

Uncertain Smile: Bordeaux 2019

BY NEAL MARTIN | JUNE 16, 2020

Left Bank: Saint-Estèphe | Pauillac | Saint-Julien | Margaux | Pessac-Léognan | Haut-Médoc/Médoc & Bordeaux Supérieur | Listrac-Médoc/Moulis

Right Bank: Pomerol | Saint-Émilion | Sauternes | Satellites

The château proprietor is ruing that COVID-19 struck before and not after *en primeur*. Talk about bad timing. Dressed in full PPE, gloves, rose-tinted visor and protective body suit embroidered with château logo, he thinks to himself, “We could have kept quiet for a few weeks. Waited for the final release then issued a brief statement along the lines of, ‘Oh, and by the way, there is a pathogen that’s going to kill thousands of people’.” Fortunately, his PA, standing behind yellow and black duct tape stuck to the parquet floor exactly two meters from her boss’s desk, is oblivious to his immoral train of thought. She stares at a whiteboard scrawled with superlatives and euphemisms locked and loaded for the canceled *primeur* campaign and begins to wipe away last year’s rehashed hyperbole.

“Stop. We can still use them,” the manager exclaims. “You know the saying: Nothing is certain in life except for death, taxes and *en primeur*.”

Fixing him with a gimlet eye, she asks, “Apart from a highly contagious and potentially fatal virus for which there is presently no vaccine, plummeting stock markets, a restaurant industry staring into an abyss, millions self-isolating in their homes, social distancing that prevents families attending funerals of their loved ones, unfavorable exchange rates, 25% import duties and the inconvenient truth that Bordeaux is not Burgundy, do you believe this is the right time to launch the vintage of the century?”

“It is the PERFECT climate,” he retorts. “Everyone needs cheering up. What can be better than investing in our fabulous new wine?”

“A vaccine?”

“Pah! Nothing a few sunrays and detergent can’t cure. If vines can overcome phylloxera, then mankind can defeat COVID-19.”

“Vines didn’t overcome phylloxera. They were pulled up. It took decades to recover. Are you suggesting we replace the entire human race with a Covid-resistant life-form?”

Inured to her sarcasm, he continues: “Well, they obviously didn’t use the right biodynamic preparation. There’s nothing a bit of yarrow cannot cure as long as Uranus is in the right position.”

“May I suggest we wait until next year to release the 2019 and...”

“Let me stop you right there,” he interrupts. “We *must* release the wine.”

“Presumably with a large discount in accordance with these perilous times.”

“With a price commensurate with the incontrovertible quality of the wine and 15% higher than our neighbor. Marketing has already told me that 100 points is guaranteed, apart from that stingy Martin fellow. He’s back this year, isn’t he?”

“We couriered sample to his home. We dropped in a tube of hydroxychloroquine, a face-mask autographed by the cellar master and a KFC token as a ‘get well’ gesture.”

“Great.”

“Look, the only way we could sell our Grand Vin at the price you intend is if the World Health Organization discovers that our wine cures COVID-19, the only side effect being a loss of inhibition and the giggles.”

“Is that possible?”

“No.”

“Couldn’t marketing imply it *might* be?”

“No.”

He slumps into his chair. Everything is conspiring against him – well, everything apart from the growing season. Deep down he knows he has a stupendous wine on his hands. Why feel guilty about success? Why demean it with a cheap price that would displease shareholders? His 2019 puts a smile on his face, but it is shrouded by these uncertain times. There’s that nagging thought in the back of his mind: Will anyone want to buy them?



Every sample in this report was tasted here in my garden office using the same wine glass and listening to the same music – Mozart’s Clarinet Quintet performed by Heinrich Geuser on vinyl. I originally bought it when I was learning to play it myself, for anyone thinking I do not appreciate classical music.

Why Bother?

Having missed *en primeur* last year for the first time since 1997, I was looking forward to getting back in the saddle. However, as the ominous implications of COVID-19 dawned throughout February/March and France became one of the contagion’s epicenters, clearly something as trivial as *en primeur* could not proceed. Initially, my intention was to write a brief report comprising mainly less-well-known names. As the peak of the virus passed, speculation rose that a campaign was feasible, the kindling from a core of merchants and courtiers who did not fancy revenues of 2% of bugger-all. The Bordeaux machinery cranked into action and, as is often the case, châteaux acted like a shoal of fish and swam in another direction.

If critics could not come to Bordeaux, then Bordeaux would come to the critic. This change in mindset turned a trickle of samples into a deluge, pallets materializing on my doorstep to the point where next door’s builders assumed I had an acute drinking problem.

Why bother? That is a question that some have justifiably asked. Why bother when the campaign was prefaced by *apparently* negligible demand for purchasing expensive unfinished wines called “futures” when the future is so unpredictable?

The answer is simple.

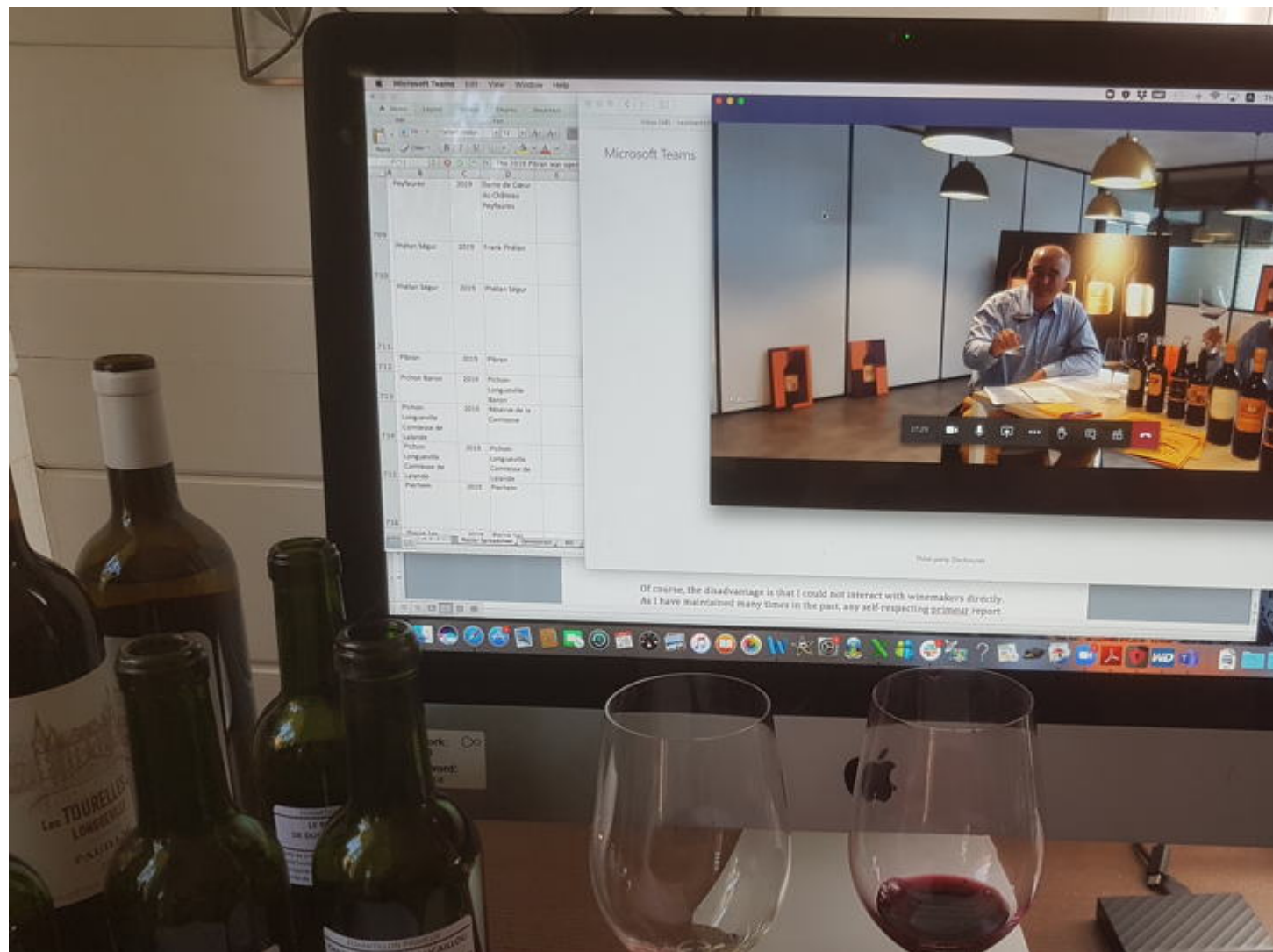
A wine critic has a duty to review the new vintage irrespective of circumstances. They have a duty to provide the best report possible so that the readers who subscribe and make independent reviewing possible are able to read, criticize or ignore as they wish. Sitting out a vintage and deciding what subscribers can or cannot read is not an option, and that is why this report exists. In addition, it seems like there is consumer demand out there. Who knew, eh?

Pluses and Minuses Tasting At Home

My initial reservations about tasting barrel samples at home were counterbalanced by unanticipated advantages. Firstly, I was able to taste in the quiet surroundings at the end of my garden path, the only interruption courtesy of an inquisitive squirrel, possibly spying on my notes for a rival publication. Secondly, I could taste at a leisurely pace, pausing over samples without worrying about being late for the next appointment, and free to return after a couple of hours if a bottle had what I call “stage fright” and needed aeration. In some instances I examined bottles over 12-hour intervals, and in dozens of cases up to and including Grand Cru Classé, I tasted the same wine multiple times from different sources as I customarily do in Bordeaux. Incidentally, every wine in this report was tasted from exactly the same glass.

