

Bordeaux 2014 Vintage Report

'Never, never, never give up'

Winston S. Churchill

Credit must be given to Château Ducru-Beaucaillou for the use of the above quote to summarise the 2014 vintage and as in 2010 for producing my wine of the vintage. On arriving at Bruno Borie's ever-improving Château, we were greeted at the door in typical Bruno Borie 'style' and handed various Ducru paraphernalia with the aforementioned Winston Churchill quote emblazoned on the front cover. It sums up 2014 very well and, on reflection, Monsieur Borie could have picked one of a dozen or so Churchill quotes and they would have been equally appropriate.

Bordeaux's success over the last decade or so has also contributed significantly to its downfall in the last few years. We find ourselves in a similar position to where we were shortly before the 2008 vintage release. Off the back of some patchy vintages for which prices were still inflated from the peaks of 2009 and 2010, the general consensus among many consumers seems to be that 2014 will be no different. I beg to disagree!

2013 in particular was difficult, but as always in the weaker vintages there are some smart buys (plenty of 97s, 02s and 07s have given me great pleasure of late because I know plenty of other people would turn their noses up at them), yet chosen carefully they exceed expectations in terms of quality and value. 2012 was excellent in Pomerol, but generally hit and miss elsewhere. 2011 was a pretty good vintage on the whole, but pricing was still inflated following the extraordinary peaks of 2009 and 2010. In my view, the market's mood is so very similar to the mood pre-Bordeaux 2008, based on quality and following a couple of so-so vintages which were also rather overpriced in parts. The initial assumption was that there was not value to be had, but the vintage's quality was only really appreciated once the wines were tasted by the wine trade in April the following year, so the Bordeaux hype-machine had not kicked into gear. The conditions for 2008 and 2014 were initially tough, but given the fortuitous Indian summer last year it all turned around at the last minute and some truly excellent wines have been produced.

While I suspect few people reading this would like to read a full weather report on the vintage, I think a brief summary is necessary to understand why the now slightly amusing, overused term 'miracle vintage' may appear once or twice in Bordeaux 2014 articles in the coming month or so. Early conditions in 2008 and 2014 suggested we were on track for a pretty shoddy set of wines, and many characters smarter-than-I were prepared to write off both vintages. Both were saved by spells of very warm weather shortly before harvest, though I think in 2014 this was even more extreme than in 2008. The weather in June, July and August 2014 was little short of a disaster, but this Indian summer meant that grapes were fully ripe and in plentiful volume by the time of harvest. The shorter spell of hot weather has probably meant the wines do not have, nor were ever going to have, the tannic structure of 2005 or 2010, but in terms of fruit profile, they are not far off. The fruit was ripe, juicy, friendly and with sufficient levels of tannin to balance the wines with moderate acidity and relatively low alcohol levels. Hand on heart, this was the easiest, most enjoyable week I have spent during this type of visit to Bordeaux. That's not to say the wines are of the calibre of 2005, 2009 or 2010 - they're not - but as Paul Pontellier of Château Margaux suggests, "it's the best of the vintages that are not quite spectacular". I'd be inclined to agree based on what experience I have. 2005, 2009 and 2010 are better, but 2014 is arguably the best of the rest since 2000, vying with 2001 and 2008 for that title.

"When you get a thing the way you want it, leave it alone."

Winston S. Churchill

So, there are plenty of excellent wines! But that's not to say that they will all be worth buying. Of course, pricing is vital. The En Primeur system used to work very well, but there were clearly question marks over its appeal in the last year or two. While it was working why tinker with it? Perhaps the big players in Bordeaux ought to have left it alone. From discussions I've had while we were over there, there are some Châteaux who will be silly with their pricing and raise prices to the point where I don't plan to offer their wares. Conversely there are many Châteaux who appreciate the failures of some recent vintages and are planning to price very attractively. Given the favourable exchange rate, this should see price drops on 2013 prices in the UK, but obviously quality is considerably up on 2013, so I feel there will be plenty of smart buys. The key will be to avoid the temptation to make generalisations and to look at each release on its own merits. We'll try to weed out the good buys from the opportunistic estates before the wines appear for sale.

So, where is the smart money this year? Well, until the prices are released we won't know for sure, but certainly St Julien, Pauillac and especially St-Estèphe have trumped Pessac-Léognan and Margaux this year. There are plenty of excellent, relatively early drinking Médocs; not that they are lightweight (they are lovely, rich and juicy in fact), but the tannic structure is such that I think the more affordable end of the spectrum will be lovely in the first 5-6 years of their life. The right bank is more complicated. St Emilion is once again patchy, some very impressive wines, but a mixed bag at all levels. Some Châteaux still seem to be trying to extract a little too much for my liking leaving some pretty astringent tannins, high alcohol and flabby fruit, but there are of course exceptions. Pomerol is far better on the whole; far more consistent, but certain areas in Pomerol are clearly producing better wines this year, so there is still a degree of care required when buying here. In saying that, looking over my notes there are a very high proportion of my absolute favourite 2014s from Pomerol despite my view that it is generally a Left Bank vintage. The highlights though on the Right Bank I think are the more affordable wines from less fashionable Fronsac, Castillon and Blaye. Fronsac in particular seemed to have a very good hit-rate of excellent 2014s. As for the strangely unfashionable sweet wines of Bordeaux, I think there is so much value to be had here, especially given the amount of effort than goes into making Sauternes. A lovely vintage for these wines and prices are as always likely to be very attractive. The dry whites were talked about very favourably by many, but I felt slightly disappointed. Few wines truly exceeded expectations with only a handful of exceptions in my highlights listed below.

Angus McLean, Laithwaite's Fine Wine, April 2015

Left Bank Highlights

Château Malescot-St-Exupéry
Château Labégorce
Château Dauzac
Château Batailley
Château Grand-Puy-Lacoste
Château Pichon-Baron
Château Tronquoy-Lalande
Château Ducru-Beaucaillou
Château Lafite-Rothschild
Château Léoville-Las-Cases
Château Montrose
Château Calon-Ségur
Château La Mission Haut Brion

Right Bank Highlights

Château La Fleur-Pétrus
Château Bel-Air (Pomerol)
Virgine de Valandraud
Château Beaugard
Vieux Château Certan
Château La Conseillante
Château l'Évangile
Le Petit Cheval

Value Reds

Château Charmail
Château Chantalouette
Château Capbern
Château Les Hauts-Conseillants
Château Villars
Château du Retout
Château Haut-Bages-Monpélou
Petit Caillou
Château Dalem

Dry White Highlights

Clos Floridène
Pavillon Blanc de Château Margaux
Domaine de Chevalier
La Mission Haut Brion

Sauternes Highlights

Château Doisy-Védrières
Château Doisy-Daëne
Château d'Yquem