

A SUMMARY OF THE 2010 VINTAGE

Written by Michael Schuster
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Un Grand Millésime Peut en Cacher un Autre

2010 and 2009 will certainly figure amongst Bordeaux's great claret 'pairs', albeit in very contrasting styles.

Headlines

- The top 2010 reds, as in 2009, are amongst the finest for fifty years or more.
- Good to great wines across the region, notably fine Cabernets from the Médoc.
- Red wines: high in alcohol, and in tannin, and in acidity.
- In spite of very high tannin the best clarets have an exquisitely fine texture.
- Dry Whites: an exceptionally fine year.
- Sauternes: very good, very appealing, rather than great.
- A late ripening and very dry year, but also a notably cool one.
- Exceptionally healthy fruit.
- A prolonged and almost rain free harvest where you could pick as suited your grapes and preferred wine style.
- Harvest Size: No official figures at the time of writing (1st May 2011). Early estimates* suggest an average harvest of around 5.6m hectolitres, around 3% down on 2009.

* Agrestes Infos Rapides – Viticulture – Oct 2010

Growing Season*: Not the simple story that was 2009.

If 2009's growing season was a relatively straightforward story, 2010's was not. Bill Blatch puts it thus: "It was a violent vineyard year that tested the vine's resistance to chaotic conditions: during its grape formation, (resistance) to extreme drought during ripening, and to a high variation of hot and cold temperatures at the end – totally the opposite of the previous year's just as excessive but very regular cycle. 2010 is a vintage of extremes, but the extremes went the right way."

Winter: A long cold winter, with twice as many days of frost as usual from February to March, allowed the vines a healthy dormant period. Plentiful winter rainfall, with a particularly high November figure, built up soil and water table reserves which would be crucial during the very dry summer to come.

Spring / Flowering: Flowering and fruit set was mostly satisfactory in **early June**, but the two middle weeks of the month, that of the 8th to the 15th especially, were plagued by cold temperatures and heavy rainfall which affected the flowering and set of the Merlot especially. If this reduced the Merlot yield markedly for some properties, it is interesting to note that the affect on flowering of this poor weather was by no means uniform across the region, which goes some way to explaining the great variations in yield (qv).

June was also notable as the only month in the growing season during which there was more than average rainfall - 60% more than the thirty year average. This and the winter water reserves already mentioned were an important factor, alongside the cooler than average temperatures from mid July onwards, in preventing the drought conditions from creating sufficient stress to 'shut down' the vines and interrupt their phenolic ripening cycle.

Summer: Summer started from June 20th with a much warmer than normal final ten days to the month, leading to a very dry, hot and sunny **July** which concentrated the grapes on the one hand, and completely halted the vegetative growth of the vine by early August on the other. The vine could then concentrate, after *veraison* (colour change), entirely on the gradual ripening of its fruit. July was the only month in the 2010 growing season which was warmer than the thirty year average, but without any heat spikes. **August** and **September** followed on as two further particularly dry months, making the 2010 season the driest of the decade. But what made / saved, and eventually decided the character and quality of the year's fruit was the *coolness* of the season *in relation to its dryness*. With

the exception of July and early October, all the monthly temperatures during the 2010 growing season were below the fifteen year average. August in particular remained cool, for its first cloudy three weeks especially, with very few heat spikes and with exceptionally cool nights. Bordeaux is used to Hot / Dry, or Cool / Wet combinations, but Dry / Cool is rare. It meant that water remained available to the vines, they didn't 'close down' from heat/drought stress, acidities remained fresh and the grapes' solid matter in particular could continue to ripen gradually and without interruption.

The very unusual combination of both dry and relatively cool conditions during August and September produced small, thick skinned grapes from the dry conditions; plus a prolonged slow ripening period during which the cooler than usual diurnal *and* nocturnal temperatures were particularly beneficial for the ripening of the polyphenols. The combination resulted not only in high *levels* of tannin in the small, concentrated grapes, but also in the *aromatic richness* and remarkably *fine tannin textures* which eventually characterised the best wines.