There were logistical challenges: most importantly, the lead time between *prélèvement*, the date when the sample is taken from barrel, and yours truly tasting it. Unlike finished wines that can be put aside and opened when convenient, samples are less stable and must be dosed with sulfur, how much or how little depending upon the châteaux tasked with finding a liminal point between adequate protection and not obscuring aroma or taste. Generally, châteaux chose to keep to a minimal amount of SO₂, and that seemed the right decision. Why? Well, these 2019s traveled far better than expected, demonstrating as much freshness and stability as when I taste at the properties. This report would not exist had that not been the case. The speed of arrival was impressive – often within 24 hours, judging by *prélèvement* dates. Crucially, this allowed time for the samples to rest before opening. Of course, the disadvantage is that I could not interact with winemakers directly, though this was easily overcome with technology and communication platforms.

Before I go on: A score without a tasting note is just a number. Any self-respecting *primeur* report should explain the reasoning behind the scores and relate the stories of the growing season from the perspective of proprietors and winemakers. Being denied that information, I have done my best to author a report that uses both my experiences of the growing season toward the end and numerous conversations with winemakers via the internet.



It was actually thoroughly enjoyable and useful speaking directly with winemakers in Bordeaux – here, Bruno Borie at Ducru-Beaucaillou. It's a shame that nearly every one used a different platform that I had to download.

The Growing Season

Usually I monitor the Bordeaux growing season first-hand via regular visits. Last year was an exception, since I could not travel for a few months; however, I visited as soon as possible on the return journey from a family holiday in August. More on that later. In September I finally visited châteaux to taste the 2018s just as the 2019 harvest was going full steam ahead. I could gauge winemakers' sentiment as fruit entered *chais*, as well as making numerous recce into the vines just before picking. Against the odds, I ended up with decent in-person views of the 2019 vintage.

Much of the data comes from the annual report co-authored by De Axel Marchal, Prof. Laurence Geny and the aptly named Dr. Valérie Lavigne, who took over the annual publication from the late Prof. Denis Dubourdieu at the University of Bordeaux.

So let's wind the clock back to January 2019. It was yet another mild and short winter. Whether that is due to global change can be discussed on another occasion, although these days, winemakers do not expect the extended periods of sub-freezing temperatures that keep vines dormant and help eradicate viral diseases and pests. February saw temperatures reach a balmy 28°C but cooler weather retarded vine development to normal dates for de-budding. April and May were rather inclement. April was overcast and cool, especially during the night, and this led to minor frost damage on April 12. These persistent cool conditions meant that while budding was even, there was some heterogeneity between plots. Then on April 15, spring finally arrived and the shoots began to make up for their sluggish start, though the last week saw more precipitation that, again, hindered growth. May was among the coolest of the last 30 years and marked by a series of thunderstorms, though rainfall ended up around average. Together this kept the brakes on vine development. After a brief spell of warm weather at the end of May, the first three weeks of June were inclement, Entre-Deux-Mers experiencing its coolest day in June since 1978 at 14.2°C. Rainfall was around 37% above average, 85mm compared to the 30-year average of 62mm. These cool and humid condition coincided with flowering (*mi-floraison* June 4 – one day later than the previous year) and capped potential yields, though most escaped serious episodes of *millerandage* and *coulure*. This seems to have affected the Right Bank more than the Left; for example, Ets. J-P Moueix's yields are 20% down. May and June's unsettled weather caused some heterogeneity of clusters in more sensitive parcels that might have posed problems had the growing season not turned on its heel.

On June 23, warm air from Africa settled over the region. Finally there was some proper heat – especially June 25–29, when temperatures topped 35°C – that expedited cluster formation. Localized storms on July 16 and 26 were vital in terms of replenishing water reserves and kept the vines “chugging along”, although it varied between regions: 40mm in Pessac-Léognan, 45mm at Lafite-Rothschild, 32mm at Pichon-Lalande, while Sauternes saw a deluge of around 100mm that, unlike the Left Bank, was definitely unwelcome, since it provoked outbreaks of acid rot. Overall figures for the region indicate that there was 33mm of rain compared to the 30-year average of 56mm. It was the first serious rainfall since July the previous year - the day France won the World Cup, to be precise. July also ended up being the sunniest in 30 years, with 319 sunlight hours compared to a 30-year average of 249 hours. Apart from a very brief spell of cooler weather on August 10 and 11, the month was mainly hot and dry except for a crucial spell of rain, around 20-30mm at the beginning of the month, that enabled that evened out *véraison* and allowed the Cabernet Sauvignon to continue ripening.

Many winemakers and growing season summaries claim that 2019 saw no heat spikes.

Really?

When I was in Bordeaux on August 23/24, it was blisteringly hot, around 39°C, to the point where instead of visiting tourist sites in the city I spent a boring day cooling down in a supermarket. I guess all the winemakers must have been down in Cap Feret, because if that was not a heat spike, then I don't know what is. This heat and sunshine meant it was ill-advised to de-leaf the vines and remove protective shade from bunches. As Nicolas Glumineau at Pichon-Lalande explained, their vineyard team prudently removes foliage on the north and eastern side of the vine only. “What's the point of de-leaving?” he asked. “Growing seasons are becoming so dry that the leaves fall off by themselves!”

September began relatively cool, though a benign warm and settled period lasted from September 11 to 20, during which time the red grapes attained color and tannins. Although there was 69mm of rain during this month, 20% below average, this figure was higher than in 2014 or 2018. Precipitation became more widespread and persistent during the last 10 days of the month, which limited stress on the more free-draining, gravelly soils.



Bunches ripening in Saint-Émilion up on the limestone plateau. I remember it was a stifling 38–39°C that day and the berries showed a little grillure.

The Harvest

It is always informative to visit châteaux during harvest. Although much took place under clear blue skies, there were episodes of rain that had to be dodged. Many properties now conduct intra-parcel pickings, dividing plots per soil type to obtain optimal ripeness, such as at Troplong Mondot. My abiding memory of 2019 is the frenetic activity at Vieux Château Certan as the fruit piled into the winery reception, sorting tables at full capacity. Amid the din and the people running here and there stood the rangy figure of Alexandre Thienpont, an oasis of calm guiding everyone in the right direction and still having time to show me his 2018 from barrel. Picking of the dry whites began on August 26 with respect to some parcels of Sauvignon Blanc, while much of the Sémillon was picked in the second week of September (except for Haut-Brion and La Mission Haut-Brion). In terms of analysis, the Merlot was picked from around September 16 with average sugar levels of 244g/l, which is higher than in 2018 (233g/l) but a bit lower than in 2016 (246g/l). The Cabernet Sauvignon was picked from September 30 at around 233g/l, is slightly higher than in 2018 (230g/l) and 2016 (223g/l). These sugar levels are counterbalanced by somewhat higher acidity levels in 2019 compared to 2018: 2.7g/l total acidity against 2.5g/l in 2018 for the Merlot, 3.3g/l total acidity against 2.8g/l with respect to Cabernet Sauvignon.

Apologies for bamboozling you with all those figures, but before I move on, there is one aspect of intra-bunch ripeness levels that is important. Some Right Bank winemakers told me that they noticed how ripeness levels varied within bunches, between berries located at the top and on the shoulders and those in the center. I suspect this was more applicable to the earlier-ripening Merlot than the Cabernet. Time to wheel out those optical sorting machines? Not necessarily. The new breed of open-minded winemakers accept these “less ripe” berries that would previously be described and eradicated as “unripe.” Combined with berries higher in sugar levels, they impart complementary freshness and together create more complex wines. This relaxation in attitude toward variegated ripeness levels will surely spread across Bordeaux. I hope so.

Winemaking

The soundtrack to the 2019 vintage should be Lionel Richie crooning the classic “Easy.” That is the most commonly heard word when I asked about the work in both the vineyard and the winery *vis-à-vis* 2018. The growing season was dry and the resulting sanitary conditions meant that rigorous sorting was unnecessary. Alcoholic fermentations appear to have passed smoothly and slowly, with fewer properties nowadays performing pre-fermentation cold soaks (a practice wound down at L’Évangile, as just one example), in addition to dialing down maximum fermentation temperatures by a couple of degrees (26°C was often quoted). Many properties are now well versed in gentler extraction techniques, important in a vintage where you want to preserve the rich sweet fruit while keeping freshness. One final note is that many properties blended the wines earlier than other vintages, which might explain the stability in the samples I received. Also, more properties are using clay amphora as an alternative to orthodox oak barrels, though I still wonder whether they are installed for aesthetic purposes rather than improving the wine. And one or two are installing *foudres* – for example, at Troplong Mondot. Frankly, I am surprised that we have not seen more of these in Bordeaux. Maybe we will in the coming years.



I love this photo. I took this at Vieux-Château-Certan, Guillaume Thienpont in the foreground with his father Alexandre manning the sorting line in his trademark straw hat that some might recognize from my Pomerol book.

The Wines

Two thousand and nineteen is a great vintage. I know. Boring. But my job is to tell it as it is, and that is what it is. It *is* an excellent vintage. Where it stands in the context of elite growing seasons such as 2000, 2005, 2009, 2010 and 2016 is another matter. Proprietors habitually trot out the “BEST. WINE. EVER” banner each year. You can easily become so entangled in hyperbole that it becomes impossible to objectively judge how true that statement is. Having tasted all the aforementioned vintages in barrel and regularly in bottle, there are instances where the 2019 vintage *does* surpass everything I have tasted at this unfinished stage, and others where I feel the benchmark 2016s will ultimately be superior. Speaking to winemakers and inviting them to compare the two, while some are adamant that their 2019 eclipses their 2016, the hesitation in others spoke a thousand words. As I suggested last year, I believe that the 2019s are not only stylistically very different from the more powerful 2018s but generally display much more elegance and will probably become more renowned.

