rich mid palate good acidity and fresh ripe tannins with a very long finish. 97-99.

Haut Bailly: One of the best wines in 2020 in the Pessac region. They have just finished a remarkable new winery which is one of the most impressive I have seen. State of the art everywhere you turn. The 2020 vinified in the new cellars is a very dark deep ruby with aromas of cassis and black cherry. Succulent rich ripe fresh tannins. A powerful yet refined and balanced wine. 52% Cabernet Sauvignon 42% Merlot 3% Cabernet Franc 3% Petit Verdot. 95-97.

Les Carmes Haut Brion: Managed by the brilliant Guillaume Poulitier, one of the most enthusiastic vigneronns in all of France. Since his arrival Les Carmes has been at the top of its game. Color black with such an exotic nose of iris, cherry and violets. Super rich on the front and mid palate with great fresh ripe pure tannins and a very long finish. 94-97.

Pape Clement: One of the many chateaux in Bordeaux owned by Bernard Magrez. Dense black color with cherry and blueberry bouquet. A powerful rich full-bodied wine with good structure and lush ripe tannins and a slight saltiness on the finish. 93-95.

Clarence de Haut Brion: This is probably the finest Clarence I have tasted. Black in color with an exotic bouquet of cassis and eucalyptus. Great balance and lovely rich mid palate fruit and exhibiting a long finish. 94-96.

Chapelle de La Mission: Wine maker and manager Jean-Philippe Delmas has hit a home run at both properties and the second wines are extremely impressive. Color very dark ruby with exotic cherry and cassis bouquet with a hint of new oak. Lovely silky ripe tannins and rich fruit with a long finish. 94-95.

Domaine de Chevalier: Owned by the Bernard family who has been improving the quality year on year. The 2020 is black color with a very expressive nose of cherry and blackberry fruit. It is a big boned wine with lots of rich flesh and creamy tannins with the requisite length. 93-95.

De Fieuzal: This was a wonderful surprise for me. This is the best young De Fieuzal I have tasted. Black in color with a closed nose but once on the palate there is a burst of fresh ripe fruit with a great balance and delicacy. Good structure and nice finish. 93-95.

POMEROL

A small commune but it boasts some of the most famous wines in the world. Not classified in the 1855 Classification there are seven properties Lafleur, Le Pin, L'Evangile, La Conseillante, Petrus, Trotanoy and Vieux Chateau Certan that are a stone's throw from each other. This year it was like Déjà vu the wines here are stunning and vying for wine of the vintage.

Vieux Chateau Certan: This is one of my favorite visits. While last year I thought the usually restrained Alexander Thienpont was effusive but this year he was over the moon about his wine and rightfully so. For me it is one of the best wines of the vintage. I look forward to a blind tasting of the great past recent vintages 2009, 2010, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020. We were totally blown away by the aromas of exotic fruit, cherry cassis violets and the aromas exuding from the glass. But the best was yet to come. The fruit is massively rich, so rich you immediately say WOW. The mid palate richness was stunning. Amazing freshness and balance with finesse and elegance yet so much power. It was our last tasting of the day and the finish from this wine lasted halfway back to Bordeaux. 85% Merlot 15% Cabernet Franc 98-99+. I cannot give a perfect score to an unfinished wine, but this came as close as possible.

Lafleur: One of my personal favorites but with one problem!! Not enough wine to go around. Again, one of my favorite visits and another extremely enthusiastic vigneron Omri Rahm greeted us. They are at the cutting edge of vineyard management and manage their prized small parcel of vines magnificently. Color very dark ruby with aromas of violets and cherries exuding from the glass. Another candidate for wine of the vintage it has everything in a wine you want. The front and mid palate are stunning, rich refined sweet ripe tannins and gob smacking powerful fruit. There is elegance, balance and power with a long, long finish. Bravo!! 46% De Bouchets 54% Merlot. 97-99.

L'Evangile: I praised the excellent quality of the 2019 (97-99) but I think this 2020 is equal or maybe slightly better. Color black with a very exotic cherry eucalyptus nose. Every possible attribute is there to make it a potentially perfect wine, super rich up-front fruit with massive lush ripe fruit in the mid palate whilst also being refined and balanced. Super fresh tannins and very long finish. 88% Merlot 12% Cabernet Franc 97-99.