Harvest: Eight weeks of almost uninterrupted sunshine.

A dry and exceptionally sunny **September** was followed by a similarly sunny **October**, with an unusually warm early fortnight. Nights were cool keeping the grapes fresh, healthy and aromatic; and there was just enough well spaced rainfall, a day or two at a time, to nudge the red grapes to absolute ripeness, and finally to encourage the onset and development of a rather tardy *botrytis* in Sauternes. The harvest was prolonged, starting with **dry whites** from early to mid September; fairly late and drawn out for the **red wines**, from the third week of September to the third week of October; and in a desultory fashion for **Sauternes** from late September to late October. Picking dates varied considerably depending on the style of wine you wanted to make, but there was no pressure whatsoever to harvest from the weather conditions *per se*.

* The information and statistics on which this summary is based come from three principal sources:

Bill Blatch: Annual Vintage Report

Faculty of Oenology, Bordeaux University (Geny, Doneche, Dubourdieu): 2010 Vintage in Bordeaux

Château Lagrange: Fifteen Year Weather Station Records.

Alcohol Levels - an Issue?

As in 2009, alcohol levels in 2010 are high. In the majority of cases at least the equal of 2009, in Pessac-Léognan and on the right bank often higher. As in 2009 they are typically between 13% and 14% on the left bank, between 14% and 15%+ on the right bank. 'Worrying' about high alcohol levels is not, as I have seen it suggested recently (quite absurdly), to imply that overcropped, sugar short, unripe and heavily chaptalised 12% - 12.5% clarets are the alternative. That said, we know that numerous superb wines have been made until very recently at 12.5% -13.5%. And the fact that there are indeed beautifully balanced and delicious tasting table wines at 14%-15%+ is not, in my view, a good reason to welcome them *in general*, or a reason not to seek means of reducing excessive sugar levels in fully ripe grapes in the vineyard.

The relationship between high levels of alcohol and good balance / pleasant / less pleasant tastes is far from straightforward, as I argued in my 2009 *en primeur* report. Fine balance and good flavour notwithstanding, there remain many wine lovers (by no means all old fogies) who simply don't want to drink *table* wines at alcohol levels approaching or above those of Fino Sherry. For them these are simply less refreshing, and eventually more fatiguing beverages. And high alcohol levels are an 'issue' for that reason if no other. Indeed if you ask many Bordeaux winemakers whether they would not have preferred to make their 2009 and 2010 wines with lower levels of alcohol, the vast majority would say 'yes'. However 'well balanced' you consider 2010 La Mission Haut Brion at 15.1%, would the property itself have been happier to produce it at 13.5-14%? Yes. And would it have tasted finer and even more harmonious at that level? Most probably. And if the weather pattern continues in the current pattern, I think sugar levels will become an issue that winemakers in Bordeaux, let alone elsewhere, will be looking to address with some urgency. As last year I have put the levels of alcohol in my notes where the information was available.

Yields

In the absence of official figures at the time of writing (1st May 2011) it is difficult to be precise about yields. What is clear is that it is not a simple story of a 'low yield' vintage due to Merlot's flowering problems, and to the very dry conditions. The poor weather at flowering affected vineyards very variably, with no obvious pattern, and the same goes for the effect of the drought conditions. Clearly many right bank properties, with a high proportion of Merlot, are down 10-20% on their 2009 production. But on the left bank there is little consistency. Here are a few examples: with *similar* global yields to 2009 (09 figures in brackets): Léoville Poyferré's yield in 2010 was 41hl/ha (42 in 2009), Grand Puy Lacoste 44 (45), Beychevelle exactly the same in both years 45hl/ha; with *less* than in 2009: Pichon Baron 35(40), Pontet Canet 41(45), Branaire Ducru 39(47), Charmail 50(55); with *more* in 2010: Montrose 47(40); Angludet 40(32); St Pierre 44(38), Gloria 46(42), Lagrange 50(43) ... and so on. Which just underlines that we should be particularly wary of generalisations about 2010 yields.