It is neither a Right nor Left Bank vintage; one does not have supremacy over the other. Jean-Philippe Delmas at Haut-Brion opined that in 2019, every grape variety, white or red, performed well - something

he noticed when sourcing parcels from around Bordeaux for Domaine Clarence Dillon's entry-level Clarandelle range. Perhaps this is one reason why among the elite estates, I do not feel that there is a huge gap between the First Growths and "the rest." As it transpired, a First Growth did not even receive my highest score on the Left Bank. Basically, if your vineyard was located on prime terroir, then you could potentially make an outstanding 2019.

So is everything hunky-dory? No. Certainly not.

Regionally speaking, the 2019 vintage is not consistent, perhaps even less so than 2018 in that respect. Part of the reason is the prevailing dry conditions from July 2018 until July 2019. Vineyards located on less propitious terroir whose soils could not offer vines reserves of moisture suffered greater hydric stress. Likewise, younger vines with a shallower root system may have struggled to find water and shut down as a result. This is not the only factor. Some of the smaller properties have had a tough time in recent years, whether it was frost damage in 2017 or mildew in 2018. Combined with sales/revenues stymied by apathy toward less expensive Bordeaux, they cannot invest in the labor or equipment to deal with these conditions with the same efficiency or immediacy as wealthier properties. Then there were times when simple human error allowed victory to slip through their fingers: de-leafing earlier in the season, an incorrect picking date, over-extraction or excessive oak maturation.

On a positive note, however, I was pleased to find so many 2019 "minnows" crafting really quite gorgeous wines. Bordeaux is a vast ocean of names that easily blur into each other, but pick carefully and there are wines that can represent unbeatable value-for-money against any wine region in the world.

Generally, I found the following characteristics:

1) **Elevated aromatics.** A majority of the 2019s are going to offer very perfumed, often floral scents, perhaps more "iris" than "violet." It is an ongoing trend for Bordeaux wines to attract the drinker by stimulating the olfactory senses, and in some ways they do resemble the 2016s in this respect. One leitmotif on both Left Bank and Right Bank is an estuarine, marine-influenced tincture – think seaweed, Japanese *nori* or brine. Personally I love this feature because it conjures images of the Gironde estuary or the Dordogne River, signifying the place where they come from.

2) **Creaminess.** An adjective that cropped up several times during winemaker conversations is creaminess, in terms of texture rather than taste. If Bordeaux is seeking to make their wines more flattering in their youth, then this tactile sensation is going to appeal to those who prefer not to wait decades for wines to reach drinking plateaus. It derives from the above-average sunlight hours that increased sugar levels, the strict selection and especially optical sorting machines, gentler extractions at slightly lower temperatures and employing high-quality new oak with less *chauffage*.

3) **Fine tannins.** Those creamy textures described above can disguise the backbone of some of these wines, possibly hiding their built-in longevity. What it does not disguise are rough-hewn tannins. This is not a big-boned, tannic vintage in the vein of 2005 or 2010 at the same stage, even though the analysis suggests otherwise. Many 2019s possess high IPT levels of 80 and above, figures associated with what you might call "hard" or "masculine" vintages such as 1986 and 2010, yet 2019 feels nothing like either of those.

4) **Purity.** The fruit has the purity of a pious nun. At times it is extraordinary. That is due to the meticulous selection carried out both in the vineyard during picking and at reception courtesy of teams of sorters, vibrating tables, optical sorting and state-of-the-art crusher/de-stemmers. Like those creamy textures, it renders the best wines seriously seductive, sometimes almost too seductive given that these are unfinished samples.

5) **Alcohol.** This has become a bit of a *cause célèbre* in recent years, and with good reason. It has implications for both quality and health. You must be prudent in stating alcohol content at this stage because depending on atmospheric conditions in the cellar, the level can decrease during barrel

maturation. I would rather state an analytical measure of a finished wine. However, it is useful to readers to get the gist of where they stand. For certain, the alcohol degrees for 2019 are high, though what was once considered high has fast become the norm. Data courtesy of the Union de Grand Cru indicates that a majority lie between 13.5% and 14.5%, though analytical measures are intermixed with those simply reprinting what is on the label, which itself has leeway. For the record, any alcohol levels quoted in my report are from analysis only. Certainly the 16%+ levels countenanced several years ago seem to be a thing of the past. Broadly speaking, I found few instances of alcoholic warmth that compromised definition and freshness; for the most part, these 2019s deftly disguise their alcohol. How? Partly because higher alcohol levels are a natural result of warmer growing seasons instead of dogmatically picking as late as possible, piecemeal changes in grape varieties in both the field and the blend, and more prudent approaches in the winery, particularly with regard to skin maceration and gentler pressings. Do I wish they were lower? Yes. Can I live with them being higher? I think so. But I hope not *every* year.

6) **Acidity.** Acidity is fundamental to the success of 2019. Thinking back to the torrid heat that I experienced at the end of August, it is remarkable how many wines have lower pH levels than in 2018. How? Partly due to canopy management and partly because vines are clever clogs. They adapt to climate changes very quickly, learning from previous growing seasons. This imbues many of the best wines with freshness and tension that counterbalances the alcohol levels and, to quote many a winemaker, renders the higher alcohol intangible. As I have argued many times, this is a moot point because higher alcohol will still impact your metabolism and ability to form coherent sentences when consumed in quantities Bacchus would approve of.

7) **Longevity.** That's the \$64,000 question. Many winemakers stressed that their wines must appeal to those who are not inclined to cellar bottles over many years. The 2019s are amazingly approachable, hence my drinking windows advising you could broach many of these wines after just four or five years of bottle age. While I understand the wish to appease oenophiles less disposed to cellar fine wine, it risks denying the next generation the pleasures of fully mature Bordeaux replete with all the nuances and secondary aromas/flavors that only time imparts. Most winemakers are convinced that their 2019s have the structure to also age 20–30 or more years. Time will tell.

Scores

Scores are the quick-fire and easy-to-understand lingua franca of *primeur*. They feed the system. The success of the late-released Latour and Pontet-Canet fired the starting gun, and châteaux were split between those rushing to release and others, bemused by the flurry of activity, that prefer to wait. I have resisted requests to cleave away reviews so that they become part of their promotional campaign, even though I dislike the situation whereby readers do not have reviews or scores to hand. However, not only was my report unfinished, but I was receiving samples just five days before publication date. My scores are not to boost the campaign or serve as simply a promotional tool – they are there to present an overall assessment of an appellation and region, so that readers can compare and make reasoned buying decisions. Even though, like Antonio, I burned the midnight oil turning around this report as quickly as I could, it was important that at the end I could just pause and reflect upon the true quality of what I have tasted in the context of the last 24 vintages assessed from barrel.

The Market

Where do you begin? Donald Trump's 25% tariff feels as if it was imposed years ago. Now it seems trifling in the wake of COVID-19. Whatever the results of the current pandemic, at time of writing this duty has not been rescinded and the current parlous state of the world could well be exaggerating its effect on demand.

The situation with COVID-19 is so fluid that this paragraph could be outdated by the time it is published. Certainly we are bracing ourselves for a global recession that could be unprecedented. The UK economy shrank 20.4% in April. I am not as gloomy as some of the media and believe that it will create opportunities, even in a devastated hospitality industry. Though demand will be impacted by a decline in the number of restaurants, more damaging could be the mass unemployment of middle-income families,

those that will lose the disposable income they fluttered on a few cases each *primeur*. If they do have that income, might they be more attracted to ready-to-drink back vintages?

One advantage of publishing this report when the *primeur* campaign is underway is that you get a good idea of whether those optimistic merchants and courtiers were right. Perhaps despite all the doom and gloom, *en primeur* is impervious to global events, just like that fictitious estate manager in my introduction described.

It is and it isn't.

Judging by the only views that matter – merchants on the telephone to end consumers – there is no question that there *is* demand for Bordeaux 2019s. What this vintage is proving is that though Bordeaux proprietors balk at the idea that prices matter, thus far, success and failure is perceived by value-for-money. Prices matter. However, remember that the sales pitch is always “buy now or you’ll regret it forever.” Every stage of the distribution process from château to merchant has an interest in squeezing orders while the market is hot because consumers move on very quickly. Firstly, remember the quantity that many of the châteaux make – thousands and thousands of cases. Guess what? They’ll be thousands and thousands of cases in less than 12 months too. And don’t forget that yields for most estates are significantly up from the mildew-affected 2018. Secondly, châteaux rarely if ever disclose the percentage of production released onto the market. How do you know whether 10% or 50% of this year’s crop remains unreleased? Which properties sell everything apart from bottles for their own private use and which keep back a large proportion to sell later at price where they don’t have to grit their teeth? Your guess is as good as mine. It is designed to create an illusion of scarcity when Bordeaux is anything but. For sure, some properties are sitting on half their production, which they are perfectly entitled to do. I just wish they would be open about it.



Picking is back breaking work. I took this at Haut-Brion on the driveway leading down to the château. Not a cloud in the sky.

Final Thoughts

In the twilight days of the old world – that is to say, a few weeks ago – the Bordelais were worried. Heavy import duties of wine under 14% alcohol into the United States, combined with China's apathy toward *primeur*, not to mention Brexit, weighed heavily on their minds. Where would demand come from? Nobody foresaw the events leading up to *primeur*, the chaos wrought by an invisible pathogen. Yet nothing is guaranteed in life except death, taxes and *en primeur*. It almost seems impervious to global crises given reports of sold-out allocations. Then again, writing this in the middle of the frenzied buying atmosphere

stoked by rhetoric around the campaign, I caution readers to see where we are in a few months time once the dust settles.

