



BORDEAUX 2016 VINTAGE REPORT

Triumph after torrential rain and trauma of drought

Within a period of eight days in the region of Bordeaux, Thomas Boxberger-von Schaabner tasted 955 wines – here is his vintage report:

Around six months of heavy rainfall followed by four months of drought and heat caused the winemakers of Bordeaux to break out in a cold sweat during the growth period for the 2016 vintage. The fear that they were facing a total disaster was at the back of their minds all the time. The stresses and strains experienced not only by the vines, but also the people who worked with them, were huge – and it turned out to be crucial that the right decisions were taken concerning the work in the vineyards. A feeling of relief only broke out shortly before the harvest, turning into one of jubilation after the musts had fermented. Now it was clear after all the stress that the wine in their cellars was of exceptional quality. There had probably never been such a strange vintage in Bordeaux ever before!



The year 2016 saw the production of some great Bordeaux wines, which could not be compared with any other vintages from the past. Because – as in a warm vintage – the wines are almost black in colour, display a viscous texture and contain rich and sweet extractaromas with great fullness and powerful tannin structures. In turn, the clear, precise fruit aromas with moderate levels of alcohol are attributes of a cool year with the equally present elegant acidity and brilliant freshness. As a result, the 2016 Bordeaux takes on the characteristics of a small, highly-developed sports car with low fuel consumption, surrounded by the powerful bodywork of a large off-road vehicle! The 2016 vintage is clearly better than 2015, with significantly more high ratings in the upper and top quality category! But even the average level among the smaller terroirs is exceptional – at a homogenous level that has not been seen since 2000 or 2005. Vintages like 2009, 2010 and 2015 have

much more favoured the better and high-class terroirs. For the lesser terroirs and appellations for these vintages it always was a heterogenous quality instead. During the primeur tastings it was important to determine whether the wines provided enough length and extract sweetness in their finish. Some wines were full-bodied and impressively structured, but the aftertaste quickly faded without any distinctive back aroma. Such cases were reminiscent of a great concert where the artist briefly says goodbye after the last piece and leaves the stage without giving an encore, with the lights then going on immediately, leaving behind the audience with a feeling of something missing. Even if 2016 is one of the best vintages of the past 20 years, only a few châteaux have produced absolutely the best wine of all time.

THE APPELLATIONS

The only appellation which surpasses almost all previous vintages in 2016 is Fronsac. 150 years ago, Fronsac – which is located west of St. Emilion and Pomerol – was the most famous appellation anyway on the right bank. All other appellations displayed a consistently high quality level: rich, masculine wines with a noble structure and length were produced in Pauillac. St.-Estèphe with some more peaks and St.-Julien in general are very even, in Margaux the two top châteaux Palmer and Margaux are outstanding – and the rest excellent. Among the Cru Bourgeois in the Médoc and Haut-Médoc there are excellent qualities just as well as among the simple Bordeaux supérieurs. Graves is enjoying an high average level of quality among the red wines with the top positions being occupied by names which are well known. The white wines from Graves are very clear and clean, but sometimes lack complexity, bite and grip. In St. Emilion and Pomerol the picture is very heterogeneous. Terroirs with clay in the subsoil were able to take advantage of its good water storage capacity during the dry period. An additional factor is the earlier or later timing

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for the harvest of the grapes, which differed significantly. The rather less aromatic Merlot this year was happy to accept the support of successful Cabernet Francs. But in some vineyards even the Cabernet Franc has had some problems and then came with a reduced proportion into the final blend. Young vines on sand and gravel had the most problems in all of the appellations, producing hard tannins and a sharp-edged structure. It was just as important to eliminate dried berries or grapes with sunburn from young vines that had lost their leaves due to drought stress, or if the leaves in the grape zone were removed too early by the vineyard-workers. For this reason, the selection of the grape material was again a very important factor in the quality of the wines.



GROWTH DEVELOPMENT

Bordeaux is the only wine-producing region in France which was largely spared the consequences of massive frost and hail damage in 2016. The winter was warm and dry, with the highest average temperature in December for the past 100 years. At the beginning of the year the soils were therefore dried out, so that the rainy January with precipitation levels of 233 mm was very welcome. The damp weather remained, and due to the warm winter it was feared that the buds would break out early, which in turn would harbour a great risk if there was a frost. At the end of March the buds appeared quickly and without any problems. April and May brought chaotic temperature fluctuations with continuously high precipitation. A slight frost was observed in April only in Graves, Sauternes and on the right bank in the low-lying terroirs. After the long dry period in 2015, the soils had recovered and were able to form a water reservoir in the subsoil, which would prove to be particularly helpful for the subsequent dry phase. In the wet part of the growing season it was important to catch the right moment for spraying against mildew and other fungal diseases. Anyone who missed the boat in terms of the right time to launch a counter-attack suffered the consequences accordingly. During this phase, every winemaker was afraid that this vintage would be weak and watered-down. Fortunately, the flowering period occurred during a warm time window without any rain between June 2 and 11, so that the growth of the fruits proved to be very uniform. After the Brexit decision in the United Kingdom, the rain stopped on June 20 and the temperatures rose within 24 hours from 19°C to 33°C. It now



