

22 MAR
2017

SOURCE : The Wine Doctor

CATEGORIE : On parle de vous

TAGS : Degustation

Bordeaux 2014: Pessac-Léognan

The memory of some wines just seems to stick. I will never forget my first taste, for example, of 2009 Château Latour, a breathtaking paradox of majestic weight and defined floral purity, sipped and spat while looking out over the Latour vines and the Gironde (because there is no such thing as blind tasting when it comes to the first growths, and when it is barrel samples you are looking at I think blind tasting is a bit nonsensical anyway). The 2014 primeur tastings of Pessac-Léognan provided another example of such a moment. Not Château Haut-Brion though. Not Château La Mission Haut-Brion either. Not even our old friend Château Haut-Bailly. No, it was another château that blew my tastebuds off, in much the same way that Charlie Croker blew the bloody doors off.

The wine - or barrel sample, to be precise - in question was 2014 Domaine de Chevalier. I nearly telephoned Olivier Bernard from the tasting room at Château Rouillac (I think that was where I was tasting that day - funny how I can remember the wine so clearly, but not any detail of the room or château wrapped around us both) to place an order.

Coming back to the finished wines, in bottle, if I had placed a purchase then I wouldn't have had any cause to regret it now - other than the fact en primeur prices are no longer the bargains they once were, of course. Putting prices to one side for a minute, the quality within 2014 Domaine de Chevalier remains tip-top. Nevertheless, although as a barrel sample it was a contender for top wine of the appellation, today that office has been filled by a more usual suspect.

Tasting the Wines

The 2014 Domaine de Chevalier still displays that crystal pure fruit, and is still a lovely effort in this vintage. Now, though, I rate a number of other wines on the same or a similar level, albeit in a variety of styles. The 2014 Château Haut-Bailly is dark but ripe and delightfully balanced, the 2014 Château La Mission Haut-Brion fabulously perfumed, showing a classic house style for this estate, while the 2014 Château Smith-Haut-Lafitte is typically concentrated, floral and lifted.

A serious step up from all these wines, however, is the 2014 Château Haut-Brion, which is a 14.5% tour de force brimming with the complex aromatics of black bean, tea leaf and liquorice. It is a stunning effort. Special mention should also go to Château Malartic-Lagravière, who have made a charming wine in 2014, showing better from bottle than it ever did from barrel (otherwise all the wines show true to my barrel tasting notes and scores). On the whole, for red wines, these show well, and they seem to have comparable quality to other good vintages in Pessac-Léognan, such as 2012.

As for the white wines, for a variety of reasons I could not make a detailed assessment of these at this time, tasting only a handful during a visit to Château La Mission Haut-Brion. In a vintage in which I found quite a little Sauvignon greenness at the primeurs, the high-class trio reported on here showed no such shortcomings. The 2014 Château Haut-Brion Blanc, unusually dominated by Semillon (which surely helps), in particular shows an admirable texture, richness and purity.

This is another appellation - like St Estèphe, St Emilion and Pomerol - where buyers should be careful about automatically assuming 2014 is the superior of the four vintages that immediately followed 2010. While it no doubt wipes the floor with 2013 (in red anyway, although I suspect in white also, judged on what few wines I have tasted, here and elsewhere), the difference between 2014 and the other two vintages, especially 2012 in which Pessac-Léognan over-performed (again, I am thinking more red than white), is less significant. (22/3/17)

Pessac-Léognan 2014: Tasting Notes

Tasted in October and December 2016

White Wines

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Château Haut-Brion Blanc 2014: A more polished but also more reserved nose, a little sandy-gravelly, with a floral edge, some notes of dried fruits, preserved lemon and dried white peach, with a dusty white pepper to it. More substantial than La Mission, more texture, perhaps less frivolous and enchanting, instead feeling more composed, complete, rounded and full, with a lovely substance and structure through to the finish. Long, pithy, quite citric and energetic. There is a lovely fine-boned acid undercurrent to it. A very impressive showing, a future classic, well set up for the cellar. 18/20

La Clarté de Haut-Brion 2014: A delightfully expressive nose, open and relating clearly to the appellation, with nuances of citrus pith, passion fruit and matchstick, with that sandy-gravelly Graves character too. The palate is fresh, fleshy, with a seam of melon and matchstick fruit, leading into a soft finish, peppered with grapefruit and little touches of quartz. There is quite some substance to this, and it certainly has appeal. 15.5/20

Château La Mission Haut-Brion Blanc 2014: A nose of orange pith, grapefruit, guava and smoke, with a fresh white-melon note behind this. This has so much more energy and direction than La Clarté on the palate. There is a very defined start, remaining fresh and delineated into the middle, with good acidity and bright flavours, with blood orange and matchstick, and a fine, quartz, sandy bed for it all. Fresh, energetic, citric and ripe, with an incisive, acid-driven finish. This should make many drinkers very happy. 17/20