Le Pin: The tiny jewel in Pomerol has produced a tremendous wine this year. Dark ruby color with an exotic bouquet of blueberries and blackberries. Very rich fat ripe up-front fruit that carries all the way through to a long finish. Finesse and elegance with balanced sweet ripe tannins. 97-98.

Clinet: Another small property in Pomerol and one that is improving year in year out. Black color with a very exotic black cherry bouquet. Rich front and mid palate with sweet ripe tannins exploding with freshness. Super finish. 96-98

La Conseillante: Black in color with a cherry and licorice expressive bouquet. These 2020 Pomerols have everything you want in a wine the upfront rich fat ripe fruit with power and balanced sweet ripe tannins with a long finish. 95-97+

L'Eglise Clinet: Medium ruby color with a cherry cassis bouquet. Rich up front fruit and sweet ripe tannins. Elegant and refined with a strong finish. 94-96

Les Pensees: The story here is this wine started out in 1987 as a second wine of Lafleur. Move forward 34 years and this is a wine that stands out on its own with its own designated vineyard. Color black with aromas of violets and cinnamon. There is a very rich and intense powerful mid palate that exudes freshness and power. Long finish and for me the best Pensees to date. 71% Merlot 29% De Bouchets. 94-96.

SAINT EMILION

The commune with the most estates and home to four Premier Grand Cru Classé A –Ausone, Cheval Blanc, Angelus and Pavie. It also has many over achievers. Not the most consistent commune but where it is good, they are at the top of their game.

Figeac: We were privileged to visit the new winery which is spectacular and so is the wine. Color very dark ruby. An expressive bouquet of cassis chocolate and coffee. This is a fabulously rich powerful wine yet with refined sweet ripe fresh tannins. Great chewy fruit and strong finish. Surely one of the best Figeac's in the last 30 years. 97-99.

Cheval Blanc: Black color with an exotic bouquet of cassis and eucalyptus. This is a very rich powerful wine with great balance of fruit and sweet ripe tannins and a freshness that reminds you of the great old Cheval Blancs. Huge structure and the requisite rich, meaty powerful fruit. 96-98+

Troplong Mondot: A huge improvement here. Black color with a very expressive exotic caramel and cassis bouquet. Lovely fat rich ripe fruit with sweet fresh ripe tannins and a stunning finish. 96-98.

Pavie: another wine with one of the best terroirs in Saint Emilion. A new style Pavie black in color with an exotic spicey bouquet of chocolate and vanilla. It is a very rich spicey chewy wine with lovely balanced and decadent fruit. Sweet ripe tannins with a very long finish. 95-97+

Ausone: One of the two original Premier Saint Emilion Grand Cru Classé A. Black fruit with a bouquet of lanolin and blueberry. A rich balanced wine with great freshness and structure. Very elegant with a lot of finesse. 95-97.

Canon: This Chateau has been on a hot streak since 2015 and 2020 is no exception. It is widely known Canon has some of the best terroir in Saint Emilion and it really shows this year. A dark ruby color with an expressive bouquet of vanilla and cherries. It has such fresh ripe tannins and is a joy to drink now. Lots of finesse and balance with a long powerful finish. 95-97

Pavie Macquin: Managed by the talented winemaker Nicolas Thienpont who has crafted another super wine. Black color with a very expressive bouquet of exotic chocolate and eucalyptus. Big structure and sweet ripe tannins with a powerful finish. 95-97.

L'If: Another tiny property owned by Jacques Thienpont. Since purchasing the property, the wine is going from strength to strength and is a property to watch. Color dark ruby with black a cherry bouquet. Powerful rich ripe fruit and great freshness of tannins with a long finish. 94-96

Angelus: Another great effort from this newly appointed Premier Grand Cru Classé A deep purple color with a bouquet of cherry and blueberry. Big structure but plenty of finesse and elegance. Nice rich fruit with super fresh tannins with a long finish. 94-96.

Canon La Gaffeliere: Always entertaining to taste with the ebullient Comte Stephan von Neipperg. Color black with an expressive bouquet of black cherry. Lots of big rich fruit but a wine of great finesse and elegance. Sweet fresh ripe tannins and a long finish. 94-96.

La Mondotte: Another tiny property with some of the best Terroir in Saint Emilion also owned by Comte Stephan von Neipperg. Color black with an expressive bouquet of black cherry. A wine with great freshness and super ripe sweet tannins. Full bodied and a long finish. 94-96.