That aside, the 2019 is a wonderful vintage to finish the decade. It is a style of wine that I personally adore. As I mentioned, it is unwise to be swayed by the incessant proclamations of greatness, and my sober judgment, one privately shared by a few merchants that I spoke to, is that it might be a notch below the 2016s. Still, that is a great place to be. It makes three wonderful vintages clustered in the second half of that decade. Will the 2020s be as fecund? As we move toward the so-called “new normal,” I have no doubt that whatever criticisms are laid at Bordeaux’s doorstep, it will continue to produce exceptional wines, as it did in 2019. Let’s hope we can enjoy them without having to social-distance with our friends and fellow wine-lovers.

If you have read this far, congratulations. Each appellation delves deeper into the vintage, and where I single out a “Jewel in the Crown” and, referencing last year’s great film, a “Hidden Gem,” note that the former is not necessarily the wine with the highest score because I take historical release prices into consideration.

Saint-Estèphe

Montrose aside, I not only tasted all the major Saint Estèphe *châteaux* but somehow ended up tasting more than ever before, including a lot of names never previously met. There have been significant changes at the top level, with all the major properties except Lafon-Rochet seeing new ownership, and even that estate has seen a change in long-term personnel. In the course of writing this report, I contacted Calon-Ségur to speak to estate director Laurent Duffau, only to be informed that he had left in January! It is an appellation that cannot sit still, at least at the top of the hierarchy. However, the lower ranks do seem afflicted by a bit of inertia, since there was a tangible differential in quality between renowned estates and what you might call “the rest.” That came as some surprise because the dryness of the growing season suited Saint-Estèphe, advantaged as it is by more clayey soils that retain and release moisture better than the free-draining gravel in Pauillac or Saint-Julien. I believe that many estates need to just pull their socks up and not rely on the appellation to sell their wines. Thankfully, there are several lesser-known names that show what is possible, and you will find them in this report.

Speaking to Cos d’Estournel’s head winemaker Dominique Arangoïts flanked by proprietor Michel Reybier, it was interesting to hear how he felt that the Merlot acted like the Cabernet Sauvignon and the Cabernet Sauvignon like the Merlot. The result is an intense, almost voluptuous **Cos d’Estournel** counterbalanced by pitch-perfect acidity (3.77 pH) and a satin-like texture that seems a million miles away from the more burly, rough-hewn wines that I tasted from barrel at the beginning of my career. In some ways the 2019 reminds me of the ethereal 2016, though I feel that it does not quite achieve the same degree of precision overall. Nevertheless, it continues a very strong run of form as it vies with Montrose as leader of the pack. Healthy competition!

But hold on a moment. Are there just two vying for supremacy? Last year I was not as smitten by **Calon-Ségur** as others because I felt that their 2018 did not quite manage to contain the warmth of that summer. Visiting last September, Laurent Duffau and winemaker Vincent Millet promulgated the 2018, yet I discerned even more excitement about the potential of the 2019 being harvested outside. Their intuition was well founded. This is possibly the greatest Calon-Ségur that I have encountered out of barrel, a riveting wine that gives notice to Montrose and Cos d’Estournel not to take their places at the top of the pyramid for granted. It just has more precision and complexity than the 2018, and more sophistication. That said, I could not quite get my head around the 2019 Capbern, which I normally rate highly. I suspect this was due to the sample not traveling well; I will re-taste in the future.

Another fast-improving estate is **Lafon-Rochet**, where Basile Tesseron is at the helm. He told me how these days he prioritizes his time at the château and in the vineyard instead of traipsing the world promoting his wines. This man is wedded to his vineyard to the point where he parted ways with technical director Lucas Leclercq so that a single person would navigate the way forward. Ergo, this vintage might be

considered Tesson's first solo voyage. Via email, he told me: "The 2019 might be the best rendition of our team's cohesion and its terroir. In my opinion, it expresses our own personal way of living. Much of ourselves is inside this bottle – it has our wildness and a certain depth. The 2019 Lafon-Rochet reflects 20 years of hard work and questioning. In 1999 my father took the lead in the estate and in 2019 we are approaching what we were looking for: making wine, a good one, a great one with much pleasure."

Tesson compared it to a blend of 2005, 2009 and 2016. It is clearly one of the best barrel samples I have tasted, with finer tannins and better salinity than those I have encountered previously. There is still a traditional element to this Lafon-Rochet, and I do not mean that negatively. It is a classic Saint-Estèphe wine that will surely give immense pleasure over 20 or 30 years.

Readers should also look out for excellent contributions from **Meyney**, where head winemaker Anne La Naour has really improved the quality of wine. (Expect an in-depth article on Meyney in the coming weeks on Vinous.) Also, **Phélan-Ségur** showed immense potential and could well represent great value, just like a stupendous **Sérilhan** that is now attired in a very *chichi* blue label.

Jewel in The Crown: Calon-Ségur – *Chapeau*, winemaker Vincent Millet! A 2019 that could equal those gems from the Forties and Fifties.

Hidden Gems: Sérilhan – smart new label with a smart new wine inside.

Pauillac

My tastings of the Pauillac 2019 were pretty extensive, from First Growth down through the ranks. There are two notable exceptions. As expected, Latour did not send any samples, which is logical because post-2011 they have not participated in the *primeur* campaign and only release when they deem their wines ready. Also, some readers have inquired about the absence of Pontet-Canet, a major growth that I have reviewed and written about for almost two decades. All I want to say is that I hope I will be allowed to return in the future, so long as I can judge the wine with the openness, honesty and impartiality accorded every wine that I taste.

Let us begin not with a First Growth, since they often get the limelight, but instead a 2019 that stopped me in my tracks. Estate manager Nicolas Glumineau has threatened to oversee a wine as ethereal as the **2019 Pichon-Lalande** for three or four years. He's finally done it, and it's a serious contender for the best wine of the vintage. Tasting from three bottles, I could only conclude that it is a breathtaking wine and a benchmark for the historic estate. Glumineau explained that hardly any rain fell between July 2018 and July 2019, and consequently you could see how young vines with shallower roots were beginning to suffer. "By then we were wondering how we could make a Bordeaux-style wine," he confessed. "Then we had 32mm of rain in July and 26mm in August, the second crucial because it allowed the Cabernet Sauvignon to finish its ripening. It also helped create a very even *véraison*. We harvested from September 16 over about four weeks, until October 8. The vinification reminded me of 2010 – for example, the thickness of the foam in the plastic tubs when we were pumping over. The foam took up half the tub. After 36 hours the juice was black whereas normally it would take four or five days to obtain that color. Also, the quality of the pressed wine is very high this year. We have used a German pneumatic horizontal press since 2018 that allows you to adjust the pressing at any time and through rotation you can obtain free-run juice merely from the pressure of the berries. Some of the IPT in the pressed wine is up into three figures and it represents around 13% of the final blend. The maceration was around 18 to 21 days – I expected it to be longer. Then we are maturing the Grand Vin in 60% new oak for what is intended to be the full 18 months."

While the vinification of the 2019 reminded Glumineau of the 2010, stylistically it is very different. He finds the 2019 has more aromatic detail and more energy, even more than the 2016. Indeed, it is a phenomenal wine. Having tasted at this address since the late Nineties, in fact this 2019 prompted me to imagine how the legendary 1982 was tasted at the same stage. Of course, the *modus operandi* is completely different.

Yet what they share is a sense of breeding and nobility that places them at First Growth level in all but name.

At Domaine Baron Philippe de Rothschild, thankfully the wines showed much better than the quality of our connection when I spoke to head winemaker Philippe Dhalluin and Philippe Sereys de Rothschild from the tasting room at **Mouton-Rothschild** (the latter appearing on screen wearing a face mask – I did not know the virus can be transmitted via Zoom).

“The 2019 saw a warm and dry winter when the temperature was 2°C above average,” Dhalluin explained. “March was quite rainy but June was a special month. At first it was rainy and cold and then suddenly it changed, the weather becoming much warmer with hot nights, what we call the *canicule*. We thought it could be like a 2018. Flowering took place over a week and there was no *coulure* or *millerandage*. July was warmer than usual with around 30mm of rain, but the vines did not seem to suffer. August was dry with a storm on August 11 that saw 50mm of rain, which was extremely useful. Picking began on September 18 with the younger Merlot, commencing the following day at Clerc-Milon and d’Armailhac, and finished on October 9. The berries showed a lot of richness and tannins. With regard to Mouton-Rothschild, I was surprised how easy it was to taste when we showed the wine to négociants and courtiers in February. It reminds me of the 2015 with a touch of 2009 in terms of grape maturity. Maybe today I am thinking there are hints of 2010 and 2016. While the 2018 was incredibly dense, the 2019 is more generous.” As expected, the 2019s here are deeply impressive, not least a very capable d’Armailhac and a splendid Mouton-Rothschild, even if it did not display the fireworks of the 2016 at the same stage.