gradually became extremely dry and hot, but without the peak temperatures of the sweltering year of 2003. Between June 20 and the reviving rain of September 13, only 25 mm of precipitation was measured at Mérignac airport during these 85 days. July was not yet too warm, although the August brought 26% more hours of sunshine than normal and two heat waves between the 12th and 16th and the 22nd and 27th. Many vines on water-permeable soils, as well as the young vines, now started to become blocked. However, only on a few surfaces did the leaves turn yellow as a consequence or fall to the ground, so that the quality of the grapes suffered only to a small extent. Only in the northern Médoc was the drought stress less extreme due to the proximity to the Atlantic ocean, which especially helped the appellations of Pauillac and St.-Estèphe. Old vines resisted the hot weather better, especially if a subsoil such as clay had good water storage capacities. In order to help the plants during the dry period, resourceful vintners such as those at Château Lafleur in Pomerol had reduced the surface of the leaves without cutting them. If

leaves are removed during this phase, the energy would be transferred to regrowing the leaves rather than saving the vine itself and the grapes from the drought. The harvesting of the dry white wines was started as always at Château Haut-Brion in Pessac on September 1st, while Sauvignon and Sémillon grapes from later maturing terroirs were brought in by the end of the month. The autumn weather came on September 13, with temperatures falling from 30-35°C to 20-25°C. During the night a total of 30-50 mm of precipitation also fell, which had a revitalising



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and Thomas Boxberger-von Schaabner*

effect on many vines. At the beginning of October it was then possible to harvest the first Merlots until around the 15th in all areas of Bordeaux. Then it was the turn of the Cabernets to be harvested under excellent conditions. Depending on the variety, each terroir and individual parcels reacted very differently to the difficult growth conditions. The winemaker had to react to this individually and with the corresponding level of detail, determining the ideal time to carry out the harvest on the basis of an educated guess. For this reason it is almost impossible to make an accurate general statement on the quality of the individual appellations. The greater the degree of detail and accuracy with which the various aspects of the harvest and fermentation were processed, the more the Grand Vin was able to benefit in the final blends. The slow growth of the grapes resulted in homogeneous maturation of the tannins in both, the skins and pips of the red grapes, as a result of which some producers were able to report the best level of phenolic maturity ever. The yields were mostly high, with records being broken in some cases. Interestingly, the grapes had a larger number of smaller grapes than usual in each bunch, while the skins were thick. The vineyards working with organic and biodynamic methods had a harvest which was around 20% smaller than a normal yield in most cases. The majority of the best grapes were clean and healthy when harvested. Due to the thickness of the skins, the extraction process for the red musts had to be gentle. Most of the cellar masters therefore significantly extended the maceration stage and reduced the frequency of extraction with remontage (pumping over the cap of the pomace [cap]), pigeage (mechanical submergence of the cap) and delestage (separation of the cap and the must). The content of polyphenols is therefore significantly higher than in 2015. In contrast, the alcohol levels in 2016 was generally lower. At Château Palmer, for example, it is 1.2% below the level of 2015, although the 2016 version has turned out to be significantly fuller and more powerful. Most of the primeurs presented themselves as being very accessible and round in the tastings, and one would have liked to take many of these young wines along to dinner. That was amazing!