Clos de Sarpe: A tiny property producing only 3000 bottles. Dark ruby color with cherry and blueberry aromas. Rich ripe fruit with silky fresh tannins and a nice finish. 93-95+

Cote de Baleau: One of the over achievers for the last two vintages. This is one of the best value for money wines you will find in all of Bordeaux. Color black with a cherry blueberry bouquet. Very fresh ripe tannins and super balance full of rich powerful succulent fruit with a long finish. 93-95 A real bargain.

SAUTERNES

The following are notes on the sweet white wines of 2020 Bordeaux by Bill Blatch, used with his permission. Blatch has been in Bordeaux since the mid-seventies and is a Sauternes specialist.

A very warm winter (100-year temperature record and 3X less frosts than the average) + major rainfall (twice the average in Nov, Dec & Mar) and a succession of storms in Jan-Feb (11 named ones in Feb) all combined together to provoke a 3-week early start to the vineyard year (which would later pull back to 10-12 days early at harvest, still extremely early.

At this very early bud-burst mid-March, a very small « sortie » was observed due to the erratic weather at the previous year's flowering when the following year's embryo bunches form. This ensured the certainty of a small crop right from the start.

Thereafter, the yields continued to be eroded by

- little pockets of frost damage during the end March cold patch*
- some limited coulure / millerandage from alternating warm / cold conditions during the very early flowering mid-May*
- very high mildew pressure, often as high as in 2018) from the warm humid conditions of late spring / early summer*
- damage by flooding of the Ciron valley in May, especially when it turned into a vicious hailstorm on 9th, hacking its way down the Ciron and slicing through the NW part of Barsac, leaving several estates, including Climens, totally devastated*
- desiccation from the drought that was to follow*

A cool and wet final end May and early June, as in 2019, was beginning to become depressing but suddenly on 19th, two days earlier than in 2019, the weather abruptly changed into what was to become the long summer drought. As it crescendo into a protracted fierce heatwave, this was to become the period that, as for the reds, created much of the vintage's sugar build-up in the grapes.

Heavy rain 11th - 13th August (Sauternes received 36 mm in one hour on 12th) brought relief to the sometimes blocked vines. It also reduced the acidities by dilution just as the dry whites were starting their harvest. But Sauternes still had a long way to go, and their acidities would have plenty of time to recover during the cool nights of end August and end September.

Specific to the Sauternes region was the higher August rainfall in Barsac than in Sauternes, which probably goes a long way to accounting for Barsac's earlier onset of botrytis, coinciding better with the first ideal picking windows. The

Barsacais would go on to produce much more good botrytis in the early pickings than the Sauternais, accounting for the higher yields.

Very dry and very hot conditions resumed over the first half of September, often after the dry whites had finished, re-concentrating the of course still unpicked Sauternes, restoring their acidities and producing fast-climbing sugar levels but...too dry for much botrytis.

Nevertheless, many did a first pass from 14th September, picking a very small quantity of mostly « passerillé » grapes, with some occasional botrytised ones mixed in. These first musts were only occasionally rich but all very fine and aromatic. They came to an abrupt halt with the harvest's first rainy period 18th - 26th September, when no harvesting could be done, but everyone's vineyard was up-to-date and clean as they waited for a second round.

There followed, on 27th, a second small three-day window of opportunity to finish the 1st pass and start the 2nd as the vineyard dried out. This time there was more botrytis, but it had mostly lost concentration. There were notable exceptions (for example, Yquem and the Doisy's), each on entirely different terroirs but both making at this time a good portion of their total harvest with more advanced good, fresh botrytis. But most had to settle for less botrytis concentration and more passerillage.

From 30th September to 6th October, it rained again, a whole month's worth in 7 days. Many lesser properties could not afford to experience another 2012 and now picked everything, botrytised or not, often at only 13-16° potential alc, for dry wine or moelleux.

All the quality estates hung on until the rain stopped on 7th, opening the vintage's third picking window as the vineyard dried out and especially as the Northerly winds came back from 15th providing the most ideal conditions of the harvest. In four or five short days, the best of the vintage was picked, producing a good half of everyone's crop, most finishing by 20th. Some continued on into a very good 3rd pass (eg Suduiraut) and others just started their whole harvest (eg Fargues) bringing in great botrytis under ideal conditions at first, then dodging the showers of 20th – 22nd. By 24th most had finished but a very few managed to continue even into November, picking grapes that had really been on the vine too long, weakened also by the return of the warm Southerlies. I have heard of none of these final pickings going into the Grand Vin.

