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FOOD

The Innate, Ageless Appeal of Good Bordeaux

Wines of The Times

By ERIC ASIMOV OCT. 20, 2016

Nobody wants to talk about Bordeaux much these days, except for the people in the Bordeaux trade, who spend a lot of time discussing why nobody is talking about it.

The issues with the region are complicated, but it basically boils down to this: The good wines cost a lot of money; its English-speaking audience is aging; the dominant grapes, cabernet sauvignon and merlot, are out of fashion relatively speaking; and the region, unlike, say, Burgundy, lacks charismatic representatives to talk up its appeal.

I understand why people have been turned off Bordeaux. Nonetheless, I love the wines and always have. I believe that if the burden of its reputation, now frumpy, could be ignored, many people who give the wines little thought would love them as well.

Now, let's be clear: Bordeaux still sells a lot of wine, and it still has its ardent fans. Some of those fans are trophy hunters who have plenty of disposable income to chase first-growth Bordeaux or highly rated bottles. Others simply understand its

inherent goodness and cherish the experience of drinking a fine bottle, preferably with a good decade or more of age.

Wine lovers middle-aged and older who cut their teeth on Bordeaux (I'm one of them) have never completely lost their respect for the region or their taste for the wines. It's primarily younger wine drinkers, who had many more choices early on, for whom Bordeaux is irrelevant.

The Bordeaux trade has worked hard to demonstrate to this group that good, inexpensive Bordeaux exists. This is indeed true. But it's also true that many inexpensive bottles come from uninteresting terroirs and, even at their best, are not so good. In addition, those cheap bottles that do rise to the level of decent generally lack the immediate fruity appeal of, for example, an Argentine malbec.

Perhaps the \$20-and-under realm is not the best place to look for Bordeaux. I wouldn't dream of telling marketers how to do their business, but I would contend that spending somewhat more money for a bottle with good provenance can do more to demonstrate the potential beauty of Bordeaux than selling boatloads of cheap but undistinguished bottles.

In an informal test of this proposition, the wine panel recently sampled 20 bottles of Bordeaux from the 2011 vintage. We restricted our selection to the Médoc and Pessac-Léognan on the left bank of the Gironde. These wines are more expensive than those from lesser terroirs, but the region is the source for Bordeaux's classic profile of relatively austere wines that are primarily blends of cabernet sauvignon and merlot.

For the tasting, Florence Fabricant and I were joined by Amanda Smeltz, the head sommelier at Bar Boulud and Boulud Sud near Lincoln Center, and Kimberly Prokoshyn, head sommelier at Rebelle in NoLiTa.

We chose the 2011 vintage because, although it was a complicated year, the wines were pretty good and readily available. What's more, it was overshadowed by the highly touted 2009 and 2010 vintages.

In my experience, the best place to look for values is in a good vintage that

comes right after a year that has been deemed great. The 2001 Bordeaux vintage is a classic example.

Along with its built-in millennial appeal, the 2000 vintage was hugely hyped by many critics. Bordeaux fans salivated after these wines regardless of costs. They paid far more per bottle than they would have for 2001s, a vintage that I actually prefer to 2000. The 2001s were appealing at an earlier age than the 2000s and, in many cases, are still preferable.

I don't mean to say that 2011 was a better vintage than '10 or '09. But it's cheaper, and while many bottles require further aging, they do remind me a bit of the 2001s in that they will be ready to drink sooner than their predecessors.

The tasting affirmed my sense that the 2011s offer a lot of pleasure. The best of these wines reminded me that Bordeaux excels at the classic mission of all wines: to refresh and to be a great drink with food. The fabled austerity of these wines may be an obstacle as an aperitif or for drinking in a bar, but with food, what otherwise may seem astringent comes off as cool, brisk and fresh.

These qualities derive from the excellent acidity in many of these wines. We all agreed that the best showed a good balance of tannins and acidity, the elements that provide structure to a wine. The top wines were structured yet fresh, with nuanced aromas and flavors that were fruity, floral, herbal and mineral.

We rejected wines that had lost the tension between ripeness and acidity, showing sweet and candied flavors. We also found more than a few wines that were dominated by oaky aromas and flavors, and marred by the bitterness of oak tannins.

As a matter of course, we put a \$100 limit on bottles selected for our blind tasting. This ruled out many of the top names.

We also eliminated second labels. Most good producers offer second labels and sometimes third, wines that for one reason or another weren't used in the top cuvée. They can be good, and are less expensive. But I always have the nagging feeling that they are not great values, especially those that trade on top names.

