

Connections wine

BORDEAUX 2005: An Introduction

<http://www.connectionstowine.com> / By Panos Kakaviatos



***T**hanks for subscribing to my first newsletter. Wine is my passion, and I look forward to writing about it for you here.*

Good thing to start with Bordeaux 2005, because if you have never tried Bordeaux before, it's time to invest in a case or two.

I was smiling in the photo taken at *Château d'Yquem*, at the beginning of tastings, in early April. I was still smiling at the end, because the vintage is special.

Why? The weather. Bordeaux vineyards face a finicky climate, where rain often gets in the way of optimal grape maturity. In years like 2000 or 1990, it is reached and the consumer is happy, but in a very few vintages the weather is not only ideal for such maturity but for an *amplified* balance of tannin, acidity, alcohol and fruit. More of them all than is usual, but also not *too much* of one over another, which seemed to be the case even for the less expensive wines I tasted. Comparing 2005 wines from those of the great 2000 vintage, many wine writers were impressed with the 2005's "greater freshness," while also its ability to match the fine maturity of the 2000 vintage. Though tasting Bordeaux for only the last 10 years – from barrel in the last four – I feel that 2005 *deserves* its media hype, also because of extensive interviews with professionals.

Located in southwestern France, Bordeaux comprises some 100,000 hectares of vines yielding three to five million hectoliters of wine per

year, divided into 57 appellations or AOCs. Some great, like Pauillac or St. Emilion, costing between 15 to 500 dollars/euros per bottle, others more common, like your 6 to 8-dollar/euro bottle of Bordeaux AOC or Bordeaux Superior, where wines can be made from grapes grown *anywhere* within that vast region. Bordeaux produces as much wine as *all* of Germany, for example, and few low-end Bordeaux wines are associated with impressive buildings. But if you read *mis en bouteille au château* on the label, the wine was made from a specific plot of land (*estate grown*), even though the “château” could be a shack. Most of my tasting notes cover the top 5% of Bordeaux, from the best AOCs. Bordeaux is the standard for Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, the primary grapes for Bordeaux blends – Bordeaux is almost always a blend – plus, to a lesser extent, Cabernet Franc, Petit Verdot and Malbec.

Because Bordeaux’s climate can be difficult, vintages matter most. We are not talking about central plains in Chile, where the weather is almost always good enough, year in and year out, to at least avoid disease in the vineyard and yield very ripe if not necessarily very complex fruit, the cliché of New World wine – a cliché, because microclimates in New World regions can and do result in wines of both quality with aging potential. But nowhere else in the world do Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot reach such heights as in Bordeaux, *when the weather cooperates*. The result is a wine that has richness, but also structure, backbone and freshness.

To obtain insight on the 2005 vintage, I interviewed many a vintner – some who had absolutely no incentive to hype the vintage – and all said they had never seen such a fine year. Take for example Yves Bertrand in the Graves region. Not the famous Pessac-Léognan appellation in the northern Graves, home to such great wines as *Haut Brion* and *Domaine de Chevalier*, but to the south. Yves was on his way to his native Canada last November, to retire from the wine business, after having worked for over 25 years at *Chateau de Gaillat*, near Langon. “I do not think I have ever seen such fine weather for Bordeaux,” he said. The same goes for famous winemakers, like Jean-Claude Berrouet, who makes *Pétrus*, the most expensive Bordeaux in the Merlot-dominated appellation of Pomerol. No need to market his wine, which is sold every year with zero difficulty. The proof however is in the pudding, and I hope my tasting notes give you insight to this vintage’s fine quality.

Is it going to be worth the price?

Price will be a problem. The very best wines of 2005 are going to be very expensive, no doubt about it, with millionaires picking them up in Japan, China and in the US, primarily, one trader told me. But the good news is that 2005 is a uniform vintage, indeed also a rare vintage, where red and whites (including sweet whites) were made successfully and across different price points. That means that you will find fine wines at modest prices, too. Such wines I have marked with an asterisk* in these pages, so look out for those high price/quality ratios. But should you buy a more expensive wine in a futures price, I suspect that you will get your money's worth. Basically, in lesser vintages, such as 2002 and 2004, many people rightfully saw no need to buy wine futures, because the release prices (the shelf price of the wine released in bottle, about two years afterwards) tend to be about the same as the futures prices.

