France, Bordeaux: Make Bordeaux Great (Again)
En Primeur 2016
By Neal Martin

The estate manager paces the parquet floor of his re-re-refurbished office, stares blankly out of the window to survey a sky so grey, so leaden, that it either augurs 2013 (Part II) or the end of the world... same thing, basically. He checks the date on his Demeter-approved, hemp-lined biodynamic calendar. 17 June 2016. His heart sinks as the rain pitter-patters on the windowpane presaging another downpour. 17 June 2016. At least in six days time, the E.U. vote will be out of the way. Markets have been stymied by uncertainty. He needs a stable currency, calm waters. Once the Remain vote romps to victory, he can at least cross one thing off his worry list.

That morning he had to escort another deluded N.R.P. (New Robert Parker) to look at their vines. His 4x4 had almost been swept away by the flood. All it needed was a plague of rats and a crappy Wine Advocate review for the devastation to be complete. He sat silently in a trance; rain pounding the roof, the frantic window wipers doing their metronomic best. The N.R.P. whipped out his smartphone and started tweeting live to his six followers (including three bots and himself). As soon as the rain petered out, he returned him to his grimy two-man tent pitched next to a flooded ditch in Fronsac and then hurried back to the château.

He sits down at his computer, whose screensaver depicts frost-devastated vineyards in Chablis. The image of desolation makes him feel better each morning. Schadenfreude never hurt anyone. His telephone rings. It’s his boss, currently front-page news for axing half his workforce, teetotal in real life but a connoisseur/dipsomaniac according to his PR department. That morning a market report landed on his desk detailing a stomach-churning decrease in current value. No surprise. Against his advice, marketing had added an extra zero to his recommended price last year, which funnily enough equates precisely to the number of cases sold.

“I want you to find every hard copy of that report and burn it,” his boss bellows down the line. “Yes Sir. But...”

“And I want 100 points. I don’t care how many optical sorting machines it takes. In any case, I thought you could pre-program these things with intended score? Punch it in. One-zero-zero. Easy.”

“We are making extra efforts with our biodynamic program. We are due certification next year and...”

“Screw that hippy drivel. Biodynamics is yesterday. Less pray, more spray.”

“But we have just bought the horses, Rudolf and Steiner...”

“They’re dog food.”

There follows a rant about shareholders’ expectations and sullied brand image; whether the UGC holding the journalist tasting at the roller-disco affected scores; the higher score for “Château Nemesis” despite last year’s specially commissioned vintage poem, the latest N.R.P to request a vertical back to 1945, plus poached eggs in the morning during primeur and their latest recruitment—a hot-shot consultant whose existence is only verified by his monthly invoice. He begins to daydream as rain lashes the window. What did his manically depressed vineyard manager say? Almost 700 millimeters since January. That’s when Noah started building his ark. He fantasizes about a huge golden tap beyond the clouds. God is beckoning him to float up.
Angels pluck their harps. All he needs to do is turn the tap. The rain will stop and not a droplet will fall until the final berry is tucked up in bed with a goodnight story called “Fermentation.” What are the odds of that happening?

The Growing Season

2016... It was wet. Then it was dry. Then they picked. This is the growing season in a nutshell. Skip the next part if you want the minutiae. The remarkable feature about 2016 was the almost meteorological volte-face—the manner in which incessant rain abruptly stopped and clement conditions prevailed. That golden tap in the sky... it does exist! Discussing the 2016 growing season with winemakers several months afterwards, I found many still scratching their heads and asking whether that really happened, before breaking into a Cheshire cat grin.

Part 1: Le Splish-Splish! – Let’s rewind to the previous year. As Baptiste Guinaudeau at Lafleur pertinently reminded me, the last six months of 2015 had been particularly dry, December unseasonably dry and warm. So when the heavens opened and almost drowned Bordeaux with around 233 millimeters of rainfall in January 2016, a figure not seen since 1920, the Bordelais were wet but not particularly concerned, even if it did delay pruning. However, nobody realized that this sodden January presaged six months of constant rain or to use the French vernacular... le splish splas. From March there was a conveyor belt of low depression systems. Some feared a premature bud-burst, ergo a risk of frost damage, however the cooling effects of the sodden ground retarded bud-burst so that most buds appeared after the warm weekend of 26/27 March, and high nitrogen levels in the soil—also due to the rain—ensured that bud-burst was incredibly regular. April and May was inclement with fluctuating temperatures and continuing wet conditions, the opposite of 2015, prompting fears of a sequel to 2013 as wanted as a sequel to Titanic.