Our No. 1 wine was the Smith Haut Lafitte from Pessac-Léognan, the northern

part of the historic Graves region. It was a lovely bottle, fresh and lively, with complex flavors that included flowers, herbs and minerals. No. 2 was the Montrose from St.-Estèphe, bright, earthy and intense.

These both were among the most expensive bottles in the tasting, at \$100 and \$80. For the vast majority of people, they simply confirm the notion that Bordeaux is for the wealthy, even though the \$100 Smith Haut Lafitte 2011 is far less than the \$175 you might pay for the 2010 vintage.

I can't defend Bordeaux prices except to say that the benchmark wine regions exist in a different world. You could liken Smith Haut Lafitte and Montrose to premier cru Burgundies or vintage Champagnes, or even Manhattan real estate. Their audience may be the 1 percent, but enough people pay the going rate, effectively putting them beyond the means of most others.

Fortunately, alternatives exist. Our No. 4 bottle, the Potensac from Médoc, was our best value at \$30. The vineyard is outside the boundaries of more elevated communes like Pauillac, St.-Julien or Margaux, but the stony, fresh, lightly tannic wine gives a clear taste of what the region is all about. Likewise, our No. 5 bottle, the Mongravey from Margaux, was rich and intense, yet harmonious with plenty of stuffing. Mongravey is little known, which accounts for the \$32 price.

Other wines to keep in mind include the earthy, spicy Grand-Puy-Lacoste from Pauillac; the deep, nuanced Domaine de Chevalier from Pessac-Léognan; the ripe, structured Malescot St.-Exupéry from Margaux; and the stony, floral La Tour Carnet from Haut-Médoc.

At \$40 to \$70, none of these wines are inexpensive. Yet the region's historical importance and the continuing quality of its wines are worth the occasional splurge, if only to create a mental context for Bordeaux and Bordeaux-style wines.

That speaks to their intellectual attraction, but they appeal to the pleasure center as well. Bordeaux would not have centuries of history behind it if it did not.

Tasting 2011 Bordeaux

★★★ Château Smith Haut Lafitte Pessac-Léognan 2011 \$100

Fresh and lively, with pretty aromas and flavors of violets, red fruits, spices and minerals. (Maisons Marques & Domaines, Oakland, Calif.)

★★★ Château Montrose St.-Estèphe 2011 \$80

Bright and earthy, with intense aromas and flavors of flowers and dark red fruits. (Allied Beverage Group, Carlstadt, N.J.)

★★★ Château Grand-Puy-Lacoste Pauillac 2011 \$60

Rich, ripe and high-toned, with earthy, floral aromas and flavors of spicy dark fruit. (Allied Beverage Group)

Best Value: ★★★ Château Potensac Médoc 2011 \$30

Lightly tannic and fresh, with stony, lingering flavors of flowers and spicy red fruit. (Wineberry America, New York)

★★½ Château Mongravey Margaux 2011 \$32

Deep and harmonious, with flavors of ripe red fruit, flowers and a touch of well-integrated oak. (Winebow, New York)

★★½ Domaine de Chevalier Pessac-Léognan 2011 \$68

Lightly tannic, with long, lingering, earthy flavors of purple fruits and graphite. (Monsieur Touton Selection, New York)

★★½ Château Malescot St.-Exupéry Margaux 2011 \$65

Inky and rich, with flavors of flowers and minerals; needs aging for the elements to integrate. (Le Reine Importing, New York)

★★½ Château La Tour Carnet Haut-Médoc 2011 \$45

Aromas of purple fruits and violets, with stony, herbal flavors. (Le Reine Importing)

★★½ **Château Haut-Bages Libéral Pauillac 2011** \$39

Focused and pure, with flavors of red fruits, tobacco and herbs. (Frederick Wildman & Sons, New York)

★★½ **Château D'Issan Margaux 2011** \$53

Potent aromas of dark red fruits, with focused, earthy, bittersweet flavors. (Frederick Wildman & Sons)

Recipe Pairing: **Fettuccine With Merguez and Mint Pesto**

These wines are well bred and can be counted on to deliver complexity, a sleek mouth feel often bolstered by tannins, balanced fruit and touches of smoke or spice. To justify their longstanding reputation at the table, be assured that the wines of Bordeaux can flatter a long menu. Lamb is a classic partner, but it's not necessary to tiptoe chateau-style with a rack or roast leg. These wines, especially the youthful examples in our tasting, are not too high-toned to go someplace bold and rustic like Morocco. For this pasta dish, I opted for the North African lamb sausage, merguez, to which I added mint, garlic, lemon, sun-dried tomatoes, olives and a dusting of ground cumin. Thanks to some pasta water, these flavors all came together admirably to dress the pasta and suit the wine. **FLORENCE FABRICANT**