But in vintages like 2000, for example, which generated incredible media attention, on shelf discounts were few and far between, and futures prices, though high, turned out to be relative bargains. In the US, one will definitely have to take into consideration the exchange rate, and at the time of this writing, the dollar is weak compared to the euro. My feeling is the wines seem so exceptional, that if you do not have that much Bordeaux in your collection, money to spare and time to sit on the wine for some years, you should buy some higher end wines, as well as the low- to mid-range QPRs. The quality is there and they will only appreciate in value, meaning that even if you end up not liking the wine for whatever reason, demand will be such that you will be able to resell it for a profit, if not break even, at the very least. Again, 2000 is a good reference. I remember getting caught up in a buying frenzy when the futures campaign kicked off in the spring of 2001, and it has already paid off. I bought Château Montrose for \$50 a bottle in futures; it now sells for almost twice as much. Same for Châteaux Gruaud Larose and Lynch Bages. Another wine I really liked, Château Grand Puy Lacoste, I bought for \$35 per bottle. It sells today for nearly twice as much. But a word to the investor-conscious: pay attention to the point scores of American wine critic Robert Parker. Whether one agrees with his analysis on a given wine or not, his point scores influence Bordeaux prices like no other scores, including those from *The Wine Spectator* and *Decanter*.



Scenes from Bordeaux this past April, from top to bottom: the majestic Château Latour in Pauillac, tasting wine blind in Sauternes and another blind tasting at Château Talbot, in St. Julien

Wonderful weather

Dry weather conditions characterized the 2005 vintage in Bordeaux. In a drought, the lack of water could lead to an arrested development of the vine, which cannot nourish the grapes: the case for many vineyards in 2003. Extreme dryness in that summer, combined with the torrid heat wave of August (the infamous month where thousands of people lost their lives in France because of the extreme heat) led to massive vine stress. But in 2005, the *early onset* of dry weather permitted vines preparation. Winter rainfall from 2004-2005 amounted to 362mm, with the average of 497mm over the last 30 years. The vines responded by limiting growth, resulting in less shoots. Root development reacted as well, with a search for humidity deep in the soils, so that by the time August rolled around, the vines were already on a scarce-water footing. Happily, August proved a perfect match to the vines' expectations and less grapes per vine also meant potential for more concentrated juice per grape. Unlike the torrid 24-hour per day heat of 2003, August in 2005 yielded above average temperatures *during the day*, but very cool evenings with light wind which helped freshen the soils, and also maintain humidity, as winemaker Pascal Delbeck of Château Belair in St. Emilion explained.

Risking too high a level of alcohol?

The “amplified” nature of the 2005 vintage was best expressed by the producers themselves, who seemed to run out of words and turned to statistics to explain the wines during the April tastings, inundating journalists with figures and indices, including (high) measures of tannin, sugar and alcohol. And – thank goodness – good acidity, lending the wines needed freshness. Paul Pontallier, winemaker at the famous *Château Margaux* turned to the IPT tannin index. Quantity of tannins is measured on the total polyphenol index (IPT). “In 2000 it was 70, in 2003 it was 73. This year it is 78. Just to put that in perspective, in 1982 it was between 62 and 63,” he explained.

Pontallier also noted that Merlot alcohol levels were the highest that had been seen in 100 years (up to 15.5%), but made clear that the higher-alcohol Merlot was only used for the second wine, *Pavillon Rouge*, which had a slightly drying finish, he said, because it was perhaps a tad high on the alcohol register.

“For the Margaux terroir, there would never be a truly great wine at 13.5% or above,” he asserted. “For me, high alcohol is a real enemy of fine wine.”

Another danger from high alcohol is aging in new oak, as many winemakers like. The higher the alcohol, the greater the risk of extracting too much wood flavor into the wine.

Back in October last year, Pétrus winemaker Berrouet posed the question for the now famous 2005 vintage: If near-perfect weather resulted in naturally concentrated grapes with high sugar content, why should anyone have picked late, employed green harvests or tried to over-extract tannins?

“The skins were quite thick by the time we finished picking the Merlots on Sept. 17, but some thought that by waiting further—sometimes much further—there would be an improvement of the skins,” Berrouet said. “They ran the risk of reaching alcohol levels that are far too high.”