2010 Red Wine Style and Quality

Most wines have an abundance of everything: fruit, alcohol, acid, tannin. The *dry character of the year* produced small grapes, with up to 20% less weight than normal so that there was a high proportion of skin to juice and a natural potential richness; the year's *cooler temperatures*, day and night, kept acidities on the fresher side, and meant that ripening was slow, but beneficially so for the flavour and texture of the tannins; the *prolonged dry, clement, sunny weather* allowed for a very long growing period, a long 'hang time' for the fruit, and the opportunity for the grapes' solid matter to ripen to perfection in terms of texture and aroma.

The wines are *full bodied*: high in alcohol, concentrated in fruit; *fresh to lively & linear* in character: pH's on the lower and acidities on the higher side; and *tannic*, with very high tannin readings. The abundant, aromatically rich and fine textured tannins were very easy to extract, as they *are* when the grapes are very ripe, an extraction facilitated in any case by high alcohol, so that there was no need for vigorous extraction during vinification, or extended maceration. Intelligent winemakers used a light hand. But as always, what matters with tannins is not their measured 'index', but the level of their aromatic savour, and the quality of their affect upon one's gums – silk, or sacking?

Although there are many wines with very high tannin readings, they are for the most part not the tough tannins frequently found in 1986 for example, or more aridly dry tannins often there in 1995 or 2000. It is a remarkable feature of the best 2010 Cabernet Sauvignon based wines that they have a quite extraordinary finesse of texture, with tannins so fine as to be almost imperceptible; a 'finesse' of tannin quality, at this juncture, for which I can think of no immediate comparison. An apotheosis of the combined effects of great terroirs, a most particular weather cycle, and skilful winemaking?

Another feature of many of the wines this year is a notably fine aftertaste: a length which derives in part from, and is defined by, the fresh acidities, plus an aromatic richness which comes from the fully and profoundly ripe skins and pips. The best wines, probably from the Médoc especially, will rank amongst the finest clarets ever.

Cabernet Year / Merlot Year?

All three principal red grape varieties made very fine wines in 2010 so it is not really an either / or question.

Merlot had the same 'New World problem' (if this is how one can describe it) as in 2009, in that winemakers had to wait for the whole grape to be ripe, not just the sugar element, and this often meant waiting until the potential alcohol levels became uncomfortably high. This coupled with a (principally right bank?) tendency to make more extracty Merlot based wines can make many seem rather 'bulky and thick, though some will consider this to be a style rather than a quality question. A matter about which one can argue! Quite a number of right bank wines seemed to be even 'stronger' versions of their 2009's, with a touch of raisiny ripeness, and a potent, hot, faintly bittersweet character more reminiscent of Priorat force and concentration than Bordeaux elegance and restraint. Those with a high proportion of **Cabernet Franc** clearly had the potential to make superbly aromatic wines.

But it must be said that the best **Cabernet Sauvignon** based wines in 2010, especially from the northern Médoc, are remarkably complete, aromatically expressive and exceptionally refined

examples of the grape and of the terroirs. It is interesting to see how many wines in the Médoc contain an unusually high proportion of Cabernet Sauvignon in this year's blend. With the Cabernet so splendidly and completely ripe, less need for the Merlot's 'softening' flesh and warmth? Indeed a blender's fear that its relative corpulence, its weight and warmth, might just compromise the magnificent distinction of their 2010 Cabernets?

Compared with 2009

What seems certain is that the best wines of these two years, and there will be many, will rank amongst the greatest red wines Bordeaux has produced. And, more importantly for most of us, there will be much deliciously satisfying claret that will be accessible and affordable for those of us who actually want to pull the corks.

Retasting 2009's next to 2010's where possible, I felt I would end up preferring some 2009's, some 2010's of the same wine, with a marginal preference for 2009's on the right bank, the 2010's on the left bank – if forced to choose. But actually, I'd like the pick of both, at all levels. **2009's** are on the whole warmer in impression, sweeter, juicier, a bit more exotic, with a more immediate, flattering, fleshy appeal; delicious, seductive, accessible and friendly, with plenty of complexity too. And they will be more attractive earlier, on the whole. But some **2010's** will put their 2009 counterparts in the shade, especially in terms of refinement and absolute scope, most likely from the northern Médoc. They are not, on the whole, austere wines in spite of their tannin content, though they are, of course, a more masculine, more muscular expression of the terroirs. Like the 2009's they have a wonderfully sweet core intensity of fruit, but a greater freshness and vitality from their crisper constitutions, more density, vigour, sinew, and a remarkable minerality of flavour given their levels of ripeness. When mature there will be many brilliant, imposing, aristocratic and hugely satisfying 2010's.

