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Titus Andronicus

Insanity, Glory, Blood, Tears, Lust, Tragedy, Extravagance, Avarice, Violence and Mythology on the Gironde

It is almost painful to tell the story of another great vintage in Bordeaux. The fact that 2010 follows the superb 2009 vintage is remarkable as well. And of course, there is the potential for serious wine consumers who love Bordeaux to once again be bludgeoned with skyrocketing prices that are likely to exceed those that were asked for 2009. Yet the world continues to change, and it is an inescapable truth that 2010 has produced another year of compelling Bordeaux that will go down as a prodigious vintage alongside 2009. Take your pick – this news is either tragic or mythical, but I have tasted enough wines from 2005, 2009 and 2010 to realize that these may be the three greatest Bordeaux vintages I have tasted in my career.

2009 will always be the more “fun” vintage because of its more sumptuous, fruit-forward, lower acid wines with soaring aromatics as well as fleshy, exuberant flavors and plush, succulent personalities. Their style vaguely recalls ripe, precocious vintages such as 1982 and 1990. 2010 exceeds 2009 in record setting alcohols, but, paradoxically, it is the fresh acids, lower pHs and massive tannins that have dictated more precision in the mouth despite the record alcohol levels these wines attained. While massive and highly extracted, the 2010s are also fresh and incredibly pure. Moreover, they will enjoy astonishing longevity.

It is no secret that the finest Bordeaux vintages are dry (often drought-like) years when there is early, consistent flowering followed by gorgeous weather in September and October. The old saying, “June makes the quantity, August makes the style and September makes the quality,” has considerable merit, and it could be modified to include October along with September as making the quality. Most of the 2010 and 2008 crops were harvested extremely late, some well into the last weeks of October, as more and more producers seek full phenolic maturity.

The only problem 2010 encountered was a poor flowering with the Merlot crop, which reduced yields dramatically. Readers will hear the French use the words *coulure*, which means tiny “shot” berries, and *millerandage*, which is often referred to as “hens and chickens” that results from problematic weather during the flowering. Throughout Bordeaux, in the Médoc, Graves and Pomerol, the Merlot crop was affected dramatically by these conditions in 2010. However, the only effect was to reduce yields and ultimately, based on the weather that occurred subsequently, to increase concentration and extract levels in the grapes. 2010 was another drought year, but unlike 2009, the summer was more similar to 2005 with no dramatic heat waves, only extremely dry weather. Even though June turned out to be a warmer month than in either 2009 or 2005, it was also less sunny. That changed in July, which was warmer, sunnier and drier than both 2005 and 2009. This was followed by three months, August, September and October, that were cooler than both 2009 and 2005, but with drought-like conditions. In short, there was less precipitation from July through September than in 2009, 2005 and 2003. I think these statistics explain why the wines are so concentrated and rich, yet also have higher total acid numbers and lower pHs than 2009, thus giving the 2010s a freshness and precision that is the paradoxical characteristic of this vintage. Normally, incredible ripeness as was achieved in 2010 with alcohol levels averaging 13.8%-14.5% and higher in the Médoc and Graves to 15.5% and higher in Pomerol and St.-Emilion are accompanied by low acidities and suspiciously high pHs. That is not the case in 2010. The pHs are actually quite respectable, running between 3.5 and 3.8, and the total acids are normal as well. Add the extraordinary concentration of flavor and the high polyphenol levels with tannins that are often off the charts in terms of analytical readings, and readers can see that this is a massively concentrated vintage that will be less sumptuous and not nearly as friendly as 2009. In short, if there is any vintage that 2010 tends to resemble, it would be 2005, which was a great vintage of backward, dense, concentrated wines. 2010 has also turned out to be a top-flight vintage for the dry white Bordeaux as they seem to have levels of concentration and fruit that has produced the finest white wines Bordeaux has

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I do not think it would be fair or prudent to say that 2010 exceeds in overall quality what was produced in 2009, 2005 or perhaps even 2000. However, it is unquestionably another great vintage. While Bob Dylan may have been talking about his own country when he wrote the song *With God On Our Side*, it sure looks as if fate has smiled on Bordeaux in an extraordinary way for much of the last decade with four great vintages (2000, 2005, 2009 and 2010). Moreover, the quality of the other vintages in that decade is very good.

If 2009 stood out for the historic richness and potential of the Médocs and some Graves and Pomerols, 2010 seems relatively homogeneous throughout Bordeaux. The Cabernet Sauvignon has once again done exceptionally well, while there may be a handful of Merlot-based wines where the tannins are unusually rustic and excessive, by and large this is a great vintage in every appellation. As time elapses, I do believe it will be the Cabernet Sauvignon-based wines that put on the most weight and reveal the greatest nuances.