Not so, said Gerard Perse of Château Pavie in St. Emilion, under consultation from world famous winemaker Michel Rolland. Perse did not finish picking his Merlot until Oct. 7—a good three weeks after Pétrus—and claims to have reached the utmost maturity, with alcohol levels at about 14.2% for his Merlot.”

“The harvest was incredible,” he said. “One could compare it to 1982, but the difference is that in 2005, more careful attention was paid to the vineyard. We had the courage to wait.” Perse explained the importance of “careful winemaking because of the high levels of alcohol, which meant regular pumping over and *pigeages*, because the very structured and concentrated juice needed a lot of oxygen during fermentation.”

At Pétrus, the Merlot grapes contained less alcohol, between 13.5% and 14%. “Some people say that Petrus started too early, but we seek fruit and freshness,” Berrouet explained. “The taste of prunes does not interest us.”

Only 70% new oak is being used to age the wine at Pétrus – already considered a high amount, while Pavie is using 100% new oak. As for winemaking, the amount of pumping over and *pigeages* was kept to a minimum: “You need to avoid extracting too much in this vintage,” Berrouet said when I tasted his wine in April.

In the Cabernet Sauvignon-dominated Médoc, Anthony Barton of Châteaux Langoa and Léoville Barton bluntly explained the significance of picking dates in 2005: “The fashion has been to harvest late, but some people went absolutely berserk this year.” He criticized Christophe Coupez, a Médoc-based oenologist who advised winemakers that the best parcels of Merlot are those harvested “when

the skins begin to degrade.” At Château Pedesclaux – an estate not far from the world famous Château Mouton Rothschild – for example, Merlot pickings began on September 26th and ended on October 7th, while the Cabernet Sauvignon was picked from October 9th until October 13th, according to winemaking director Denis Jugla, who works under Coupez’s consultation.

“Some grapes had jammy aromas and we did wait until the skins were starting to degrade,” said Coupez, who came from the Côtes du Rhône four years ago and whose laboratory in Pauillac consults some 300 properties in the Medoc.

“2005 was typical of what we did in the Rhône, waiting until the extreme limit so that all three elements – aroma, color and tannin – were completely ripe,” explained Coupez, who had just visited another Medoc property under his consultation, Château Saint Saturnin, where the harvest had not started until October 21st.

“We did not have botrytis,” affirmed Jugla, who in response to critics of later harvesting in 2005, said that “one has to take risks to make a great wine.” Botrytis is a natural mold that is very good for making white Sauternes but terrible for red wines.

“Ridiculous,” Barton countered. “We finished our Cabernet harvest after the Merlot, on September 30th, and had 12, up to 13 degrees natural alcohol [Cabernet Sauvignon is lower in degree than Merlot], with acidities around a level of four,” he said. “We would not have gained anything by waiting,” he added. “Quite the contrary, things were starting to go downhill. What that enologist advised is so typical of the vogue these days of late harvesting - totally unnecessary in 2005. And many who did green harvests this year are regretting that.”

At Château Mouton Rothschild, the famous Château in Pauillac, winemaking director Philippe Dhalluin said that the Merlots were picked from September 26th until September 28th, when the first Cabernet Sauvignon was picked. Mouton Rothschild’s final day of harvesting was on October 6th, for the Cabernet Sauvignon and for the late-ripening petit verdot.

“I think some did harvest too late in 2005,” he said. “But the harvest was so exceptional; most wines will be generally good.”

During our tasting in April this year, Pétrus’s Berrouet told me that wines from all over the world these days have too much alcohol, “certainly because of warmer climates, but also because of later harvesting, greater leaf clearing and green harvests.”

“And consumer curiosity and taste is turning toward internationally styled wines, where color and ‘sugar’ are principle elements,” he said. “It is a fact that the higher the level of alcohol, the higher the sensation of sugar, and over-ripeness has the same effect, particularly on tannins, to the detriment of aromatic subtlety.

“So we are cultivating the glory of black-colored wines, powerful, full-bodied – and simple.”

But Berrouet is confident that “we will still find all kinds of wines being made: traditional and modern, with each wine maker creating wine according to a specific vision, and 2005 in Bordeaux is a very good example. In the same zones of production, we have never seen so many different types of wines.”

ONE LAST THING!

Please do share these pages with (very close) friends and family, but as I am of course seeking more subscribers, I would appreciate recommendations of this newsletter to others, if you like what you read. Thanks again.

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