Whilst Burgundy and Chablis in particular were being annihilated by frost and hail, Bordeaux was spared save for some isolated problems in mid-April. May continued to pile on the pressure, Mother Nature at its capricious best with wild temperature swings and random hailstorms. Edouard Moueix showed me an astonishing photo that he took from Château Belair-Monange as an ominous sheet of hail approached from Entre-Deux-Mers. This aside, other French wine regions must look upon Bordeaux with envy. Livelihoods were not destroyed. Winemakers did not face annihilation of their vineyard. The first major test for a vintage is flowering and at first glance, these wildly fluctuating temperatures and unrelenting showers did not bode well.

This is where the Bordelais enjoyed their first stroke of luck, thanks to a break in the rainfall between 3 and 11 June (eight days later than average), whereby the weather remained fine and daytime temperatures hovered between 21 and 28 degrees Celsius. It was here that approximately 80% of the flowering took place. Anything after that suffered coulure and millerandage, but that was minor compared to other French wine regions. Somebody was obviously smiling upon Bordeaux. Whatever happened next there was at least the possibility of a large crop, but what they did not know was the eventual quality.

When I visited Bordeaux in the second week of June, I found winemakers in a pessimistic mood. Between January and June, over 700 millimeters of rain had fallen and the weather had not improved sufficiently to allay fears of another 2013. Some vineyards were clearly soaked to the bone, tractors finding it difficult to maneuver through the vines. One or two winemakers discreetly trialing biodynamics discreetly abandoned their project and sprayed their vines against rot. The handful remaining faithful to Steiner with small vineyards sprayed by hand. Many had taken preemptive measures and sprayed their vineyards in advance, although they had another challenge in the form of grape worm, so virulent that some of the sexual confusion tags were unable to control it. In May, many in Bordeaux seemed to be resigned to their fate, as if 2016
came to redress the balance of fortune after 2015. As Philippe Blanc, estate manager at Château Beychevelle so eloquently put it: “We were in the shit.”

I posted on social media my perilous drive through Pomerol on 17 June, a month that witnessed over 100 millimeters of rain in some areas. It felt like those 100 millimeters fell on me that day. Driving up from the village of Catusseau towards Clinet, the drainage system could not contain the deluge, and swathes of lower-lying vineyards were under inches of turbid water. One winemaker, marooned in his home, waved for me to go back because it was too dangerous. Would my car be swept away by rising waters? Should I phone and say my final farewell to my kids? Do I have life insurance? What I did not know, nor any winemakers, was that this represented the final throw of the dice in terms of Mother Nature banjaxing the growing season. She had thrown all the obstacles in the way of winemakers in the first half of the season. She was out of weapons.

**Part 2: Il Fait du Soleil** – On 20 June, the rain stopped and the sun returned. Now this is where my account of the growing season might deviate from those that simply copy and paste vintage summary reports. I have read that the mercury shot up from 19 to 33 degrees Celsius virtually overnight and suddenly everyone was bronzing themselves in Arcachon and donning Prada flip-flops. However, it was not like that. It seems more likely that the rain stopped and the sun came out, but summer and its attendant high temperatures did not arrive until mid-July. (The saint of Sauternes, Bill Blatch, cites this change in condition to the contemporaneous transition from El Nino to La Nina). The question was how long would these benevolent climes last? The answer to that was just as surprising as the change in weather itself, insofar that it lasted until the harvest had been completed. In terms of viticulture, that means forever.

There was nary a drop of rain from 20 June. I remember two or three al fresco dinners at the end of that month under balmy conditions, memories of flooded Pomerol now attributed to a different growing season. Of course, now the Bordelais understood why God had deluged them with so much rain for the first six months of the year: to ensure that vines’ throats did not go dry. If it had not been for that torrential rain, then you would have witnessed widespread hydric stress, browning or dropped leaves by the end of the season. However, inspecting vineyards myself just prior to picking, vineyards were very different to those of say 2003 when I remember driving through Pomerol and seeing so many vines dropping their entire canopy due to stress. Not knowing how long these clement conditions would last, vineyard managers had to make an important decision, whether to strip back some of the foliage to enhance ventilation and avert risk of disease, or maintain cover crops between rows to absorb moisture. It is like a game of poker. Was the weather bluffing? As it turned out, those that did practice effeuillage or leaf plucking ended up regretting that decision, since they were unknowingly exposing bunches to the sun without protection. Naturally, not a single winemaker admitted that. It was always “somebody else!” Fortunately, the staggered arrival of perfect weather conditions gave many vineyard managers a chance to be prudent, wait and see, pluck the leaves on one side to leave some protective cover. In any case, sunburn is easy to remedy without affecting quality.