I spoke to winemaker Eric Kohler at **Lafite-Rothschild** about the four 2019s that were sent to my home. “It was an easy vintage, easier than 2018,” he began, referencing the hydric stress that many vineyards faced last year. In 2019 he opined that the vines seem to have adapted to dry conditions. Of course, vine stress was alleviated by showers at opportune moments in July and then even during harvest on September 17 and 21. “I was a bit anxious during harvest,” he continued, “as I remembered 2017 when the rain [during harvest] diluted some of the concentration. But it was only 14–15mm in 2018.” No doubt coinciding with the arrival of Saskia de Rothschild, there are what you might call “small tweaks” occurring across their properties. Perhaps the most significant is with respect to Carruades de Lafite, where I instantly recognized a positive change. “For the first time we have used much more Cabernet Sauvignon,” Kohler told me. “This has given the wine more density and brought it closer in style to the Grand Vin, which I don’t think it was in the past. This has been brought about by vineyard analysis using satellite imagery and soil sensitivity analysis.” One change with regard to Lafite-Rothschild concerns the small percentage of Merlot. There were two vats from two parcels in 2019. One comes from the parcel that traditionally enters the Grand Vin. This year there is an additional vat from three parcels hitherto blended into Carruades that share gravelly soil profiles which hypothetically make them more suitable for Cabernet Sauvignon. Kohler found that when he blended them together, they contributed more freshness and tension into the final blend, so these are likely to be used in the future, subject to the results of blind tastings. It is great Lafite-Rothschild that maintains the style of this First Growth, though I did marvel at their fantastic Duhart-Milon that will appeal to those who appreciate traditional Claret. It is less tannic and hard than older vintages that used to take years to come around, this 2019 being fine-boned and more approachable.

Another standout is **Lynch-Bages**. Touring their winery in December last year, I could see that this is going to be an impressive facility when the work is complete. Their 2019 Lynch-Bages was made in their temporary winery, but that does not seem to have prevented Jean-Charles Cazes from overseeing a great Grand Vin in the mold of their standout 2016, even if it does not quite reach that pinnacle.

Jewel in the Crown: Pichon-Longueville de Lalande – when not listening to The Cure, Nicolas Glumineau likes to spend his time making wines of the vintage.

Hidden Gem: Fonbadet – who said Pauillac has to cost and arm and a leg?

Saint-Julien

A full complement of Saint-Julien wines were tasted thanks to the last minute dispatch of samples from Domaine Delon. I expanded my remit to lesser-known names this year, though truth be told there is a noticeable drop in quality once you venture beyond the Grand Cru Classés.

I received samples from **Ducru Beaucaillou** before speaking to Bruno Borie. I was perplexed by a couple of new cuvées that I did not recognize and a couple of absentees. This is a result of rebranding, so that now his four wines all bear the name of “Beaucaillou,” which might be confusing in itself! So we have the Grand Vin, Ducru Beaucaillou and the Deuxième Vin Croix Ducru Beaucaillou as normal. From 2019 there is also Madame de Ducru Beaucaillou, which is both a tribute to Borie’s mother and one of the founders of the estate, which celebrates its tricentennial this year. This is a mixture of fruit from parcels in the Haut-Médoc that hitherto were sold as bulk or under alternative brand names, and Listrac, which is why henceforth there is no Fourcas-Borie. This is joined by Le Petit Ducru de Ducru Beaucaillou, which replaces the Lalande-Borie. “That vineyard was planted in 1972,” Borie told me, “so it is in need of replanting.” This is essentially now the Troisième Vin of the estate. Got it? Good. This reorganization means that the Grand Vin in 2019 represented only around one-quarter of the total production. There has also been a change and, you could say, “harmonizing” of personnel at the estate, so that everyone now sings from the same hymn sheet, including latest recruit Cécile Dupuis, who previously worked alongside Jean-Baptiste Bourotte at Clos du Clocher.

With regard to his 2019s, Borie spoke about the importance of the lack of a heat wave in Bordeaux, with few days topping 35°C, yet surpassing many years in terms of sunshine hours, rendering the tannins ripe and rounded, yet with low pH and good acidity. To put figures on that, all his cuvées are in excess of 80 in terms of IPT except for the Madame de Beaucaillou. “We have never produced such rich wines,” he enthused. “They are wines for eternity.” I’m not sure if we can incorporate that sentiment into a drinking window.

Speaking to Pierre Graffeuille at **Léoville–Las Cases**, he told me that the hot and dry conditions could cause hydric stress in the younger vines, but that the relatively cool nights enabled them to keep the freshness. The *véraison* was more even than the flowering had been, and then they decided to commence the picking early, as they were afraid of overripeness, beginning September 14 at Nenin in Pomerol and four days later at Las Cases. There followed a relatively long harvest: three weeks’ picking on the Left Bank and longer on the Right Bank. “We found that the Cabernet Sauvignon was even in terms of ripeness,” Graffeuille told me, “but the Cabernet Franc suffered more than the Merlot since it is planted on more gravel soils.” He observed that the Merlot tasted like the Cabernet Sauvignon, just as they found up at Cos d’Estournel, and in fact, consultant Eric Boissenot told them that he felt the quality of Merlot was the best since 2010. One important point during the vinification is that they reduced the pump-overs by 50%. “There is less alcohol in the 2019, about 0.8% less than the 2018,” Graffeuille continued. “I find the vintage expresses the DNA of our vineyard extremely well, better than the previous year.”

When Didier Cuvelier retired from running **Léoville-Poyferré**, I must admit I was worried whether the estate would lose its way. Well, the spectacular 2019 answers that question. Under new manager Sara Lecompte Cuvelier and oenologist Isabelle Davin, they have fashioned a stunning wine that retains its signature opulence while keeping alcohol levels under control at just over 14 degrees. This vintage was always going to suit the style of this estate and it just seems to revel in what nature allowed it to do this year.

Perhaps the most exciting story in this appellation has been the rise of **Gloria** and **Saint-Pierre**. From out of nowhere, these estates have ratcheted up quality, as evidenced by recent blind peer group tasting where both have equaled some of the more expensive Saint-Julien wines. Kudos to co-manager Jean Triaud, who is doing a fantastic job. In particular, Saint-Pierre has become one of my go-to estates. In my early career, it was frankly just an “also-ran” estate that often felt a little rustic. Nowadays it has polish and sheen, much finer delineation and newfound sophistication. What is more, it continues to be offered at a wallet-friendly price. What’s not to like (apart from the crow’s-nest glass tasting room that sits on the roof)?

There are changes afoot at **Léoville-Barton**, where a new winery is being installed. Some might say that it ought to have been done years ago. Modernization is so passim in Bordeaux that visiting there was almost like going back in time. But that is what makes it so special, and let's face it, it has not prevented them from furnishing lovers of classic Bordeaux wine with some exceptional vintages in recent years. Damien Barton-Sartorius has become a more prominent face and roving ambassador and in 2019, both **Langoa-Barton** and **Léoville-Barton** put in strong showings that their loyal following will lap up.

As usual, Saint-Julien is a strong appellation with excellent contributions from **Lagrange** (expect a vertical in the coming weeks) and a rejuvenated **Brancaire-Ducru** that felt a little fuller and grippier than previous offerings, though this is one example where I felt the first sample that came with the UGC shipment was not quite right and requested another direct from the property. Sometimes it happens.

Jewel in the Crown: Léoville-Poyferré – outstanding, sensual and delicious Poyferré as we enter the post-Didier era.

Hidden Gem: Le Petit Lion – Léoville–Las Cases's second label roars.

Margaux

The Margaux appellation showed a little more inconsistency than others, partly because it is so expansive and accommodates a diverse array of terroirs and talents. Also, this is the one appellation where I feel I cannot get an accurate measurement of success, since I was unable to taste either Palmer or Rauzan-Ségla, two of the most consistent performers in recent years.

Head winemaker Philippe Bascaules at **Château Margaux** told me how they enjoyed a good fruit set, so that yields ended up a generous 47hl/ha, which is much more than the mildew-affected 31hl/ha the previous year. Like everywhere, they experienced a dry summer, with only 64mm of rain between June and August, resulting in stressed younger vines on well-drained soils. The Sauvignon Blanc for the Pavillon Blanc was picked in early September, though I did not taste this cuvée. The harvest for red varieties began with the Merlot on September 18, though this came to halt when 20mm of rain fell on September 20, after which they waited before restarting. "It is like two vintages in one," Bascaules remarked with respect to the Merlot. "The Merlot picked before the rain was concentrated and high in alcohol. The Merlot picked afterward had better balance and freshness. Before the rain, there had been a risk of over-extraction, like last year." One should remember that this only constitutes 10% of the final blend, the remainder being Cabernet Sauvignon that was marked by small berries and high sugar levels. Hence the alcohol level for the Grand Vin is 13.9% (incidentally, the same as at Mouton-Rothschild). Bascaules was another who admitted that the winemaking was "easy" in 2019, principally because, unlike in 2018, he did not have to worry about over-extraction; the color and tannins extracted slowly and were therefore easier to control during a skin maceration that lasted up to 23 days. As usual, the Grand Vin is matured in 100% new oak, and 60% for the Pavillon Rouge, though interestingly he spoke about the possibility of decreasing that percentage for the Grand Vin and increasing it for the Pavillon.

The IPT is 75 – only the 2018 was higher – and it is more than 2009 or 2010. Given that, one would expect the Grand Vin to feel tannic and structured, but that is not what they found. "The first impression is one of elegance and freshness," Bascaules commented, mirroring my own observation. "It is more classic in style. The texture is so creamy, something very specific to the 2019. The level of concentration was so fine. It reminds me of the 2009 but there is more acidity [pH 3.66]. The 2019 might have less opulence than the 2009 but I find there is greater length. Maybe it reminds me of the 1996 Château Margaux."

One name that has definitely crept up in my estimation and is long overdue a visit is **Cantenac-Brown**. Winemaker José Sanfins is doing a fantastic job at the estate and his 2019 may well be his best so far. He picked over four weeks between September 18 and October 9, and that stop–start picking enabled him to create a very pure and absolutely delicious Margaux that may represent one of the best values here.