The Global Marketplace and the Increasingly Intimidating Prices Asked for Great Bordeaux

The Bordeaux marketplace is a global one and more and more it is apparent that a caste system has developed. One could argue that this has existed ever since the famous 1855 Classification of the Wines of the Gironde was published. Today, the world is shocked by skyrocketing prices for 30 or 40 châteaux. Normally this would look like a bubble ready to burst. However, that does not look to be the case. The fact is, the demand continues to increase and the quantity of these wines remains the same as it has for decades. In fact, for many of these estates the selection process has become so draconian that there is actually less wine being produced than in the past. Much has been written about the investment firms in Great Britain that are allowed to purchase fine wine as an investment. That was a factor in 2009, and will be so again in 2010. Add to that the roaring Chinese economy where more millionaires are being created each day than in a month in the United States, and their propensity to love Bordeaux, and to want to buy the world's finest wines, and readers can see there is too much upward pressure for the top 40 or so Bordeaux châteaux. However, some Bordeaux wines still represent phenomenal bargains, and, hopefully, many of them are covered in these reports. Additionally, in the middle category of \$30-\$75 a bottle offerings, there are many great wines that represent fabulous value in terms of world-class wines that will age for 25-30+ years.

In summary, the Chinese are buying fine art, jade and great Bordeaux, for both consumption and as a hedge against inflation. Combine that with the investment firms taking a position in the top Bordeaux châteaux, and all the conditions are there for continued high prices. I had hoped we would see a replay of what happened in 1990 when Bordeaux prices dropped after reaching record levels in 1989. However, I do not believe this will happen in 2011. Everywhere I went in Bordeaux the news seemed rather pessimistic that prices would remain stable or go up. In fact, most *négociants* and proprietors were talking about 15-20% increases as they watched their 2009s soar in value in secondary marketplaces.

What this all actually means is that readers need to forget about the first-growths, super-second and a handful of other limited production glamour wines as they will be beyond the reach of all but the wealthiest millionaires and billionaires. However, these represent only a tiny fraction of the entire Bordeaux production. There are many, many good values and great wines

to be found at far lower prices. It makes sense to buy those wines as futures if you are dealing with a reputable merchant with a history of buying and delivering Bordeaux futures.

About the 2008s

This vintage came out at low prices and the top wines have soared in value. However, most 2008s remain somewhat forgotten and under-valued *vis à vis* the two subsequent vintages. These are classic and outstanding wines that represent excellent value. 2008 is an exceptionally strong vintage in Pomerol and St.-Emilion as well as Graves. The Médocs are more mixed, but as the following tasting notes indicate, there are some top wines in this vintage even though they may not hit the high marks of the sumptuous 2009s or massive 2010s.

What If?

Any serious introspection of the global wine market for Bordeaux over the last two years has to include the fact that it is impossible to determine the amount of 2009 Bordeaux futures (and in a few months, 2010 Bordeaux futures) that have actually been sold to consumers. Throughout Bordeaux there is talk of the massive market in Asia, and the increasing significance of the English wine investment firms, but there are those (and I wouldn't dismiss their opinions) who tend to think that such assertions are grossly inflated. Moreover, they argue that there is a real bubble that is in danger of bursting if the right external influences unfold. One theory is that the Big Eight (which includes all the first growths of the Médoc as well as Haut-Brion and the trifecta of unofficial first growths of the Right Bank, Petrus, Cheval Blanc and Ausone) are actually hoarding huge inventories of their wines to inflate prices. This theory also suggests that the super seconds and many of the other cherished names in Bordeaux are doing the same thing. Why? They are trying to manipulate the market price. The appearance of little or no appreciable quantities of wine from two great vintages equals higher and higher prices. Is there a falsification of the demand from Asian consumers? The fact is, no one seems to know the answer. While some 2009s have not held their initial opening prices because they were too high, many have. If

much of the 2009s, as well as the 2010s, are not sold through to wine consumers, who are the true marketplace since they actually drink these wines, and then tend to replenish their stock, buttressing the marketplace, then this is a bubble. Despite huge warehouses filled with reserve stocks of great vintages, prices could be set for a major adjustment, just as we have seen in the United States with the real estate market. What, if any of this, is true?

I raise this issue only because it is a possibility. The fact that no one can (or wants to) provide the actual sales figures of how much 2009 (or over the next six months, how much 2010) is actually being sold through to consumers is astonishing. If most of the stocks of these two vintages are held by importers, négociants, wholesalers, or on paper by investment firms, then it is obvious the consumers have not purchased 2009 and eventually 2010. In any event, I think this scenario has to be raised, given the overheated marketplace and the sometimes absurd rhetoric about how popular these wines are at prices of \$1000 or more a bottle.

About the Tastings

All of the wines were tasted between March 19 and March 31, 2011, in both centralized and châteaux visits. With the exception of the first-growths and a handful of the super-second, most of these wines were tasted at least twice, some of them 3-5 separate times during the nearly two weeks I spent in Bordeaux. While one cannot control the weather in Bordeaux, I have generally had very good weather during the 32 years I have been visiting this region. I had perfect weather for tasting on this trip, meaning high pressure, no humidity and lots of sunshine. Not a drop of rain fell on 12 of the 13 days I was in Bordeaux. The weather can have an effect when tasting barrel samples, especially if a low depression descends on Bordeaux, and the weather is cold and rainy. None of these conditions developed during my visit. The wines, particularly the 2010 barrel samples, performed remarkably well with the exception of a handful that had just finished or were still undergoing malolactic fermentation. If that was the case, that was noted in the tasting notes.

—Robert Parker

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