

Nickolls & Perks

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2005 Bordeaux Vintage Report

The words “Legendary Vintage” may as well be printed on the back label of the 2005 Bordeaux wine bottles, as it seems the usual few years cellaring required to confirm the early indications are not called for this year. Such was the hype surrounding the presentation of barrel samples to the world’s wine trade and press during the last week of March and the first week of April.

Hype is not unusual in association to Bordeaux ‘En Primeur’ vintage campaigns. However, declarations such as “vintage of the century” are usually met with an air of reservation by the most respected critics in the wine trade - the wine makers themselves. 2005, uniquely, has drawn this kind of comment from several ‘maitre de chais’ whose opinions certainly add enormous weight to this year’s assessment.

Nickolls and Perks’ team spent 4 days in Bordeaux based in the wonderfully sleepy medieval town of St Emilion, visiting Chateaux and organised barrel tastings to make our own minds up, determined not to be swept away on the wave of hysteria, against which, caution is rarely sufficient defence, but experience, invaluable.

Our team, with over 30 years of combined experience, annually tasting Bordeaux vintages, have compiled the following thoughts and notes which will allow our clients to select with confidence a portfolio of wines, from the 2005 vintage, to be proud of in years to come.

The Style of the Vintage

2005 is as unique as any vintage. There are no strong comparisons to make with the wines of the past decade or so. Certainly, the best of the reds are very powerful and well endowed with all the necessary component parts to promote great wines. Tannins are abundant, lacy and generally ripe giving exceptionally silky textures and packed mid-palates. The fruit is very concentrated offering great aromatics, which are pure and focused. Ripe vintages are often dogged by low acidity. This is where 2005 may be taking quality to a different level, many wines displayed a piercing rod of acidity, lifting the whole vinous experience and helping to carry the complex flavours in the wines into their exceptional finishes.

The integration of these component parts will be a joy to behold as the wines evolve. Many of the great wines tasted are potentially the best wines made at individual chateaux in the past decade and will find few rivals much further back in the wine libraries of connoisseurs.

2005 will be recognised for longevity, some wines will be alive and kicking into the twenty second century, however, this does not mean that the wines will not be enjoyable early in their lives. Alain Vautier at Chateau Ausone drew a comparison

with the 1982 vintage commenting the best vintages are attractive to drink throughout their lives, 2005 is one such vintage.

2005 will also be remembered for homogeneity, rarely do we enjoy consistent quality across all grape varieties, Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Merlot all excelling, right and left bank vigneron equally proud of their wines.

I found the super ripe Cabernet Sauvignon crop of the Northern Medoc really outstanding. As such, the commune of Pauillac would have my nod as the best and most consistent commune in 2005. All three wines at Chateau Lafite epitomising this, the Carruades - the best I have ever tasted, Duhart Milon and Lafite certainly rivalling, if not eclipsing their truly great 1996's.

Either side of Pauillac the communes of St Estephe and St Julien both performed brilliantly; Leoville Barton, a good yardstick, was magnificent and will rival the fabulous 2003.

The Margaux wines at the U.G.C tasting, held at Chateau Brane Cantenac were very consistent. A powerful vintage like 2005 makes it difficult to assess the underlying charm which we look for in these wines, but the concentration of fruit was so often emphatic on the nose, and the sheer exuberance in wines such as Malescot St Exupery, Rauzan Segla, Prieur Lichine, du Tertre and Kirwan, has to be commended.

Pessac Leognan was the most difficult of the communes I found good balance at Smith Haut Lafite, De Fieuzal and Pape Clement but could not help feeling a little disappointed at the level of tannin at many properties, seeming just too big for the wines to handle.

I will hold my judgement of many of these wines.

St Emilion is certainly a success with some outstanding wines on show. The 'Perse' wines were very good culminating in a great Pavie, an excellent Monbousquet and a knockout Bellevue Mondotte.

Brilliant wines at Clos Fourtet, Grand Mayne, Figeac, Troplong Mondot and Angelus to mention a few.