Elsewhere in the appellation, I was generally impressed by the quality that can occasionally lack consistency between its various communes. One sweet spot is the Labarde plateau, home to the likes of **Giscours, Siran** and **Dauzac**, the latter now run under biodynamic principles and, for all you healthy non-meat-eaters out there, certified vegan. Their respective 2019s embraced the *joie-de-vivre* of the growing season, sporting vivid fruit profiles both aromatically and on the palate. Watch for prices on these when released, as they may represent great value-for-money. **Brane-Cantenac** is a singular Margaux that lives up to its sobriquet of “Pauillac of Margaux,” though the natural austerity it can sometimes show in its youth is mollified by the character of a growing season that produced abundant fruit and creamy textures. Incidentally, they debuted a white wine that will go under the name Brane-Cantenac Blanc from their plots located in the Haut-Médoc on soils deemed better for white varieties.

Jewel in the Crown: Cantenac-Brown – under-the-radar Margaux that has upped its game in recent years under José Sanfins.

Hidden Gems: Pouget – the “secret” Grand Cru Classé has quietly undergone a revolution in recent years.

Pessac-Léognan

It was a bit of mixed bag from Pessac-Léognan and Graves, to be honest, though with plenty of potentially tempting offerings clustered at the top end. Much like my findings in other appellations, there is a bifurcation between the top estates and lesser-known names on inferior terroirs, not that it precluded some of those from producing excellent wines that represent value-for-money.

The whites are pretty strong in 2019, since most were picked before the September rains. I love the dry whites of Bordeaux, though I often find that too much praise is heaped upon them at this early stage, with reviews and scores equivalent to top Burgundy Grand Crus. They very rarely reach those heights, though it is not impossible. Case in point: the whites from Domaine Clarence Dillon, **2019 La Mission Haut-Brion Blanc** and **Haut-Brion Blanc**. It is a shame that these have become so expensive in recent years, but there are plenty of cheaper alternatives, such as excellent examples from **Domaine de Chevalier, La Louvière, Larrivet Haut-Brion, Malartic-Lagravière** and especially a stunning **Smith Haut-Lafitte**.

My last winemaker interview was with Jean-Philippe Delmas, head winemaker for **Domaine Clarence Dillon** and the third generation to hold the position. Sadly, his father, Jean-Bernard Delmas, passed away last year on the final day of the picking at Haut-Brion. Jean-Philippe speculated that maybe he was waiting until the harvest was over before taking his final breath.

“In the spring we didn’t have any problems in terms of mildew and oïdium,” Delmas explained. “The summer was warm and dry. In July we irrigated the young vines up to three years old, which we are allowed to do, because they suffered so much [these do not enter into production]. The challenge was to find the best solution to obtain the freshness. Therefore we reversed the order of picking for the white, the Sémillon before the Sauvignon Blanc, which we felt could wait a little longer. We started picking August 29 for Haut-Brion and finished September 9, and one day later for La Mission Haut-Brion Blanc. The result is that the La Mission Haut-Brion Blanc is classic and in the style of the old Laville Haut-Brions that were based on great Sémillon. The Haut-Brion Blanc is more expressive because of the Sauvignon Blanc. In terms of acidity we have a lower pH levels this year. La Mission Haut-Brion Blanc is 3.27 and Haut-Brion Blanc 3.3 compared to 3.37 last year. I find there is better balance in 2019 than in 2018. We bottled the whites at the end of April.”

Moving on to the reds, Delmas saw good yields in 2019, more than the previous year due to the volume of Merlot. Astutely, he described the 2019 as “a riper 1998 or a fresher 1990.” I asked the same question as I do every year: stuck on a desert island, would he take La Mission Haut-Brion or Haut-Brion? This year it was an unfair question since the latter will always evoke memories of Jean-Bernard Delmas. Jean-Philippe is amazed by the crescendo on the palate of the Haut-Brion and, when pushed, sided with the First Growth. Myself? Tasting them side by side over 24 hours, I initially fell head over heels in love with

the more structured and denser La Mission Haut-Brion before settling on the Haut-Brion four hours later. Yet later on, the La Mission Haut-Brion seemed to move ahead, redoubling its intensity and precision so that eventually it seemed clear that in fact, while Haut-Brion is more expressive, the La Mission Haut-Brion could well end up among legends like the 1955 and 1989. I feel both might have an edge over the First Growths because of their combination of Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon in a growing season where both varieties excelled. I still wish the alcohol levels were lower than 14.6%, though this might simply be a result of the slightly warmer urban climate.

I spoke to Véronique Sanders, estate manager at **Haut-Bailly**, via Zoom. She told me that the winter was short and February was marked by unseasonal heat spikes of 28°C that prompted early budding. Then there was a sustained series of frost risks that obliged the vineyard team to light wax candles five times up until May, though thankfully they avoided last year's loss of 50% of the crop. Flowering was on May 23, and then from the end of June to the end of July it was very warm, with two heat spikes on June 26/27 and July 22–25, when the mercury reached 42°C. "In fact, in the vineyard we recorded temperatures of 52°C," Sanders told me. "Fortunately this did not affect the vines. It was amazing. I think this is because they are old and have become resistant to the heat." She believes that the 40mm of rain from a storm on July 26 provided crucial water, and a second shower just prior to the harvest was equally important in terms of boosting the energy of the vines. "The wines would be quite different if it were not for that rain," she told me. The harvest took place between September 23 and October 11 under perfect conditions. Vinification was mostly the same as usual, though there was one change. "We have a new vertical press. It is gentler and the quality of the *vin de presse* is fantastic. It will comprise 3–4% of the final blend." This is a fabulous Haut-Bailly for sure, opulent in style but with serious structure underneath that will see it age over the long term.

All the wines produced at **Smith Haut-Lafitte** this year were impressive, not just the Grand Vins of both colors, but also other cuvées such as Le Petit Haut Lafitte and their pure Sauvignon Blanc, Les Hauts de Smith, both of which will doubtlessly represent great value for the quality. The 2019 Smith Haut Lafitte already sports a complex nose with a hint of black olive, while the 2019 Smith Haut Lafitte Blanc will be irresistible, which is a pity because too few people cellar this wine that repays bottle age. Kudos not just to Daniel and Florence Cathiard, but also to Fabien Teitgen, who has overseen a raft of innovations at the estate in recent years.

Jewel in the Crown: Smith Haut-Lafitte – both white and red steal the show.

Hidden Gem: Haut-Bacalan – this 8-hectare vineyard, near Pessac and owned by the Gonet family, produced a lovely 2019.

Listrac/Moulis-en-Médoc

These two appellations are often overlooked and yet they can be a source of great value. Two thousand and nineteen is fecund with potentially great wines from both appellations. In Moulis-en-Médoc, you cannot go wrong with the high-performing Branas Grand Poujeaux, which, frankly, is cruising at Grand Cru Classé quality. There is a fantastic 2019 from Chasse-Spleen and a quite brilliant Poujeaux that – who knows – might well replicate the otherworldly 1928 that I have enjoyed a couple of times now. Listrac maybe lacks these ethereal highs and yet Ducluzeaux, Fonréaud and Saransot-Dupré are definitely worth looking out for.

Jewel in the Crown: Poujeaux – could the 2019 replicate the performance of the 1928?

Hidden Gem: Saransot-Dupré – a very fine Listrac from owner Yves Raymond.

Haut-Médoc/Médoc & Bordeaux Supérieur

Readers will find a vast swath of wines from the Haut-Médoc and Médoc in this report, more than I have ever offered before. This is the category that I often refer to as "the real Bordeaux," and that is truer than

ever. Sure, you have to tread carefully because, sadly, many wines fall short of the mark. But others shone brightly during my tastings and epitomize what makes this region so great. Merchants might not be begging you to buy them, and the reasons for purchasing *en primeur* are difficult to defend when, let's be honest, most are going to have similar prices when physically available (if they are even offered *en primeur* at all). Even so, they are the lifeblood of Bordeaux, and people work just as hard in their vineyards as those working in historic vineyards – maybe even harder, since they are often without the same deep pockets and resources of famous names. I also paid just much attention to Bordeaux Supérieur, and there are some absolute gems to find here if you drink wines not labels. As such I have singled out a dozen names to hunt down:

- Beaumont (Haut-Médoc)
- Bolaire (Bordeaux Supérieur)
- Campillot (Médoc)
- Domaine de Cartujac (Haut-Médoc)
- La Chandelliere (Médoc)
- Charmail (Haut-Médoc)
- Doyac (Haut-Médoc)
- Féret-Lambert (Bordeaux Supérieur)
- La Grande Clotte Blanc (Bordeaux Blanc)
- De Lamarque (Haut-Médoc)
- Moutte Blanc (Bordeaux Supérieur)
- Pontoise Cabarrus (Haut-Médoc)

Pomerol

A fairly full house with regard to the appellation. To be honest, I would have been surprised if the top three, Petrus, Lafleur and Le Pin, had sent samples. Their absence means that I am denied the context of a normal year, and I look forward to visiting those estates and tasting their respective 2019s. Fortunately, Ets. J-P Moueix did send sample bottles of their estates, which was crucial given the importance of Trotanoy, La Fleur-Pétrus and Hosanna. These and the numerous other Pomerol wines have enabled me to obtain a picture of a growing season that yielded a clutch of spectacular wines, which are definitely worth seeking out if prices seem reasonable.

There is only one place to begin.

How bittersweet to celebrate Denis Durantou's 2019s just a couple of weeks after his untimely passing. Before his daughters Noémie and Constance sent samples, I wondered whether I could appraise them objectively, but that is what I have striven to do. The last time we met was mid-September, when, with typical *sangfroid*, Durantou said: "I am happy with this vintage." Probably the most self-critical winemaker in Bordeaux, and the antithesis of proprietors prone to hyperbole, this translated as him being ecstatic about the quality. I spoke to Noémie and Constance, who were where their father would have wanted them to be, out among the vines in Montlandrie. They told me how their father was fully involved in the 2019 vintage despite his ailing health, and in fact, he was still walking through the vines with his daughters dispensing invaluable knowledge two months prior to his passing. They told me how they picked a little

early to capture the freshness and how Denis felt that 2019 is not only comparable to 2018, but endowed with more elegance. Noémie told me that this is partly down to now subdividing parcels in halves and thirds to enhance selection and also because some of the vines that her father planted are now reaching their peak performance.