*This shot was taken at Canon just before picking. You can see some shriveled berries on the sun-exposed side. These were snipped off or the bunch discarded at the sorting table.*
The statistics with respect to the dry conditions in the latter part of 2016 are remarkable. From 20 June to 13 September, 85 days, there was just 25 millimeters of rainfall (80% of the average). In Saint Estèphe there was just 5.5 millimeters of rain. Generally, there was an accretion of dryness and most crucially, every fortnight or so, there would be a brief nighttime shower that prevented vines from tipping over into stress or shutting down. Coupled with the plentiful water reserves, it kept the vines stressed but ticking over. Whilst July was close to average in terms of temperature, the pivotal month was August, not so much in terms of temperature, but in sunlight hours. Only four days saw the thermometer exceed 30 degrees Celsius and there was just 11.3 millimeters of rain. And put those sunglasses on, because there was 26% more sunlight hours than normal with two heatwaves between 12-16 and 22-27 August. These began to affect younger vines with shallower roots, but it was negligible compared to 2003 and in case, that is what Deuxième Vins are for, no?

This “bespoke” growing season ensured that véraison was more uniform than expected, thanks to two small showers on 30 July and 4 August recharging vines’ batteries to makes sure that the berries changed color. That said, Bill Blatch estimates that around one-fifth of the crop endured a prolonged véraison and as a consequence, this fruit did not achieve the same level of quality. Diurnal temperature variations that at their greatest could be between 17-19 degrees Celsius at night to 33-36 degrees Celsius during day, together preserved acidity levels and freshness, building anthocyanin levels that ended up higher than 2009 or 2015. The whites began to be picked on 1 September at Haut-Brion where its urban locale creates a slightly warmer microclimate, swiftly followed by other Pessac-Léognan estates.

There had been one abrupt change of season in 2016. The second occurred on 13 September, when summer declared that it had enough and passed the baton to autumn. It could not have been timed more perfectly. Nearly every winemaker admitted that they were suffering sleepless nights, worried by the lack of water at the end of August. Some leaves were curling upwards to protect themselves, turning brown or dropping off altogether. Vines were on the cusp of getting into real difficulties and there is no question that in some properties, they shut down and stymied ripeness levels that were sometimes never recovered.

This was taken at Petrus as harvest commenced. As you can see, hardly any brown leaves and plenty of green foliage.

However, this Godsend of rainfall that shimmied up from the Basque region changed the fortunes of the vintage, because up until that point it could have still been disastrous. Cue plummeting
temperatures. Overnight they fell by around 10-15 degrees Celsius. Say hello to the freshness and tension that suffuses many 2016s. But it was the rainfall that was most important because the 20-50 millimeters (the figure actually differs between adjacent properties!) immediately revivified the vines. The rain was not a deluge, but prolonged and constant, allowing it to penetrate the soils rather than run off, thereby expediting ripening particularly with respect to Cabernet on gravelly soils. Although doubtless you will read that winemakers look back on this as a Godsend, I can tell you that at the time, some were concerned that it could spoil the harvest, especially with respect to the earlier-picked Merlot. At its most beneficial, the rain eradicated pyrazines that could have afflicted vines, though in one or two cases it caused winemakers to blink when they had been anticipating a leisurely picking and went out with the pickers too early. One benefit of the hot July and August was that skins were thicker and therefore, there were few instances of split berries, which can particular afflict Merlot.

On 30 September, there was another 10-20 millimeters of rain. It’s not the date here that is important, but the day. It was a Friday. Now, who is going to give up their weekend, get out there and spray the vines to protect them from rot? If you had the kind of sponge-like soil that soaks up the water, then you had an advantage. If not, then the water just stayed in the vineyard and potentially created humid conditions that were perfect for rot. “I sprayed three times that weekend,” one Saint Emilion vigneron told me. “It saved us. I was amazed that there were not more people in the vineyard over the weekend.” At least the nights following this rain were cool. Most of the Merlot was picked between 3 and 7 October, the latest plucked on 15 October. The harvest for the Cabernet Sauvignon commenced on 15 to 16 October, as the wind veered to the south before petering out and rendering Bordeaux quite humid. This caused a few harvest managers to expedite the picking.

