



Bordeaux Futures: 2024 Vintage Report from Flickinger Wine

Results of en Primeur tastings and visits week of 4/13/25

The early reports coming from Bordeaux, and indeed from all of France, regarding the 2024 vintage have been generally negative, with rainy, wet weather during the spring flowering and the fall harvest featuring prominently in most descriptions.

To be sure, these were huge issues for the producers in Bordeaux, but based on our tasting of several hundred wines during the past week, it is safe to say that the actual results are much more diverse, with a lot of wines that are thin, dilute and possessing excessive unripe tannins, but also quite a few wines that reflect the unique conditions of the year through their elegance, balance, and refined tannins.

The vintage is marked not so much by variations by appellation, but by variation according to producer and the quality of their terroir, and perhaps even more so the ability of a producer to marshal and dedicate resources to shepherd their vines and grapes through the growing season. This, accompanied by ruthless and effectively sorting at harvest time, separated the successes from the failures. The chateaux that had the ability and determination to do the work and spend the money, showed results that are spectacular. The chateaux that could not, or would not, generally fell well short of that standard.

The Weather

A year's worth of rain fell on Bordeaux between September 2023 and March 2024, leaving vineyards well soaked as buds began to appear in late March. The wet vineyards made accessing the vines by traffic difficult during the following months, when multiple applications of the copper/sulfur spray (the only treatment for mildew permissible for organic and biodynamic viticulture) were absolutely necessary.

In fact, the repeated spraying required between rain showers (each of which washes the protective copper/sulfur spray off the vines) to stay ahead of the rampant mildew was the first test for a chateau's willingness and ability to stay in front of the problem. At Chateau la Gaffeliere, the vineyard manager told me that he and his team

worked every weekend during April, May and June. One measure of a chateau's ability to marshal resources was just this- having enough people and tractors on hand to spray the vines before the next rain washed the treatment off. It is much easier said than done, as even the chateaux that managed to treat their vines successfully lost a good percentage (up to 40%) of their crop due to the mildew.

Following the wet/rainy months of March and April, flowering took place in late May and early June, with the cool weather impacting pollination and the fruit set, which ended up extremely uneven in most cases. We were shown pictures at one chateau which showed grapes on the vine in July, with some berries round and purple, and other berries small and green- in the same bunch. Plenty of such *coulure* (flowers failing to turn into grapes) and *millerandage* (uneven fertilization of the grapes) was evident, foretelling the need for super strict selection later on.

Subsequently, July and August proved to be both warm and dry, which certainly was the salvation of the vintage. In fact, rain in July and August was a solid 50% below the norm across Bordeaux, to the point where many vines started to show hydric stress, whereby the plants stop photosynthesizing in order to preserve energy for survival. Different terroirs, however, had different abilities to manage the dryness, with the most successful terroirs living up to their reputations, with water reserves sufficient to prevent the vines from stopping their maturation. Temperatures during the month were pretty much exactly the norm of the past 30 years, and fortunately there were no heat spikes that would have exacerbated hydric stress in the vines. The mildew battle abated during these dry months, giving both the grapes and the vineyard workers a much needed break.

As important as the hot and dry weather was, it was accompanied by lower-than average sunlight during July and August, which had the effect of causing smaller, less fleshy berries. The impact of that are wines with less weight than in hotter/riper/sunnier years, and lower alcohols due to less sugar. Vineyard managers battled this with canopy management to increase the grapes' exposures to the sun, but again this required substantial resources to execute such plans quickly over large vineyards.

Late August to mid-September brought more rain, in the form of big storms interspersed with dry, sunny days. Again, terroir played a huge role in managing the excess moisture; the better terroirs successfully drained off the water that would otherwise dilute the grapes. Harvesting decisions were tense as the threat of yet more mold loomed. Harvesting took place later than usual, and often over the course of two or even three weeks, but again the chateaux that had the wherewithal to take risk, and held out until the rains ended, were well rewarded. Most of the grapes were in by the tenth day of October.

The Winemaking

With grapes in hand, the winemaking work began. First, the wines were sorted during the process of harvesting, with unripe berries/bunches left on the ground. In the chai, manual sorting tables required dozens of people, instead of a handful, with once again the better-resourced chateaux having the ability to dedicate manpower to the task.

Many also used optical sorting instead of or in addition to the manual sorting, and a select few more utilized their investment in densimetric sorting machines, which permit the chateau to create a 'bath' comprised of water, sugar and sulfur, through which the grapes are passed, with the denser grapes sinking in the solution, and the less dense grapes floating up to be rejected from the final blend.

At Carmes Haut Brion, we were shown a photo of a bunch of meticulously sorted, absolutely beautiful, ripe grapes...and were told that 50% were rejected as a result of the densimetric sorting process.

The net result were yields that were the smallest since 1991, averaging 35 hectoliters per hectare across Bordeaux. No one we spoke with mentioned yields anywhere near their long-term average.

The Wines

The wines we tasted generally fell into two categories. First were the wines that showed light aromas and very little fruit on first sip, a short life on the mid-palate that faded quickly, to be replaced by an onslaught of generally unripe tannins and acidity, unintegrated and out of balance with the amount of available fruit.

The second category were wines from the best terroirs, from the better-resourced producers, which were subject to super-strict selections. These wines showed beautifully perfumed aromas, wonderfully delicate, lighter-weight fruit on the palate, and a healthy dose of very ripe tannins and balancing acidic structure. We tasted no wines over 13.5% alcohol; most were 12.5-13%, harkening back to a prior age in Bordeaux. But, that age did not have the technology, *savoir faire*, and resources available that today's winemakers do, and the best 2024 wines are elegant, pretty, non-blockbuster wines that are frankly fascinating contrasts to the wines produced in the warmer 'great' years of recent past. They are fresh and refreshing, they will drink sooner than their recent counterparts, and they will give tremendous pleasure without causing the headaches that accompany 15% alcohol blockbusters.

The Market

Lastly, and very importantly for consumers, is the economic backdrop of this vintage. Demand for fine wine has been weak since early 2023, and the chateaux of Bordeaux have frankly made a bit of a mess for themselves with their relentless appetite for price increases over the past decade. They face a market that is today weakened by two wars in Europe and the Middle East, economic stagnation in Asia, and an uncertain (at best) economic outlook in the US. Negotiants collectively have excess inventory from the past three vintages and are holding stock that they are finding expensive to finance. Negotiants are going to want to sell through the 2024 vintage, as very few will have the financial liquidity to invest heavily in this vintage.

At the same time, chateaux face the dilemma of addressing market reality with their pricing, at the same time dealing with a 30% drop in yield from 2023, and lower prices. Last year, the 2023 vintage sold successfully mostly for the very top names among the classified growths and their equivalents; many in the next tier of quality sold very little. The early word from Bordeaux is that the chateaux realize this, and intend to

price the 2024s in a way that will be attractive to the market. Of course we have heard such pledges before, and whether they come true remains to be seen. But having followed the en Primeur process for as long as we have, it's safe to say that the prospect of attractive pricing on some very, very attractive, interesting and unique wines has our attention and we will be making our recommendations accordingly when the campaign starts in earnest on Wednesday the 23rd of April.