I don't think it is helpful it is to think in 'either / or' terms, these are two very great vintages, in very different styles. Nor do I think that if one will 'last' longer than the other this is an indication of superiority. What matters is how good they are when they are 'ready' and at their best, whether this be sooner, or later. Jean René Matignon put it succinctly: "*C'est une comparaison compliquée, et surtout une question de goût.*" It's a complicated comparison, and above all a question of taste.

The Communes

Pessac Léognan Dry Whites

After a good, if largely uninspiring, performance in 2009, this is another outstanding year for dry white Bordeaux, right the way across the hierarchy. The wines are rich and vigorous, ripe and generous in fruit, with great vitality from the vintage's acidity, with vividly projected Sauvignon aromas and a fine minerality too. There is very little that I didn't like and there are several of the absolute stars of the vintage here: *Haut Brion Blanc*, *La Mission Haut Brion Blanc*, *Dom. De Chevalier Blanc*; and I also particularly enjoyed the *Fieuzal* and *Smith Haut Lafitte* whites.

Sauternes / Barsac

A very good vintage in Sauternes, with some great wines, but without the high number of really exciting performances to be considered a great vintage. Sugar levels are similar to those of 2007, 130-140g/l, mostly not as high as in 2009; alcohol levels are very much the current norm of 13.5-14%, and acidities are similar to 2009, but mostly lower than in 2007 or 2001. The very dry, cool conditions with little moisture, meant that *botrytis* was slow to arrive until the few rainy days in late September and early October, and it was then perhaps less consistent across the region than usual, with the best coming late on. There were certainly neither the levels nor the range of *botrytis* that there had been in 2009 or 2007 for example.

What is good to know is that in a region where the yields are often depressingly low, this was a generous year in which many properties could make close to the maximum 25hl/ha, and many habitual underperformers have made good wine. The style of 2010 is full and fresh, very sweet, with a deliciously lush and succulent fruit character. They are full of a delightful up front, opulent and juicy appeal. They are not lacking in sugar or acidity, but many do seem to lack the close knit aromatic complexity and density of flavour, the excitement, the *éclat* that comes from a richly varied and widespread *botrytis*. Wines which take your breath away are few. It may be that rather like the variable effects of June's bad weather on Merlot's flowering, or the inconsistent yields in the Médoc, that *botrytis* in Sauternes was heterogeneous this year. *Coutet* has made an outstanding wine; *De*

Fargues, Doisy Daëne, Nairac, Lafaurie Peyraguey and Raymond Lafon were others that stood out for me.

The Médoc.

Here, in St Estèphe, Pauillac, St Julien and Margaux, is where you find both the most refined examples of this exceptional vintage, as well as many of its most gratifyingly good values amongst the Cru Bourgeois and 'Second' wines. All the First Growths have produced great wines. *Margaux, Latour and Mouton* are sublime in their scope and refinement, and several Second Growths (or equivalent) have produced wine of First Growth quality: *Cos d'Estournel* and *Léoville Las Cases* in particular, with *Ducru Beaucaillou, Palmer* and *Léoville Poyferré* close behind. **St Estèphe** suffered from both hail in May, and Merlot flowering problems in June so that there are many lesser wines with very low yields, but in consequence a rare richness, a most attractive plump, fleshy juiciness and sap; it is an outstanding year for the commune, which should be a particularly rewarding bibber's hunting ground. **Pauillac** Really too many good wines to single out here (you will see their names *italicised* in my notes), but as a likely-to-be-good-value *beverage* trio, the Grand Puy Lacoste wines are particularly worthy of mention, *Grand Puy Lacoste* itself, *Haut Batailley* and *Lacoste Borie*. **St Julien** The usual consistency in this smallest of the grand communes, where *Beychevelle, Clos du Marquis, Langoa, Moulin Riche, Gloria, St Pierre* and *Talbot* should make for splendid bottles amongst the more affordable prices. **Margaux** is a pleasant surprise this year, for an unusual consistency and hit rate. Many lovely wines. They have more matter than usual, more structure, but without coarseness. At the more affordable end I would single out *Angludet, Ferrière* and *Ségla*.