THE VARIETIES

For the third year in succession, the Merlot variety is significantly less aromatic than usual: In 2014 the cold summer was to blame, whereas in 2015 and 2016 the Merlots suffered from the dryness and heat. Anyone who carried out the harvest a little later in 2016 obtained an intensively structured wine with little core aroma and the sweetness of dark berry extract in the background instead of the red berry-cherry Merlot component with its fleshy fullness in the front. For this reason, wines from St. Emilion and Pomerol are mostly more aromatic if more Cabernet Franc has been processed in the assemblage with Merlot. Pure Merlots can have the effect of being a bit hollow in the middle. On the other hand, there were also vintners who produced very excellent, expressive and typical Merlots. Denis Durantou from Château l'Eglise-Clinet even spoke of the "Revenge of the Merlot" in 2016, after the Cabernets had often dominated in the previous years. The hand-picked lovers of Château Pétrus do not have to worry either! Although there are not very many, there are nevertheless a few counter-examples to the current weak phase of the Merlot! This also shows that 2016 is certainly a year of contradictions, which may be attributable to the excessive rain at the beginning of the season and the subsequent hot dry phase. In general it was observed that the decision not to carry out a green harvest (vendange verte) during the dry period in the summer and an early harvest brought some advantages. Cabernet Sauvignon – and to a lesser extent Cabernet Franc – therefore again dominate the aromas of the new vintage in Bordeaux. As expected, they were expressed most beautifully in Pauillac and St.-Estèphe. Here it was possible to produce great wines which have an incredible charisma, with a powerful structure and fine tannins, without being fat or heavy. As in 2015, it was observed that the grape varieties of Petit Verdot and vMalbec have been particularly successful over the past few years. They provided the wines with outstanding depth and darkfruit aromatics, even if the proportion in the final blend is only small. In Margaux in particular, the wines benefited from the small addition of Petit Verdot. Carmenère is also enjoying growing interest among winemakers, which leads to the question: Is climate change bringing a renaissance of Bordeaux's old grape varieties?



Among the white varieties, the Sauvignon was much better able to cope with the changes in the weather. The Sémillon suffered more from the drought and proved to be less aromatic and rather dull. The dry whites are rather full, linear and with clear fruit aromas, displaying a good structure, albeit without any great complexity in many cases. 2016 will not be a leading vintage in terms of bite or breed either. The sweet wines are of a similarly homogeneous quality level, full-bodied, with exotic fruit components, juicy and ripe. Here too, the best producers have not quite achieved the level of their own peak vintages. A new and highly interesting segment among the wines from Sauternes and Barsac are the dry and 'semi-dry' qualities. Here, a consumption-oriented, modern clientele is being addressed in order to generate a counter-pole to the weakening demand for sweet wines worldwide. One very positive aspect is that all of the white wine qualities, from dry to sweet, are very drinkable and inviting in the 2016 vintage for an early consumption.

CELLARING POTENTIAL

As already stated, a vintage such as that in 2016 has never been seen before in Bordeaux. It is therefore not possible to base any advice on empirical values in this case. The wines were all quite open and inviting, with many of them even being very drinkable in their youth. It can therefore certainly be assumed that the 2016 vintage is very likely to be readily accessible very soon after bottling. The tannin structures are excellent, with lively acidity and excellent freshness, which in turn indicates good cellaring potential. Here too, the decisive factor will presumably be whether the wines have enough extract sweetness and back aroma in their finish. In general, rather than having a particularly fruit-driven core aroma, the vintage tends to be more on the structured side. If all of the components come together in a long finish with high density and length, the wines are very likely to age well. However, if the last element in the aftertaste is missing, the ripened wines may appear to be dull and dry. Personally, I would prefer to enjoy the white wines during their youth while they are still charming, as well the sweet wines should not be kept too long maybe.

DIVERSITY OF OPINION

In general, I noticed that the samples which were tasted directly on the estate generally showed better than during the panel tastings among the négociants, Syndicates or the Union Grand Cru. Two wine tasters who I know personally, and whose opinions I appreciate, both gave Château Angelus not a top-rating during the general tasting at the château, although when I tasted it at the journalist tasting event on the air-conditioned upper floor I found it to be the best St.-Emilion of the vintage. I therefore assume that with many wines produced in 2016 there will be strongly divergent opinions and impressions between the tasters and critics.



Morgens 8:30 Uhr: Château l'Evangile, Pomerol

PURCHASING STRATEGY

The best producers are convinced that they are holding one of the greatest vintages of the past in their hands. For this reason it is possible to assume that the prices for the top wines will increase. To compensate for this, there are enough less expensive alternatives with outstanding qualities in the medium Grand Cru range. The second wines were often produced from the grape material which had been rejected due to it having suffered from drought and sunburn, so that in general I tend to advise against purchasing this less expensive variant. The old rule of purchasing "small wines or even second wines in a great year" should not therefore be blindly followed. Some of the simple

qualities are outstanding. It is therefore worth purchasing the 2016 Bordeaux wines without restriction, provided that there is plenty of information, choice and advice available.

ADVICE

When purchasing high-quality wines with cellaring potential, good advice is one of the most important elements. After all, you will certainly want to take great pleasure in them at a later time, instead of falling victim to the wild promises of some celebrated wine critic. Far too often, the reviews of famous critics for me are difficult to comprehend and the wines do not confirm the given ratings if they are drunken in a mature stadium.

I hereby assure you of my sincere and reliable assessments. After all, this was the 24th vintage that I had had the opportunity to taste wines from the barrel in Bordeaux. I very much hope that you will enjoy my selections in the future. Let us share this great passion with one another.

affectionate regards, your
Thomas Boxberger-von Schaabner

