PRIVATE CELLAR

Bordeaux 2022 - Vintage Report

by Nicola Arcedeckne-Butler MW

Whenever we visit a region to taste the new vintage, there are always certain buzz words which keep reappearing; in the case of Bordeaux 2022, the key words were **energy, freshness** and **precision** – the polar opposite of what we were expecting to find. We always try to keep an open mind and not pre-judge the wines but in 2022 it was hard to escape the unremitting headlines from across Europe – even in England – about the heat and lack of water. I will confess that we approached the *primeur* tastings with a certain amount of trepidation, wondering just how our palates (and indeed teeth) were going to react to the huge tannins, high alcohol and massive extract. But we found that, extraordinarily, **most wines radiated freshness and energy** – those words again – and in some cases with lower alcohol levels than in 2020, and by the end of a full day's tasting not only were we not exhausted, we were fresh enough to carry on.

The Growing Season

With a few exceptions of very localised showers, the weather across the region was consistent; a mild, wet spring laid the foundations for some decent groundwater levels, and there was a small amount of frost in April, notably in the Northern Médoc, St Estèphe and Pessac-Léognan, where some growers lost all their white wine production. May was warm and allowed for a fine, regular flowering and then the first heatwave hit in June, uncharacteristically hot, with many fearing this was setting the scene for another 2003. Rainfall at the end of June refreshed the vines and broke the heatwave, but it was very varied – Ducru Beaucaillou received around 150mm of rain whilst Margaux, some 15 kilometres south, got just 75mm; Pontet Canet, even closer and to the north, had none at all.

The weather continued to heat up during July, leading to another heatwave in the middle of the month where temperatures were above 40C for three days in the middle of véraison, again broken by localised light rain; the pattern repeated in August, for the record-breaking third heatwave. Significantly, during each of these periods, night-time temperatures were relatively cool, tracking close to the 10-year average, whilst daytime temperatures were some 3 degrees C above average. It cannot be understated how important this day-night difference was for the vines, allowing them some respite from the heat, the resulting dew in the mornings also providing some welcome moisture for the plants. Harvest began relatively early, with many picking their Merlots in the first days of September, and most of the Cabernets were picked by the end of the month; very few were still harvesting in October. White varieties were harvested at a record early date, with some Sauvignon Blanc starting at the beginning of August.

The Quality Question

Almost without exception the growers have been at a loss to explain scientifically how the wines have such a degree of freshness, but many have a good idea. Pierre-Olivier Clouet, of Cheval Blanc, believes that the first heatwave in June was a warning shot to the vines of a hot summer to come, at precisely the time when the berries were forming, and as a result the average berry size was considerably smaller than usual; had there been significantly more rain after the fruit had set, they may well have grown to normal size. Many growers noted that the vines regulated themselves putting out many fewer new shoots and even where vines did put out new shoots, growers decided to leave them to self-balance or, in the case of Palmer, looped the wayward shoots back into the main canopy which appeared to prevent further growth. Many growers used clay, or kaolin, on the leaves to act as sunblock, reducing the rate of transpiration and retaining as much water as possible to encourage ripening. With the vines focused less on foliar growth and more on reproduction, all their energy went into the fruit and the sporadic small amounts of rain ensured that, in general, the vines didn't stop photosynthesising, bringing the majority to phenolic ripeness in the early autumn.

2022 was a vintage where *terroir* was key, and individual soil profiles showed their merit or otherwise. It was notable that the vineyards on the best soils were gloriously green at harvest time even whilst the trees surrounding the vines were autumnal browns by the early part of September. The clay subsoil of St Estèphe proved to be particularly efficient at keeping the vines hydrated and in colder, more challenging appellations like Moulis, vines fared significantly better than usual, with plenty of water in the lower soils and a hotter season in which to fully ripen the fruit, not always a given. Young vines in almost every appellation struggled with the drought as their roots just weren't deep enough to reach into the lower water table, whilst older vines in prime sites with clay or limestone in their subsoils fared significantly better.

There was one more surprise in store for the growers. Merlot, usually quick to accumulate sugar, and therefore alcohol, has been on the danger list in terms of global warming with recent Bordeaux vintages seeing Merlots easily coming in above 15% potential alcohol. All the growers were expecting to reduce their Merlot percentages in 2022, but the extraordinary growing season produced fruit with 13.5% – 14.5% potential alcohol, and with the lower alcohol came greater precision and definition of fruit flavours. **Merlot is back!**

For many, harvesting in the red vineyards was carried out over successive *tries*, more commonly seen in Sauternes, where the pickers passed through the vineyards several times selecting only the fruit that had reached optimal ripeness; those who did this were convinced that it added precision and definition to their wines. It remains to be seen whether this will be repeatable in future vintages as it is something of a luxury not often afforded by Bordeaux's maritime weather and adds considerably to labour costs in both the vineyard and the cellar.

There are no dud appellations, however the most successful were St Julien, compact and always consistent, St Estèphe at all levels with fine, mineral freshness and Pomerol on the Right Bank, with some exceptional St Emilion wines. It is, however, invidious to single out communes as all had their stars (and all had one or two underperformers). The wines did indeed combine energy and freshness, although there were some where there were some green tannins, implying either an early harvest or a harvest of blocked fruit which had not fully ripened, but these were few and far between. Inevitably, some winemakers went all out for massive extraction, making wines which stuck our gums together – we will not be offering any of those. And there are those whose wines are seductively luscious on the palate but where there is a sudden falling away – a hole – which we found in some second wines, which we will not be recommending this year. Yet other second wines were incredibly successful, with all the required ingredients, and will offer exceptional value for money compared to their grands vins. **The best wines have incredible depth of fruit and tannins so supple that you almost have to go looking for them, alongside racy, juicy (but not lush) fruits and incredibly persistent finishes.**

The Market

The final word must be about the market, without which there would be no *primeurs*. We are all fully aware of rising prices all around the world, with notable inflation in the cost of energy and consequently glass affecting producers. In order to simply stand still, properties would need to increase their prices by some 10% but there is a real fear that many will go some way above that to compensate for the small 2021 harvest. We are in no doubt that greedy release prices will see the market retaliate and turn its back on those wines. The châteaux owners we spoke with all appeared to be very aware of how damaging significant price increases would be, both to their wines and to Bordeaux as a whole, so we will remain optimistic for as long as possible – and we would be delighted to be proved wrongly pessimistic! Time will tell.

The first releases are due out in early May, setting the scene for a rapid campaign. If you have some favourite wines that you would like us to look out for, please let us know as soon as possible. If you are new to buying en primeur or would like advice and assistance in pulling together a wish list for the campaign, please do get in touch.

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Keep in Touch

To ensure that we keep you up to date with news of your favourite wines, please do keep in touch with us using the contact details below.

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