



HOUSE OF TOWNEND

FAMILY WINE MERCHANTS SINCE 1906

**BORDEAUX
2016**

EN PRIMEUR

BORDEAUX - AN OVERVIEW

Bordeaux has a habit of delivering great vintages in pairs. Think of 1989 and 1990, 1995 and 1996, 2009 and 2010. What makes Bordeaux all the more fascinating is that successive great vintages tend to have totally different personalities.

Strictly speaking the 2015 vintage does not fall into the category of 'great' as it did not offer the same uniformity of quality across all appellations. The late season rains saw 150ml of rain in the northern Médoc, specifically in the commune of St. Estèphe which led to dilution of the grapes. That said, there were some truly great wines produced in St Julien and Margaux in particular, and also in on the left bank in Pomerol and St Emilion. Wines from these areas are amongst the very best.

The 2016 vintage is already being lauded as a great vintage. The cynics and critical observers will smile wryly in the knowledge that the Bordelais are able to claim greatness without cracking a smile of their own, given half the chance! Our annual excursion to the vineyards of Bordeaux to visit the top Châteaux and attend the UGC (Union des Grands Crus) tastings is our opportunity to make our own independent assessment of how good the wines really are. This year would be the first time that my daughter, Georgia Townend, 5th generation and currently working in the commercial department of Bordeaux Négociant, Maison Sichel (also owner of Château Angludet and co proprietor of Château Palmer), joined us on our tastings.

So after a week of intense tastings we have now had time to reflect and deliver our verdict. Rather than just describing it as a 'Great' vintage, we would prefer to label it as a 'Classic' Bordeaux vintage. This should put a wide smile on the face of the Claret lover. Charles Sichel refined this further by saying "we are on the best side of classicism". The wines are powerful with a remarkable intensity and tannin structure. They possess a delicious freshness and due to the warm temperatures (as opposed to hot) are lower in alcohol compared with 2015. This resulted in the aromas being a little subdued at the time of tasting compared to the same time last year when we were assessing the 2015 vintage; however they will develop with time. The lower alcohol has also allowed the red fruit characteristics to show themselves, as opposed to the distinct black fruit character of the 2015 vintage.

Currently the wines are tight, brooding and a little introvert, characteristics that are a pre-requisite for fine Claret. They are a great succession to the more extrovert, rich wines of 2015. The wines from the 2016 vintage are very suave, full of power and energy and will have a very long lifespan. Maybe the Bordelais are right to be somewhat smug!



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2016 - THE GROWING SEASON

2016 proved to be an exceptionally difficult year for winemaking in France, particularly in the northern areas with the Loire Valley, Chablis and Burgundy all suffering from extreme weather conditions. Somehow the area of Bordeaux was blessed by the Gods and we go into more detail on this in the 'Growing Season' section of this offer. Words such as 'miraculous' and 'crazy' were often used by the Châteaux owners when discussing the 2016 vintage, not because of how good it was, but to emphasise how lucky they were! Many weather bullets had been dodged! Yann Laudeho, winemaker at Château Smith Haut Lafitte, described it a "catastrophe that never happened".

The very wet winter proved to play a fundamental role in the success of this vintage. Between January and May it was particularly wet, with rainfall two to three times higher than the norm. Bud break took place in late March, but by late April and early May there were serious concerns as to how the poor weather would affect the flowering of the vine. Then a ten day period of beautiful weather allowed a very swift and homogenous flowering. Phew!

The central theme to the growing season was dryness. Remember, great vintages are made in dry years in Bordeaux, not hot ones. Light is far more important than heat. From the 20th June until September 13th there was no rain.

From late June the weather was perfect with long, warm and sunny days yet not too hot. The lack of rain during the summer period caused some concern, particularly for the younger vines that were suffering from hydric stress. Gentle stress is good for the vine, as it stops growing and the photosynthesis is focused on the ripening of the grapes. Maturation is then optimised. However, too much stress causes the vine to close down. The very wet winter had replenished the moisture in the soils, with those vineyards with a high element of clay benefiting more.

By early September it was getting serious but on the 13th a brief storm arrived with perfect timing, refreshing the grapes. This limited rain was much needed, before a further period of fine weather allowed the grapes to continue ripening. The dry and sunny days were complimented by plummeting temperature in the evenings, sometimes as low as 3C, which maintained the acidities at a high level.

Harvest took place in mid to late October. Some Merlot pots were showing early signs of rot and so were picked before they were phenolically ripe. Selection of the Merlot grape was very important in this respect. The Cabernet Sauvignon in particular performed spectacularly – very small berries, high in concentration with low PH readings. For this reason the wines of the Médoc are heavily dominated by Cabernet Sauvignon this vintage.

After a very testing growing season the winemakers set to work with the knowledge that the weather Gods had been on their side. All was set for something very special.



2016 - THE WINES

There is a real sense that Bordeaux is moving on from the Robert Parker inspired era of big, rich and alcoholic wines and reverting back to the more classic, traditional style of Claret. This is a subtle shift but a notable one nevertheless. The weather conditions in 2016 have perhaps accentuated this return to 'Classic Bordeaux'.

Our tastings revealed a greater uniformity in quality as compared to its predecessor, the dry and warm summer being enjoyed by all communes in the Médoc. The real winner in 2016 is the Cabernet Sauvignon which benefitted from the long periods of warm sunshine and light with harvest not taking place until mid October. There is a high proportion of Cabernet Sauvignon in the blends of the top Châteaux and this is always a good sign of a strong vintage.

The Médoc has produced wines that are powerful and intense with great definition. The tannin structures are quite superb and the wines are beautifully textured. This is enhanced by a fragrance and freshness that provides a streak of elegance and polish. An important characteristic of 2016 is the lower levels of alcohol which enables the red fruit characteristics to stand out, adding character to the more dominant black fruits.

Whereas in 2015 it was Margaux that stole the show, there is a strong case for Pauillac being the commune to follow in 2016. This commune has produced some outstanding wines. Those who love the aristocratic, decadent, complex and smouldering wines of this commune are in for a real treat. They will no doubt be in very high demand. However, there are many great wines produced in the other major communes, St Julien in particular.

Pessac-Léognan is often overlooked, but this appellation often produces superb wines and this vintage has delivered some sensational wines – ignore it at your peril!

Over on the left bank there were concerns that the wines may be a little overblown, the dry weather causing the Merlot to suffer and rot setting in. The clay soils proved their worth as our tastings showed some outstanding wines from St Emilion, whilst Pomerol has performed particularly well. There are many wines with real substance and complexity. Alexandre Thienpont of Vieux Château Certan simply described it as "Haut Cuisine!"

