



by Fiona Morrison, MW

# Bordeaux for the Ages

Do high alcohols affect a wine's cellar potential?

With the release of the 2009s, more money has been made trading Bordeaux in the last few months than in any *en primeur* offering of the past. What makes Bordeaux magical, its key selling point, is that above all other great wines in the world, it has a fabulous capacity to age. Wine auction houses, collectors and merchants regularly enjoy Bordeaux wines that are 50, even 100 years old.

Yet, the 2009 Bordeaux wines are provoking controversy not just for their prices but also for their high alcohol levels. Several top Bordeaux winemakers—including Paul Pontallier at Château Margaux and Jean-Claude Berrouet, former winemaker of Pétrus—have gone on record saying that wines over 12.5% alcohol have too much power to age well. With most of the top wines in 2009 peaking around 14%, this level has been well and truly surpassed.

Alcohol is just one component of a wine's ability to age: The key lies in its balance with all of the wine's structural components (see Jamie Goode's report on alcohol and flavor, p. 10). There are the positive aspects of alcohol, such as glycerol, which adds fat and roundness to a wine; then there are the negative elements, such as excessive ethanol. With its power and heat, ethanol can take the pleasure out of drinking many contemporary Bordeaux, according to Berrouet, and raises health issues. You may be surprised to learn that even in warm vintages, when potential alcohol can be high, wine producers in the Médoc with a high percentage of tannic cabernet still chapitalize their wines to round out those tannins.

Should collectors, then, be investing so heavily in a high-alcohol vintage like 2009? As Charles Curtis, MW, director of Christie's, explains: "Big wines with big amounts of alcohol, tannin, ripeness and sugar can age well if all of those components are in balance. It is when the wines are badly made, i.e., over-extracted, that the ageability is called into question." Despite their power, the best wines of

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2009 are the most beautiful young wines I've ever tasted. However, time and again when I talked to winemakers, collectors and experts for this article, they bemoaned the heavy extraction, overuse of new oak and overripeness of several wines with some of the highest

Parker scores. It is perhaps understandable that some Bordeaux producers follow this winemaking route. The difference between a 94- and a 98-point rating from Parker can add at least a couple hundred dollars to the price of a bottle.

A case in point is the 1982 vintage, which has always been somewhat of a curiosity to me. In their youth, these wines were as delicious and seductive as the 2009s I tasted this spring, but tasting them every few years since, I have been concerned about how quickly some have aged while others remain tough and unyielding. The immense variation between estates must lie in the way the producers dealt with the heat and the power of the first hot vintage in more than a decade. Since then, Bordeaux producers have learned quite a bit about dealing with a hot, high-alcohol vintage—and, with the possible exception of 2003, have been more successful attaining balance when they happen.

The 1982s were a turning point in Bordeaux for other reasons, as well. The vintage pushed producers to think about phenolic ripeness rather than just potential alcohol for the first time. And the sex appeal of its wines inspired producers to go to extremes to reduce yields, promote ripeness and increase the use of new oak.

Wine collectors should be wary of an across-the-board endorsement of a vintage just because its full ripeness and "bigness" are attractive. Anthony Hanson, MW, a senior consultant for Christie's and a longtime Bordeaux buyer, deplores these modern winemaking practices, which are designed to



impress at the barrel tastings in the spring following the vintage. He singles out certain fashionable wines of St-Emilion as the key offenders. “These winemakers are looking for the impact and scores that their wines reach in the first years of their lives, not the beauty and elegance in aging,” he insists.

Hanson makes a valid point. It is often with a note of sadness that the wines that I particularly appreciate in a warm vintage—Léoville-Las Cases, Domaine de Chevalier, Figeac, La Mission—are not the wines that win the magical 100-point beauty contest. If you boost your winemaking to make a wine show well young, you lose some of its magic. It reminds me of those children’s beauty contests in which prepubescent girls are made up, dressed up and taught to parade the catwalk in high heels. No one remembers these little darlings when they have grown up.

As for the tarted-up young wines, there are any number of wine collectors who reject them in favor of age-worthy, classic styles. Tom Black, a collector from Nashville, Tennessee, says his epiphany came with the 1985 Pichon Lalande; he tasted it with May-Eliane de Lencquesaing a decade after its release. “I had already sampled old wines at Beringer,” Black says, “but when I tasted older Bordeaux, there was no looking back.” What Black appreciated in that ten-year-old Bordeaux was the taste and elegance that it offered—“so many more layers of complexity, so much more stimulating conversation around the dinner table.”

Stéphane Derenoncourt, an enologist who consults for properties such as Château Pavie-Macquin and Domaine de Chevalier, is one of

the winemakers committed to age-worthy styles. He believes that we need to go back 20 years, to a time when vineyard practices were less interventionist. “Reduce the canopies and perhaps pick earlier in hot, sunny vintages,” he suggests. Jean-Claude Berrouet agrees, noting that the search for high phenolic ripeness by reducing yields, green harvesting and later picking has been taken to extremes.

**Does it really matter** if high-alcohol wines do not age well? After all, many of the great wines of the world are being drunk much younger these days. On wine lists and in auction catalogs, it is the younger, more powerful vintages that fetch the highest prices. If, as Curtis suggests, “most of us will not be around when the best 2009s come into their prime,” we can only guess whether this is truly a historic vintage. “While it is not possible to generalize effectively,” he notes, “it is often the case that when the alcohol is higher, the acidity is lower (and the pH higher), the tannins softer, and the fruit aromas and flavors have a different character.” The debate raging at the moment over the merits of the 2009 Cos d’Estournel—some loving it, and others, such as myself, despairing over its trophy Californian style—shows that by no means does everyone agree on a successful high-alcohol style.

Yet Hanson believes that while a great deal of Bordeaux is being drunk young these days, wine connoisseurs who came of age in the last few decades were at first seduced by these wines and then wanted to dig deeper to find subtler tastes and sensations. His advice,

therefore, is to ignore the high-priced recent vintages and seek out older vintages. Black concurs. A partner in *Alto* in New York, he has consigned part of his cellar there for sale on the list. He points to several wines from the 1980s and 1990s on the wine list at prices that make the 2009s look ridiculous.

The Bordelais themselves tend to appreciate what they call “useful” younger-drinking vintages such as the 2002, 2004 or 2007, years that go unloved in export markets but are drunk with pleasure on restaurant wine lists in France. French wine drinkers do not have the same fixation with vintages as the Brits and Americans. As Hanson says, “The best wines in Bordeaux are not those from one given vintage but those from the best pieces of land; they have a tale to tell not only of their land but of the vintage in which they were created.”

Perhaps one of the key lessons learned from the 2009 vintage is that, with careful viticulture and winemaking, the fear of crossing the 12.5% threshold has been diminished. After all, some of the great wines of the past—and many Bordeaux experts cite the 1947 Cheval Blanc as an example—were almost 14%. Modern Bordeaux is certainly richer and riper than 20 or 30 years ago, and as the wines of such warm vintages as 1982, 1989 and 1990 age, it is clear that those made for the long term continue to hold their magic. As Tom Black states succinctly, “A great Bordeaux to be great needs to be aged.” ■

Fiona Morrison, MW, writes about Bordeaux when she’s not helping husband Jacques Thienpont make the wines at Le Pin in Pomerol.