

Is the Bordeaux bandwagon slowing down?

Bordeaux winemaker **Gavin Quinney** gives his verdict on the 2010 en primeur campaign, which is food for thought for many of his non-growth peers

Below: Château Margaux's Paul Pontallier
Right: Harvesting and tasting the much-hyped 2010 vintage

Massive prices for the 2010 first growths, super seconds and flying fifths won't deter investors and buyers from the Far East, but will the Bordeaux en primeur bandwagon run out of steam further down the line?

With wine writer James Suckling shouting "believe the hype" back in March, through to Robert Parker's later-than-usual Bordeaux 2010 report in May, the PR campaign seemed more drawn out than ever this year. And this was before the leading chateaux had thought about prices.

There are some worrying signals, too, beyond the iconic brands. Parker, while very enthusiastic about 2010, hasn't lavished as many wines with such high praise, and the difference in ratings of just a few points is, in terms of demand, very significant. Added to which, unlike 2009, there are no double asterisks from him ("best wine ever from this estate" etc) this time around.

On the other hand, many top chateaux are likely to increase prices, having made less wine than in 2009.

"Fine wine merchants expect Bordeaux 2010 to be more expensive than 2009, despite concerns over lower demand and buyers' inability to cope with rising prices," says James Miles, director of Liv-ex. "Given the lack of price movement we have seen for the 2009s over the past 12 months, it is not clear how well the market will absorb back-to-back years at record prices."

The firsts

Attendances at en primeur tastings were higher than ever at the top estates, according to Paul Pontallier of Château Margaux. Much in evidence there, as elsewhere, were brochures in Chinese, to add to the long-standing piles of English and French versions.

Even huge Parker points aren't required to sell the top brands. It's a far cry from two years ago, when (as I reported in Harpers) Alain Vauthier, owner of Château Ausone, insisted that "le marché est mort".

Hervé Berland, director at Château Mouton-Rothschild, told me last month that the average price of Mouton 2008 en primeur ex-chateau was less than €115 (and it sells 80% en primeur, he said). The average ex-chateau price for his 2009, just a year later, was €500.

A pity, because the first growths made belters this year, with all four in the Médoc coming close to perfection. What is unusual is the varying levels of alcohol between these four Cabernet Sauvignon-dominated wines: Lafite and Margaux at 13.5% abv, Mouton at 14% abv and Latour at 14.5% abv. Refreshing acidity – much touted by all the chateaux – provides the balance.

St-Julien and Pauillac: strong performances

Moving on, St-Julien and Pauillac were incredibly strong across the board. The Cabernet Sauvignons of the top appellations of the Médoc – for me, the best that Bordeaux has to offer in 2010 in any volume – are "über-classic". The Bordelais prefer to use words like "elegance", "balance" and "freshness", but these words don't adequately convey the feeling of power that these wines possess. And be prepared to be patient.

Pichon-Longueville Baron (with arguably its best wine to date), Léoville Las Cases and Léoville Poyferré just edged it for me among the super seconds, with Pontet-Canet, once again, right up there, closely followed by Lynch Bages.

And who wouldn't want a cellar full of St-Julien's like Gruaud Larose, St-Pierre and Langoa Barton, the latter with much less Merlot than usual. A lot of Merlot on both banks – especially on older vines – suffered from poor fruit set.

This reduced the crop, as did the small berry size of all the grapes. But what the Merlot lacked in quantity, and sometimes quality, the Cabernet Sauvignon made up for in quality. We can but pray that it doesn't come at too high a price.





Rest of the Left

St-Estephe was more variable. I might have caught Cos on a slightly off day, while Calon Ségur showed a lovely wine, despite losing some of the crop to a localised hailstorm in May, it had almost half as many bottles as 2009 there. Nearby, Montrose, with 20 additional hectares bought from Phélan Ségur, was untouched: 50% more bottles of the (brilliant) Grand Vin in 2010.

The appellation of Margaux, beyond the very top wines, is still a source of delicious Crus Classés and others for drinking. Twenty chateaux produced 90-plus point wines in my book. Nearby, there are some value picks from Moulis, Lustrac and the Haut-Médoc. However, among the winners are rather too many wines which lack full ripeness.

South of Bordeaux, the evenly mixed Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot blends of Pessac-Léognan will provide sumptuous drinking. While the top chateaux – Haut-Brion, La Mission, Haut Bailly and Smith Haut Lafitte – made glorious wines, prices haven't caught up yet for estates like Haut-Bergey.

On the Right Bank

It may be small but collectors' eyes are usually on Pomerol. A little rain at key moments in September really helped these precocious vineyards, which once again turned in some wonderful wines. Mixed flowering in the Merlot, hydric stress and small berries certainly had an impact on the character of the wines, as well as the yields. Pétrus, L'Evangile, L'Eglise-Clinet, VCC, Clinet, Hosanna – no surprises, just not enough wine.

I tasted scores of St-Emilions and scored many of them very highly. But it was tough going, with many having rigorous tannic frames and a sense that the drought conditions contributed to the dryness. There are plenty of 90-plus pointers here but choose carefully; many concentrated wines top 15.5% abv.

At the top level, Clos Fourtet, Pavie Macquin and Beauséjour Duffau impressed again.

Look out for many delicious wines from Fronsac and the Côtes, and the so-called lesser appellations. Those properties with clay over limestone, which provided just enough moisture, performed admirably, with balanced, attractive wines. Prices, at least at this level, will be reasonable. ■

CHATEAU	APPELLATION	VINTAGE	GQ SCORE	RP SCORE	2009 PRICE EN PRIMEUR
Lafite Rothschild	Pauillac	2010	98-100	98-100	£10,000
Margaux	Margaux	2010	97-100	96-98	£8,800
Mouton Rothschild	Pauillac	2010	97-100	97-100	£7,800
Latour	Pauillac	2010	96-100	98-100	£9,990
Léoville Las Cases	St-Julien	2010	96-100	95-98	£2,450
Pétrus	Pomerol	2010	97-99	98-100	£24,000
Pichon-Longueville Baron	Pauillac	2010	96-99	97-99+	£1,000
Cheval Blanc	St-Emilion	2010	96-98	96-98+	£7,800
L'Eglise-Clinet	Pomerol	2010	96-98	96-100	£3,400
L'Evangile	Pomerol	2010	96-98	96-98	£2,100
Léoville Poyferré	St-Julien	2010	96-98	95-98	£860
Pontet-Canet	Pauillac	2010	96-98	96-100	£900
Ausone	St-Emilion	2010	95-98	98-100	£13,200
Beauséjour Duffau	St-Emilion	2010	95-98	96-100	£900

Source: UK merchants and Liv-ex; prices per case)