

Two Thoughts

2009 Bordeaux & Red Versus Black Fruit by Charles M. Bear Dalton



A Note from Bordeaux

Last week it was Burgundy, this week it's Bordeaux. A professional wine geek's work is never done. On Sunday, I flew from Lyon to Bordeaux where we immediately got to work. Bordeaux négociant Ulysse Cazabonne held a tasting offering dozens of 2009s to taste as well as a slew of older wines. Think of it as a Sunday afternoon warm up for the week of tasting ahead.

As I'm here in Bordeaux to sort out the 2009 vintage, I focused strictly on the '09s. I'd have a couple more chances to taste some of the older wines. I had some wines we follow (such as Ch. Pontoise Cabarrus Haut Medoc) to check in on as well as some new things to look at. With the 2008 vintage we began buying Ch. Tour Sieujean Pauillac - which has not arrived yet and likely won't until after November 2010. Sunday, I tasted and approved of the 2009 Ch. Tour Sieujean. I also found a new Margaux - Ch. Bessane - we may begin to follow and two old friends we used to carry - Ch. Brisson Cotes de Castillon and Ch. du Glana St. Julien - that we are going to work with again. In all, I tasted 27 wine in that Sunday session at Ulysse Cazabonne.

Monday I tasted 72 wines and Tuesday I tried 85. Wednesday's tastings topped 100 wines. The Monday tastings included visits of a négociant's office (Nathaniel Johnston) and to visits to eight chateaux (Chx. Palmer, Margaux, Ducru Beaucaillou, Mouton, Leoville las Cases, and Latour). Tuesday started with a 9am tasting at Ch. Duhart Milon (where we tasted Ch. Lafite as Lafite is in the middle of a huge construction project. The day finished up with tasting four wines at Ch. Montrose. Wednesday was spent tasting and visiting right bank chateaux including Ausone, Cheval Blanc, Vieux Ch. Certan (near perfection), and Le Pin (perfection indeed). The vast majority of all of the wines tasted over these four days were 2009s.

I have seen and tasted enough to have some preliminary thoughts on the 2009 vintage. There has been a lot of hype in the press leading up to the tastings of 2009. If you look at the Wine Spectator on-line, there is a lot more hype on the way including some very inflated scores from critic James Suckling. While I try not to listen to too much opinion - good or bad - until I try the wines, a certain amount gets through. When the buzz is good, expectations are raised and when the buzz is bad, they are lowered.

The buzz on 2009 has been almost uniformly good so I came to Bordeaux expecting to taste good wines and for the most part, that has been the case. Unlike virtually every year in the past, I have tasted no real dogs. The low end of the vintage seems to be pretty high. As to the high end of the vintage, I don't (as yet) think 2009's top potential is as high as 2005. Which is not to say that there aren't great wines; there are. The best just may not all be quite as good as the best of 2005. The hunch in Bordeaux is that none of the other major wine critics will rank 2009 as highly as the Spectator's Suckling did.

Much of the insider buzz about 2009 has to do with the high tannin content of most of the red wines. While the wines have high levels of tannin, the tannins seem well polymerized (bonded together with other tannins and other phenols such as anthocyanins. (Tech note: Tannins, anthocyanins, and flavonoids fall into a group of molecules called phenols.) These polymerized tannins do not fit into your tannin taste receptors as they are too big. The result is that you get the earlier-drinking feel (texture) of a wine with big tannins but none of the drying bite often associated with high tannin content. To a large extent this characteristic also was typical of the 1982 vintage.

My initial thinking is that this will be a vintage to buy from the bottom up. There are a lot of inexpensive 2009 wines that are quite delicious. My tasting over the last four days confirm the tale.

Top Scoring 2009s Tasted To Date

Ch. Le Pin Pomerol
Ch. Latour Pauillac
Ch. Margaux Margaux
Vieux Ch. Certan Pomerol