Red Wines

Château Brown 2014: This is 55% Cabernet Sauvignon and 42% Merlot, with 3% Petit Verdot. The yield was 43 hl/ha, less than some vintages, with 70% of the crop going into the first label. The élevage was in 40% new oak. The nose is full of dark fruits, with a lightly roasted-macerated character. Nevertheless, the palate shows a style very typical of 2014, very fresh and pure, with clearly defined damson fruit, framed by the lively acidity of the vintage. This is quite open and elegant in style, showing a good grip, leading into a sappy finish. Overall, a good result. 16/20

Château Les Carmes Haut-Brion 2014: The assemblage here is led by Cabernet Franc, at 54% of the blend. A fascinating nose, dark but vaguely leafy, with a tobacco overlay, and some notes of green peppercorn too. The palate is fresh, bright, pure, with interesting Cabernet Franc-derived character, notably dark pencil-drawn fruits, but also some notes of mint, green peppercorn and Provençal herbs. The palate is broad, textured dark and characterful, with a full and fresh presence. Admirably textured, with a ripe structure, but the fruit character definitely reflects its reliance on Cabernet Franc. A dry, grippy but charming finish. 16/20

Domaine de Chevalier 2014: A beautifully pure and bright nose, loaded with fresh, crystalline, crimson fruit, all framed by a crunchy note of matchstick. The palate is textured, harmonious, really quite pretty, with a very pure style, the tannins underneath ripe and polished, the texture of the fruit charming and although quite generous it does not have the plushness of a great vintage. Overall the composition is dry and savoury, with plenty of energetic grip and substance. It doesn't quite have the perfumed vivacity and breathtaking poise I saw during the primeurs, but it is still a very convincing wine for the vintage. 17/20

Château Haut-Bailly 2014: A very dark and really quite reserved nose, and not very expressive. The palate has really charming texture at the beginning, although it remains fresh and pure, with a bright texture and substance. It is broad, charming, integrated and balanced, with a fine seam of ripe tannins at the finish. This is delightfully bright and poised, showing a really broad bed of ripe tannins, with good fruit and attractive harmony too. A fine, polished finish. This is very good indeed. 17/20

Château Haut-Brion 2014: A very dark nose, reticent at first, unfurling in the glass to reveal the scents of powdered chalk, damson, black tea leaf, black bean and liquorice. The palate is just so elegant, medium-bodied, a wine working on elegance rather than power. In the middle it feels composed, very refined, with a delightfully complete integration of all the components in the mouth. The tannins are silky soft and so well integrated they seem hardly noticeable, the acid doing most of the work through the front half of the palate. It all winds up in a dark, spicy, peppery and toasted finish, and only here do the tannins show up. All in all, an excellent result. 18/20

Le Clarence de Haut-Brion 2014: Dark and reserved, much less expressive than La Chapelle on this occasion. It feels quite savoury, with a dried fruit-skin character. The palate holds some real promise, reserved and defined, fresh and medium-bodied, with notes of black

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raspberry and dark red plum, all underpinned by a fine but really quite firm bed of tannins, cottony and composed. The finish reflects the wine's energy, showing a firm and direct style, and a long and grippy finish. 15/20

Château Malartic-Lagravière 2014: This is filled with sweet and expressive fruits on the nose, dressed with a leafy freshness, giving it a touch of lift and energy. The palate is quite textured, smoky and substantial. There is some charming dark-fruit character through the midpalate, which has ripe tannins at its heart, with a bright character and a delightful seam of ripe, polished tannins. This is impressive, balanced, ripe, energetic and full, with ripe fruit and grippy tannins in the finish. It all sits well together, the overall effect harmonious and correct. Very good indeed. 16.5/20

Château La Mission Haut-Brion 2014: This is a huge step up from the second wine, the aromatics filled with perfumed fruit, rose petal and peony, but also toasted almond, grilled pip and black tea leaf. This is certainly charming, fresh, with a slightly richer depth but still very much in the medium-bodied spectrum, showing elegant balance and fresh acidity, with a lightly chalky, velvety style, and well integrated tannins. It is that beautifully perfumed nose which is most captivating though. 17/20

La Chapelle de La Mission Haut-Brion 2014: A curious nose of vibrant redcurrant fruit, with a really quite leafy edge, reminiscent of blackcurrant leaf and raspberry leaf, forming a little frame of herbaceousness wrapped around the fruit. The palate seems much more convincing though, fresh and showing good substance and form, with a crispy, croquant style to the fruits, an acid-driven style, with some dry tannins underpinning it all. Quite elegant in terms of substance and texture, the structure firm but correct too. In the finish, the fruit feels interesting, but it veers a little into a more sour and acid-washed style. 14.5/20

Château Smith-Haut-Lafitte 2014: A dark and smoky nose, fresh and bright, with a lightly leafy note of mint and peppercorn. Although dark and substantial, the palate is nevertheless fresh and lifted, with a lovely purity of fruit that feels so typical of 2014, dark yet fresh and a little leafy like the nose. Underneath, a very fine grip and substance to it. This is charming, dark, characterful and polished, imbued with freshness and texture. Very good indeed. 17/20