This is borne out in the wines, not just the crown jewel of **l'Eglise-Clinet** but throughout the range in Lalande-de-Pomerol, Castillon Côtes de Bordeaux and Saint-Émilion. Saintayme, Les Cruzelles, Montlandrie and La Chenade are habitually released at prices that make a mockery of some of the region's more self-aggrandizing crus. What is sometimes forgotten is that they can age far longer than many consumers afford them. The 2019 l'Eglise-Clinet is inevitably going to be remembered as Durantou's final masterpiece, his goodbye to his cherished vineyard and the appellation that he loved. It is a brilliant wine, in my opinion better than the 2018; moreover, the Deuxième Vin, La Petite Eglise, is just about the best that I have ever tasted. The 2019 marks the end of one chapter and the beginning of a new one.

The portfolio of Ets. J-P Moueix offered some absolute delights. They narrowly escaped the frost episode on April 13, and rain in early June disrupted flowering so that the Merlot grapes per vine totaled around 120 on average instead of the usual 200. They experienced the beginnings of hydric stress in early July, relieved by around 35mm of rain on July 26. Berry size was small, 1.2gm instead of the usual 1.5gm, and this, plus the disturbed flowering, means that yields ended up 20% down after the harvest commenced. I was actually tasting their 2018s at their offices in Libourne on the final day of picking and was invited by Edouard and Christian Moueix to join the mass of jubilant harvesters for their final lunch. Their wines all underwent a double sorting, optical and with those two spherical things just above your nose, and as usual, were raised adhering to the tenet of prudent use of new French oak barrels.

Trotanoy is not just one of the best Pomerol wines in 2019 – I place it comfortably within my top Bordeaux wines of the vintage. Much like l'Eglise-Clinet, it is a quintessential wine that articulates its terroir with spellbinding clarity. Remarkably, it was picked on a single day – September 21. How's that for efficiency? Whereas I remember tasting Trotanoy 15 or 20 years ago and thinking that I should be laying down this wine for my children, nowadays I feel that the Moueix have rendered Trotanoy more approachable without losing the character of this vineyard, always just a bit broody in its youth. Sure, it remains a wine that obliges cellaring. But it is not going to punish you for broaching it too early. The **La Fleur-Pétrus** continues its strong run, the 2019 seasoned with a 3% pinch of Petit Verdot, an uncommon grape variety in these parts. I still have reservations toward **Certan-de-May**, which in recent vintages has left me perplexed, since I tasted exceptional wines from this estate up until the mid-2000s. With Jean-Claude Berrouet advising, I am perturbed by the greenness on the nose and the palate that feels a bit pinched.

At **La Conseillante** I spoke with winemaker Marielle Cazaux, who has taken the Pomerol stalwart to new heights. "It was not a difficult vintage," she told me via Zoom, co-proprietor Valmy Nicolas in the background. "We had a little rain during flowering but the rest of the vintage was quite dry and warm, so there was no disease pressure like in 2018. The biggest challenge was protecting the grapes from sunburn, so we plowed the earth and did not de-leaf the vines. The Cabernet Franc can be sensitive to drought, so we had to monitor it carefully. The Merlot ripened before the rain, so it was picked September 17–20 over four mornings, from 7:30 to noon, in order to keep the freshness. We did a *débourbage*, settled over one night, and returned the wine into tank the following day to get rid of any dust, since the weather had been so dry. One thing new this year is that I opened the cellar doors from 5 o'clock until midnight. This helped keep the cap well hydrated. There is a lot of yeast in the cap and keeping it wet helps protect it because when you have a lot of sugar, the yeast can be quite fragile. Keeping the doors open kept the temperature stable in both the cap and the juice, which helped maintain the temperature at around 26°C. This enabled me to make a smooth and slow extraction of polyphenols. Also in 2019, nearly all the pump-overs were done by hand rather than machine. These two things together make the tannins soft because there are a lot of tannins in this La Conseillante. It is also the second year that we have used clay amphora. When you have a high alcoholic degree, the amphora is efficient at keeping the fruit and sense of energy. We will continue using around 3% amphora and maybe we will increase to 5%, but no more, as I need to preserve the style of La Conseillante. The texture is different from other vintages that I

have made. The blending was very easy when we did it in mid-February. Sometimes you have questions but that was not the case. I was more satisfied with the Cabernet Franc in 2019 than in 2018.”

The end result is a sumptuous, classy La Conseillante that, perhaps because of the tannin content, reminded me of tasting the 2010 from barrel, but cut from a very different cloth since the tannins are so much finer and the fruit so pure. It is clearly one of the finest Pomerol wines of the vintage and at the top of the tree on the Right Bank.

When I spoke with Eric Kohler about **l'Évangile**, he explained: “We found that the Merlot and the Cabernet Franc resisted the heat stress in 2019. This was not the case in 2018. Early on in the growing season, I thought we had potentially a great L'Évangile. For the first time since we replanted the Cabernet Franc, we have used the entirety of our plantings, which is why there is 17% in the final blend. There is also our first Cabernet Sauvignon that we planted in 2015, which I am very excited about.” I could not quite work out this Pomerol. While I commend the reduction in the use of new oak that could smother the terroir, I still feel it is a Pomerol estate seeking its identity. This is a good wine, but it should be competing with the best of the best. I think the reconfiguration of the vineyards is going to help and I look forward to future vintages.

One of the great successes of 2019 is the stunning **Clinet**. This is a wine whose birth I witnessed in September, dropping in to see Ronan Laborde as he was inspecting bunches entering the reception area. The excitement in the air was already palpable then, but even I was not expecting an exceptional wine that harks back to the glories of, say, the 1989, but cut from a much finer cloth and, I suspect, more consistent from bottle to bottle.

Jewel in the Crown: Clinet – Ronan Laborde and his team hit the ball out of the park.

Hidden Gem: Bourgneuf – possibly the best Bourgneuf ever from winemaker Frédérique Vayron.

Saint-Émilion

Much has been written about Saint-Émilion in recent years, including by this writer. The last two decades have witnessed the rise of the *garagistes*, the growing influence of ubiquitous consultants, an influx of investors including many from East Asia, and subsequently the ebb of *garagistes* and then, around 2013/2014, a change in approach as the dogma of late picking and concentration gave way to simply creating wines as they saw fit, whether modern in style or reverting to something more traditional. This has all led to a more dynamic and heterogeneous appellation that is more interesting to taste. In an appellation where consultants are so important, it was significant that Michel Rolland announced he was stepping back from full-time duties, which probably means he'll be busier than ever. It's great to see the likes of Julien Viaud take the baton – he is a super-talented and well-respected consultant. We have also seen the rise of Thomas Duclos at Oenoteam, whose expanding list of clients are well represented in this report.

There are two notable if predictable absentees: Ausone and Cheval Blanc. Also, there is no Canon, as Nicolas Audebert preferred not to dispatch samples. I will taste their respective 2019s on my next visit. Otherwise it is more or less a full house, which boils down to a flippin' lot of wines. So where do you begin?

Let us commence with the château that epitomizes the sea change in mindset within the appellation: **Troplong-Mondot**. Since it was sold to the insurance company SCOR, who tempted Aymeric de Gironde away from Cos d'Estournel to take over the running, the style of the wine is almost unrecognizable from those made previously. I remember tasting the Grand Vin that topped 16 degrees alcohol and wondering whether they were attempting to make a fortified wine. That pursuit of richness and decadence is now anathema to de Gironde's principles as he seeks to translate what is an exceptional terroir, which I spent a couple of hours walking around last September.

"I took a new approach in 2017 in terms of vinification," de Gironde told me via Zoom. "In 2018 we started pursuing a lighter approach in the vineyard. In 2019 we did no de-leafing in order to make a more refined wine. This is accompanied with less extraction, less pumping over and instead a more "tea infusion" approach in the winery. The 2019 is the first vintage where we have the results of the 2017 and 2018, enabling us to fine-tune the 2019. In other words, we can see the consequences of what we do in the vineyard. It is a turning point."

"We did some things differently. There were two *découpages*. Firstly, we divided the individual parcels, an intra-parcel selection, so that this year the vats were tremendously representative of their origin and also very different from each other. I also harvested the side rows and end of each row separately as they receive more sunlight." De Gironde then explained the aspect of the growing season that enlightened my understanding of the vintage. "Even within the cluster, there was heterogeneity in the grapes. You could see that in the analysis. The extreme heat and downpours meant that the growing season suffered a lot of ups and downs, a lot of shocks, and this led to varying ripeness levels within the bunches." What has changed is that whereas 10 years ago they would have been dogmatic about parsing out what are perceived to be "less ripe" (rather than "underripe" berries), de Gironde believes that they complement the berries that are higher in sugar. It is an idea that I have proselytized myself for many years directly with winemakers who, I feel, became obsessed with uniformity of ripeness, and it is pleasing to hear de Gironde espouse that view, as indeed Frédéric Faye at Figeac did afterward.

"I continue searching for a fresher style," de Gironde continued, "and so we were one of the first to harvest on September 10, which turned out to be the same day as many other properties. We finished on September 21 for the Merlot, just before it began to rain. The Cabernet Franc was picked on September 23 and the Cabernet Sauvignon, October 7 and 8. Mondot, the *Deuxième Vin*, was interesting in 2019 because it is 100% Merlot on 100% limestone and I think you can find a chalky *mineralité* in the wine."