The final blends of the Grands Vins ended up tiny: from 0 ho/ha (eg Sigalas) to many at 3-6 (eg Lafaurie) and the luckiest ones at 10-11 (eg many Barsacs).

After such variability at harvesting, I was expecting great stylistic and quality divergence but in the end am amazed at how they all have such similar

appearance: some fuller, some leaner; some sweeter, some less sweet; yet all very fruit-focused wines of great beauty and purity and a surprisingly marked botrytis signature, from which extraneous tastes are totally absent.

It was a very complicated and nuanced vintage, where the windows of optimum picking were very elusive according to which portions of the vineyard were ready and at what time, sometimes without warning. So planning was tricky, even more so because of Covid restrictions (imagine the effect of a whole team being isolated if one of them tested positive). Sometimes, even when the teams were available at short notice, the fickleness of the weather often made it a question of just plain luck - good or bad. Some, mostly lesser estates, intervened precipitously very early on, obliged to base harvesting decisions on financial survival rather than on quality but most hung on to the ultimate quality picking windows and, in spite of the economic advantages of doing otherwise, only included the very best of each pass in their Grand Vin.

Nobody is claiming this is a great vintage. They don't have the sheer power of the '09s nor the fat beauty of the '15s nor the elegant beauty of the '16s and '17s, but they do have remarkable purity with a super (but better balanced) '98 kind of togetherness that will make them adorable young to mid-term and could possibly surprise us long-term.

Bill Blatch 27th April 2021

Postscript on the 2021 frost in Sauternes

On the early mornings of 7th and 8th April, the temperature dropped to around -4°C, -7°C at ground level in some places. No amount of burning of hay bales or wooshing by helicopters can raise such readings by more than a ° or two so these were the most lethal days. Then the frosts of 13th and 14th although milder, finished off a lot of whatever had been saved.

The damage was immediately visible with shriveled buds and burned clusters. Barsac was amongst the worst hit in the Bordeaux region. The following Monday, where the previous week the vineyard had been dotted with green shoots at « petit chou » stage, Barsac had completely shriveled, and the loss is almost total. Sauternes was more variable: at the lower levels, all looked similarly black and lifeless whilst on the higher elevations, there was more green visible, amongst which there were ominous snaking bands of black where colder air currents had crept over. Some vines were strangely mixed between black and green, whilst the hills of Yquem and Fargues were largely and strangely untouched.

These frosts came early in the vine's cycle, at « petit chou » or bud burst stage, two weeks earlier than in 1991 or 2017. There was hope therefore that counter-buds would emerge that would have more time than in '91 and '17 to catch up during the rest of the year, but it is now feared that even these counter-buds will be dead too.

Sauternes, already suffering from what I find an inexplicable lack of consumer interest, has now been smitten for the fifth time by a natural disaster: frost in 2017, mildew in 2018, acid rot in 2019, hail and late rain in 2020 and now frost in 2021. Egypt had seven scourges so what comes next? We are keeping an eye out for swarms of locusts...

WINES OF THE VINTAGE

- Cheval Blanc
- Figeac
- Haut Brion
- Lafite Rothschild
- Lafleur
- La Mission Haut Brion
- L'Evangile
- Mouton Rothschild
- Vieux Chateau Certan

OVER-ACHIEVERS

- Berliquet
- Brane Cantenac
- Calon Segur
- Canon
- Capbern
- Carignan Prima
- Clerc Milon
- Cote De Baleau
- Duhart Milon
- Figeac
- Gruaud Larose
- Leoville Barton
- Leoville Poyferre
- Le Petit Mouton
- Les Carmes Haut Brion
- Malescot St Exupery
- Marquis De Calon
- Montrose
- Pichon Lalande
- Rauzan Segla

VALUE DRINKERS

- Armailhac
- Berliquet
- Capbern
- Carignan
- Carignan Prima
- Cote De Baleau
- Grand Village
- Laroque
- Les Ormes De Pez
- Madame De Beaucaillou
- Malescot St Exupery
- Marquis De Calon
- Pichon Comtesse Reserve
- Saint Pierre
- Tour St Christophe