Pessac Léognan Reds

Very successful in fairly powerful, dense, muscular 2010 style; if what you are looking for is the easy, flowing, fresh and transparently gravelly middleweight Graves of yore, then this vintage is not where to look! Plenty of very good, vividly juicy, Merlot fleshy wines with a long term structure for Pessac Léognan; plenty of matter, and plenty of alcohol levels starting with the figure 14. The Haut Brion group seem, as in 2009, to have benefitted or suffered (according to your point of view) from their warmer urban location in Pessac; *Pape Clément, Domaine de Chevalier, Haut Bailly* and *Smith Haut Lafitte* are all great 2010 successes.

St Emilion and Pomerol

Power, fruit abundance, alcoholic warmth, structure abound in these two appellations where the wines are, if anything, a touch more weighty and forceful even than in 2009. Their lively acidity reins in their abundance and gives them a refreshing linearity, but there are many large scale, New World lookalike constitutions. *Ausone* and *Cheval Blanc* are standouts in St Emilion, *Petrus* and *Trotanoy* in Pomerol. Other stars are *Canon, Clos Fourtet, Figeac* and *Petit Cheval* in St Emilion; *Conseillante, Vieux Château Certan, L'Eglise Clinet, L'Evangile, Hosanna, Providence* and *Lafleur* in Pomerol.

Trends?

Global warming induced trends apart, two come to mind:

New Oak. I heard a fair number of producers talk about reining back on, reducing the amount of new wood used in ageing. One went so far as to say: "*Le bois neuf abîme le vin plus qu'il le support et l'affine!*" He will be in a minority for the moment I expect, but he won't be alone. There is not yet much evidence for this reduction, but it will be interesting to see whether a twenty five year trend is slackening.....

Increasingly small proportions of Grand Vin or, whither the notion of a *terroir*, of a *cru*?

This year Ch. Margaux represents 38% of the property's production, and the second wine, Pavillon Rouge, is the same quantity. Both are superb. A 'third' label is being created, and there may well be a 'fourth' wine after that. This is hardly widespread in Bordeaux, but Margaux is not alone, and I imagine the trend for less and less Grand Vin, less but finer (and more expensive) second wine and so on, will increase. This is the logic of a dog chasing its own tail: there is a need to produce increasingly small, rarefied selections in order to justify the increasingly heady prices, but in so doing fuelling yet further price increases in a mad, self kindling inflationary cycle. It also makes less and less sense of Bordeaux's already very loose definition of *terroir*. Such wines risk becoming simply super *cuvées*, the extreme refinement of a brand, no longer the expression a *cru*. And whilst many current wine investment funds outperform most other commodities, even gold, there is an understandable bull market. But when there are no eventual consumers for the commodity at hugely inflated prices you

have all the makings of a bubble. And one wonders who will actually pull the corks when these wines and those funds, at fantastic prices, mature? *A suivre.....*

En Primeur?

The investment grade wines (yes, the phrase is in wide use!) are, sad to say, perhaps as much a question about risk capital as cellar building, but this is a vintage where there are wonderful wines, white and red, which are certainly worth purchasing with a view to drinking. The top wines of course, if you can afford them, if you can find them. *But across the hierarchy there are a host of wines which will give a great deal of pleasure at table, in their different styles, in the medium to long term. If you can afford it, all the 'buy' signals are there.* My (numerous) favourites are clear from the summaries above, and from the italicised names in the notes.

(c) Michael Schuster / The World of Fine Wine - 1st May 2011