Alain Vautier at Chateau Ausone claimed the 2005 to be the best ever – which is saying something!

Pomerol showed some quality too, though not as emphatic as its neighbour. Good wines at la Conseillante, L'Evangile, but my feeling coming away from the Chateau Gazin, where many examples of the commune were on taste, was that the 2004 vintage is superior- don't overlook it!

Conditions affecting the style of the vintage

The growing season was relatively problem free, the inevitable spanner in the works for once never materialised.

With less than half the 30 years average rainfall, the condition of the grapes must have been a surprise to many vigneron, the rule book could be disregarded, the resistance and versatility of the vine once again quite baffling. The vines had previously suffered

in the similarly dry conditions of 1976. It seems that in 2005 the vines had become used to surviving despite the very low water table, caused by almost drought conditions throughout the previous winter and spring. This set them up to cope better than expected with the miniscule rainfall.

Heat on the other hand was not abnormal, consistently hitting the monthly averages apart from an exceptional June. Long warm dry days in abundance right through the summer and, more importantly through September and October, allowed the grapes to ripen at a very gradual pace. The precision of the harvesting was unprecedented, individual plots of merlot and cabernet were allowed to steadily reach full maturity before cropping. Incredibly, rainfall seemed to arrive at the optimum moment just sufficient to refresh the individual vine varieties between harvesting.

Cool nights helped retain valuable acidity, furnishing the wines with that recognisable freshness. Yields were down on 2004, the grapes were often quite small due to the lack of water and evaporation.

How good are they?

Whether the 2005 wines will eclipse the purity of the 1996 Cabernet stars, the great 1998 merlots, the pure hedonism offered by the fruit driven 2003's or the exceptional balance and charm of the 2000's, time will only tell. My personal feeling is 2005 is potentially greater than these wonderful vintages, particularly in the muscular structure and power; it is also a truly classical style of Bordeaux vintage.

Reports are that the botrytised wines Sauternes and Barsac are also exceptional. Unfortunately our team did not get chance to taste them this time round. At a recent Cheval Blanc vertical tasting, Monsieur Pierre Lurton, estate manager of Cheval Blanc and Chateau Yquem, struck a chord when commenting, "in 2005 the reds are very fine but the sweet whites are truly exceptional." He also quoted his cellar master who claimed in 20 years to have never seen a crop enter the 'chais' in such fine condition.

A word of caution

2005 is a very powerful vintage, winemakers will require a deft touch during the maturation in the cellar before bottling. With already extremely high tannin levels, in several cases to the point of leaving the palate dry and with a bitter element too much new oak contact could be a problem long term.

Should be buy 2005's 'En Primeur'?

2005 has the hallmark of a great vintage, a must buy for true Bordeaux lovers. Unfortunately they will not come cheap. The world economy is set to take on substantial increases in price. Promising stock market performance, the continued emergence of new markets in Russia and Asia and a vintage style which, will no doubt, suit the American palate, all bound to fuel demand. This vintage will also attract considerable interest from the speculating sector.

The prices of the blue chip wines are likely to reach, very quickly, the price level's of their 2000 counterparts, which currently lead the market in recent vintages. Premiers Crus will likely release onto the market at around £3000 per case and move upwards from there. Hopefully prices at lower levels will not be too much higher than the

release prices of the 2003's, which were inflated a little due to the short volumes. These wines are now looking well priced in light of brisk inflation in fine wine prices generally during the past 12 months.

There will likely be excellent value to be found at Cru Bourgeois level and amongst the lesser classed growths such as Beychevelle, Haut Bages Liberal etc. the second wines, particularly from the Premiers Crus estates offer increasingly exceptional value and in good vintages do seem to be quite inflated in price when they hit the market in bottle, two years or so after the 'En Primeur' release.

Need more advice, confused, Contact Will Gardener (0)1384 394518 – Mobile 07714 218586 will@nickollsandperks.co.uk - BUY IN CONFIDENCE!