Best "Second Wines" Tasted To Date

Les Forts de Latour
Pavillon Rouge du Ch. Margaux

Favorites Tasted to Date

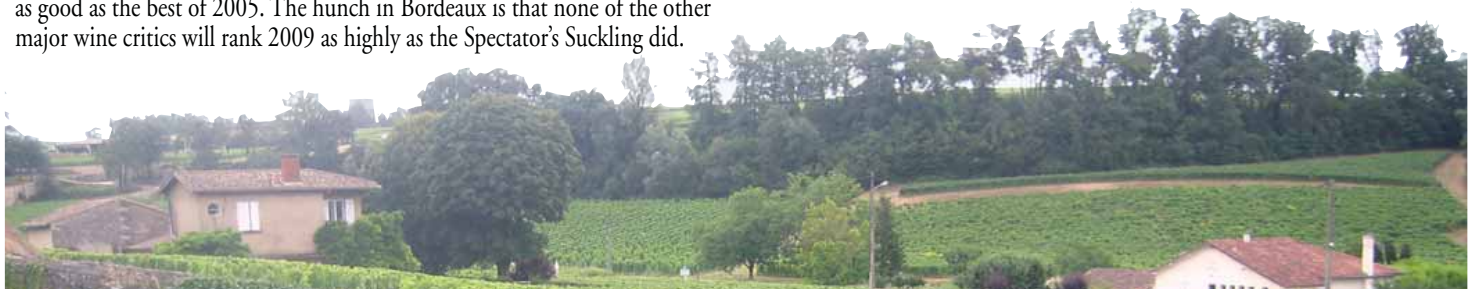
(Favorite not in the sense of "the best" but in the sense of "I'll drink a lot")

Ch. d'Armailhac Pauillac
Ch. Sociando Mallet Haut Medoc
Ch. du Glana St. Julien
Ch. Ferriere Margaux
Ch. Les Ormes de Pez St. Estephe
Ch. la Bernadotte Haut Medoc
Pauillac de Ch. Latour (the 3rd wine of the chateau)
Ch. Leoville Barton St. Julien
Ch. Siran Margaux
Ch. Grand Corbin Despagne St. Emilion
Ch. Grand Pontet St. Emilion

Top Value 2009s Tasted To Date

Ch. Pontoise Cabarrus Haut Medoc
Ch. Caronne Ste. Ghemme Haut Medoc
Ch. Brisson Cotes de Castillon
Ch. Conselier Bordeaux Superieur
Ch. Croix Mouton Bordeaux
Ch. Puygueraud Cotes de Francs

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Thinking About Red Versus Black Fruit

In my tasting notes, I frequently refer to “red and black fruit”. My notes on the 2009 Bordeaux also are full of these references. So it occurs to me that I should explain what I mean by red fruit and black fruit.

All wines are made from grapes. Most white wine grapes offer some combination of citrus fruit, tree fruit (apples, pears, etc.), stone fruit (peaches, apricots, etc.), and tropical fruits (pineapple, banana, etc.). Most red wine grapes offer the flavors of darker colored fruits and berries. These include black berries and cherries, raspberries, and plums, even grapes. Sometimes it is possible to accurately point out these sorts of flavors in red wines but often it is not. It is usually easier and more accurate to refer to the fruit in red wine as red fruit or black fruit. Red fruit is the flavors that come from a mix of fruits including cherries, raspberries, strawberries, rhubarb, cranberries, red plums, red currants, and more. Black fruit flavors include blackberries, black cherries, black raspberries, boysenberries, blueberries, mure, cassis, and more.

On the surface it seems like it would be easy to divide wines into red and black fruit flavors because most grapes can be thought of as “red fruit” varieties (Pinot Noir, Sangiovese, Tempranillo, Grenache, etc.) or “black fruit” varieties (Cabernet Sauvignon, Shiraz, Merlot, Petite Sirah, etc.). However, there are varieties such as Zinfandel that routinely offer both red and black fruit from the berries of one bunch. And any red grape variety will show red fruit if it is picked soon enough just as any red variety will show black fruit if it harvested late enough. And when you blend varieties together, the finished wine will show aspects of the various varieties used.

The result is that many wines offer some combination of “red” and “black” fruit. Some are more red-fruit-oriented and some are more oriented toward black fruit. As a scale here is an order of intensity and description between the two types. The first column is the intensity of the black fruit with 0 indicating none and 9 indicating only black fruit. The second column uses the same scale for red fruit.

BF	RF	Fruit Description
0	9	Red Fruit
1	8	Mostly Red Fruit
2	7	Much More Red than Black Fruit
3	6	More Red than Black Fruit
4	5	Evenly Mixed Red and Black Fruit – or – As much Red as Black Fruit
5	4	Evenly Mixed Black and Red Fruit – or - As much Black as Red Fruit
6	3	More Black than Red fruit
7	2	Much More Black than Red fruit
8	1	Mostly Black Fruit
9	0	Black Fruit

It's all a matter of degree and this scale expresses that degree non-numerically.

What does all this mean to you? A wine showing more red fruit flavors will often seem fresher and have brighter fruit character. It may show a higher level of acidity. A wine showing more black fruit character will often seem richer, heavier, riper, and/or lower in acidity. Which you prefer depends on what you like. I like both. I prefer red fruit (or at least wine in the top 70% of the scale) wines for serving with dinner and black fruit wines for sitting around drinking wine (such as while watching a football game on TV with friends). Some of the best and most versatile wines are in that middle range where there is complexity from the blending of the types of fruit.

While this may all seem a bit geeky (and it is), it is also a useful tool for helping you find the wines you will like the best. ★