I ask de Gironde about the overall style of the 2019. "You have the sexiness of a vintage like 2015 but you have a fresh backbone that lends incredible balance. We managed to contain the power that I feel will develop during the *élevage*. The Grand Vin is matured in 60% new oak and three 20-hectoliter *foudres* (Taransaud and Stockinger) plus three 7.5-hectoliter amphorae. There was no malolactic fermentation in oak at all – zero percent. Also, we did not use any SO₂ until the wines were put into barrel, something we have been able to do in the last three vintages. We finished blending in December and put in barrel a month and a half earlier. We are getting a better understanding of the vineyard and working with a gentler extraction."

Samples from Gérard Perse's stable arrived in May, including **Pavie** twice, once with my name emblazoned on the label, a second with Lisa Perrotti-Brown's. Put the conspiracy theories to bed: these are not special cuvées concocted to suit critics' palates, but simply marked to monitor who is receiving samples. There was obviously a mix-up at the dispatch department; however, it did have ramifications for my assessment. The first blend had omitted a crucial lot of Cabernet Franc, the grape variety that has become increasingly pivotal in the overall blend and deftly shifted Pavie away from the archetypal blockbuster-style Merlot-dominated Saint-Émilion toward a more interesting, multifaceted wine. It now articulates its enviable terroir up on the limestone slopes with greater clarity and embraces more finesse, rather than clobbering you over the head with concentration. My review comes from the second bottle with this Cabernet Franc. It's a wonderful Pavie, clearly one of the finest on the Right Bank, the aromas capturing that irresistible iris flower leitmotif of the vintage and combining it with the vivacious ripe fruit. It's a less demanding Pavie, less obsessed about impressing and more interested in seducing both senses and intellect. Perhaps an even more noticeable change in direction has been with stablemate **Bellevue-Mondotte**. I remember the days when this barrel sample was like a wrecking ball to my palate, such was its formidable, often overpowering grip and concentration. I adore the 2019, which demonstrates much more pedigree and (again) more terroir expression. Overall, together with Pavie-Decesse and a strong Arômes de Pavie, Perse's team oversaw a strong line-up of 2019s.

I spoke to Frédéric Faye at **Figeac** directly after speaking to de Gironde at Troplong-Mondot. "It was a unique growing season because of the conditions. The leaves arrived very early thanks to warm

temperatures and then the cold conditions came back and stopped the growing cycle. It became warmer and rained, so the vines grew quickly, then they were stopped again because of the dryness. It was stop-start. Because of the dry summer we were 2–3 weeks earlier than expected, but then we lost 10 days of the advance due to the dry conditions. It was very sunny with cold nights. It was particularly dry and so it gave us a slow accretion of ripeness. We did not de-leaf a lot of plots, to preserve the flavors and keep the freshness. It was a growing season where we had to make a lot of strategic decisions. I remember that I was in the vineyard on September 9 and I said to my team that we had to harvest some plots of Merlot because I was already thinking about the blend. These would give the freshness, whereas the old Merlot on the plateau was picked later to give the volume and texture. So on September 13 we started harvesting. Fortunately we had 40mm of rain between September 22 and 25 that restarted the Cabernets and gave the berries freshness and juice. We have new plots of Cabernet Franc grown from *sélection massale* on the great terroirs planted around six years ago. It's the best Cabernet Franc we have produced for 10 or 15 years. We finished on October 7 with the Cabernet Sauvignon, which produced small, concentrated berries. I was already thinking about a gentle extraction using infusion at cooler temperatures, 26°C instead of 28°C, and that difference of two degrees is very important [especially in terms of extraction]. Since 2018, we only use SO₂ after alcoholic fermentation, and we did a cold pre-ferment maceration at 5°C with slow pumping over and submerging the cap, just under one month *cuvaison* in total. Malolactic was in barrel and the first blend was made in January. The Grand Vin was matured in 100% new oak from five coopers, but we want to translate the purity of terroir. It is a benchmark Figeac for us. The 2018 is a little more exotic due to the weather conditions, the 2019 more classic, elegant and fresh in style. It is crystalline." This is a brilliant Figeac that should surpass the outstanding 2018, continuing a run that surely will see this estate considered for promotion to the very top tier.

Talking of promotion, on what was a very busy Friday of Zoom tastings, I called in to speak to Hubert and his daughter, Stéphanie de Boüard-Rivoal, in what looked like a cozy attic conversation at **Château l'Angélus**.

"We had drought in June onward, almost no rain, which produced thinner skins," Boüard-Rivoal explained. "The rain that came around September 18 was quite welcome as it helped soften the skins and moderate the alcohol level. The vines did not suffer because of the clay and also thanks to the proportion of Cabernet Franc. There were hot days but no heat wave, and cool temperatures at night with variation between daytime and nighttime temperatures. This allowed the vines to have a break and translated into lower pH (3.65), whereas last year it was 3.8. I think the aging potential of the wine is great. In 2018 we introduced two *foudres* and in 2019 we have an additional one. Around 40% of the Cabernet Franc is matured in these. That is because it is a fragile grape variety that needs care and not too much oxygen, so the *foudres* are ideal and we have been very happy with the result. We have also reduced the quantity of SO₂ in the wine. I would describe 2019 as a flamboyant vintage, though there is 12% less than 2018 due to the selection and drought."

Again, this is a fabulous l'Angélus, one of the best that I have tasted from barrel. What I like is the increasing importance and expressiveness of their Cabernet Franc, which might have been missing in vintages a decade or two ago. It lends the Grand Vin more dimension and sophistication, and makes it a more enticing prospect for aging long-term. Both the estate's second and third wines are also worthy of investigation, since improvements are evident here too.

Speaking to **Quintus**, Jean-Philippe Delmas told me that alcohol levels in the first two vats were very high. He asked me not to disclose the actual figures and it is a moot point since the September showers changed the final alcohol levels. "We were very happy about the rain that reduced the alcohol. Quintus is developing its own personality. The 2019 is matured in 38% new oak. We are using more and more 'Aquaflex' where the barrel is not burned but heated with hot water so that the wood has less influence on the wine." I agree with Delmas that this is the best wine that I have tasted from the estate, probably overshadowed by its First Growth stablemate in Pessac-Léognan.

Jewel in the Crown: Figeac – firing on all cylinders under Frédéric Faye with a new winery coming soon.

Hidden Gem: L'Hermitage Lescours – out-of-the-blue stunner from this 3.4-hectare property in Saint-Sulpice-de-Faleyrens.

Sauternes

One feature of the growing season that singles out Sauternes is that they received significantly higher rainfall in the summer, around 100mm compared to 30-40mm on the Left Bank. This came courtesy of a storm that deluged the region, thereby weakening the skins when temperatures began to rise in August. In early September this caused some acid rot, while berries located on vines planted in free-draining, arid soils began to shrivel. It was therefore necessary to undertake a labor-intensive *nettoyage* in order to eradicate these affected berries/bunches from the vineyard before the development of *pourriture noble*. After mid-September rains, the noble rot began to form, and a fortnight of warm hot weather at the beginning of October concentrated the berries further, although it tended to be too dry to form botrytis. Much of the harvest was conducted October 10-14 after damper conditions, and the heavy rain forecast on the evening of the 14th necessitated rapid picking. There was a second window of picking on October 18–23, but after this, producers were unable to use the fruit for their Grand Vin. Hence yields for 2019 in Sauternes are extremely low.

The Sauternais have it hard enough as it is, let alone when the growing season gives them brief windows in which to pick and desultory yields upon which to make a living. It is remarkable, given all this, just how well many of these underappreciated Sauternes showed. While they are not laden with botrytis, nor do I find them particularly powerful, the passes through the vineyard in early September to clean the vines of undesirable fruit were not in vain, and I found few instances of rot or volatility in the samples received. Residual sugar levels landed between 125 and 150gm/l, so they present a sense of fullness that I appreciate.

Jewel in the Crown: Suduiraut – currently on a very strong run of form.

Hidden Gem: Haut-Bergeron – a great sweetie from owner Robert Lamothe.

Right Bank Satellites

This year I tasted through dozens of samples from Right Bank satellite appellations: Castillon Côte de Bordeaux, Lussac Saint-Émilion, Montagne Saint-Émilion, Fronsac, Lalande-de-Pomerol and so on. I would love to invest time in discussing each one separately; however, I would be writing on the subject for the next month. Therefore I will leave the notes to do the talking and say that Fronsac is particularly strong in 2019, offering a clutch of outstanding wines that at the top end challenge the big names in Saint-Émilion. Remember that a century ago these Fronsac estates were highly coveted and sold for greater sums. Now they can represent unbeatable value. I also noticed an uptick in Lalande-de-Pomerol, so long lying in the shadow of Pomerol itself and rarely getting much attention. Maybe it is just missing a couple of superstars to smash prejudices against this appellation?

As I did for the Left Bank, I have singled out a dozen wines that are worthy of your attention:

- Brisson (Castillon Côtes de Bordeaux)
- Clos de Boüard (Montagne Saint-Émilion)
- La Dauphine (Fronsac)
- Fontenil (Fronsac)
- Grand Ormeau (Lalande-de-Pomerol)
- Château de la Huste (Fronsac)

- Lafitte (Côtes de Bordeaux)
- La Rose Perrière (Lussac Saint-Émilion)
- Les Trois Croix (Fronsac)
- Réaut (Cadillac Côtes de Bordeaux)
- Suau (Cadillac Côtes de Bordeaux)
- Tournefeuille La Cure (Lalande-de-Pomerol)