The Harvest

Usually I avoid visiting a wine region amidst harvest. I feel like a spare part. My presence is not needed in this crucial time, an unnecessary distraction. However, in 2016 I did visit Bordeaux at the behest of some properties to witness the commencement of the harvest and for a change, spectate vineyards that were hives of activity and wineries in action. The general atmosphere was relaxed and positive. The spirit of a vineyard is an intangible that affects the quality of the wine. When positive, it directly enhances efficiency, improves working practices and just infuses “je ne sais quoi” into the picked fruit. Vineyard managers want pickers with smiles on faces and (metaphorical) smiles on berries. Visiting Château Mouton-Rothschild on 27 September, the team had just broached the young Merlot under the watchful eye of Philippe Dhalluin, whilst at Montrose, they had opted to just delay a couple of days and the winery was eerily deserted. Chipping over to the Right Bank, Nicolas Audebert was overseeing the incoming Merlot at Canon, though he had time to show me some of the bunches that had suffered sunburn (grillure) on one side. He demonstrated its simple remedy, snipping off the side with shriveled berries to leave a perfectly healthy bunch. Of course, whether you do that or not is up to the estate. Certainly grillure was sufficiently widespread that any quality-driven estate ought to have done the same.
I took this at Mouton-Rothschild as the teams went out to pick the first Merlot vines on 28 September.

The general sentiment was for a relaxed picking. Often the weather forecast wedges harvest into an optimal picking window and any lots outside this period are deemed detrimental. Frankly, I do not think 2016 was quite the “unfold the deckchair and watch the perfect grapes come in” utopia that some winemakers depict. However, it was certainly less frenetic than other years and properties had time to go in and out of the vineyard to pick in piecemeal fashion, not only plot by plot, but specific sections of individual parcels. At Le Pin, Jacques Thienpont actually indicated which vines to pick by painting individual wooden stakes to direct pickers hither and thither, what you might call “sniper picking,” aiming the secateurs at specific vines. For exact picking dates, readers can refer to the tasting notes where this information is embedded. Generally, the Merlot began to be picked from around 22 September until the first days of October, about one week later than average. The Cabernet Sauvignon began to be picked from 5-6 October until around 20 October. Lynch-Bages and Lafite-Rothschild had finished on 12 October. As Lafite winemaker Eric Kohler explained, there was simply no benefit in waiting, since the fruit was not going to improve. So why take the risk? Some Right Bank properties dogmatic about picking late finished 24-25 October, but they did not necessarily make better wines and sometimes displayed over-ripeness.

Whilst much of the country suffered depleted yields, Burgundy for one enduring the embarrassing sight of rows of vine with everything apart from grapes, in Bordeaux not only were they not down on average but they increased by 7%, many estates producing between 45 hectoliters per hectare and 55 hectoliters per hectare. One or two winemakers suggested that higher yields improved quality by naturally regulating concentration and alcohol levels; essentially dispersing all that photosynthetic power across a greater number of bunches. Gone is the dogma of lowest yields equaling superior wine, something that I welcome. It is also important to examine the sugar content of acidity of the berries to understand the vintage. According to the report issued by Dr. Marchal, Lavigne and Prof. Gény (who have taken over from the late Denis Dubourdieu and continuing his
good work), the sugar content in 2016 was around 223 grams per liter for the Cabernet compared to 247 grams per liter in 2015 and 225 grams per liter in 2010.

Nowadays, most top estates are equipped with optical sorting machines, sometimes a battery of them working in sync, parsing out berries that fail to meet regulations. Not all winemakers are fans of optical sorting and prefer the use of human eyes, one or two winemakers dissatisfied with what the machines were discarding and even throwing the bucket of rejected fruit into the vat. They are certainly more prevalent than a couple of years ago, and even those initially opposed to their use such as Lafite-Rothschild, now employ them, and I saw several in action during my harvest tour.

This was the Merlot juice as it was entering the vat at Mouton-Rothschild. I have not adjusted the color in any way.

One aspect that I immediately noticed was the refulgent color of the juice and as I reported at the time (see Wine Journal article). Many winemakers were ecstatic when they saw the deep lucid purple hue of the foaming grape juice, predicking a gentle and possibly shorter period of skin maceration. Basically, you just had to let the fermentation do its own thing, intervene as little as possible, take the foot off the accelerator because the juice already felt plush, velvety and sumptuous when I sampled it myself. As I eventually discovered during my tastings, this was something that tripped up some over-zealous growers who pushed the extraction too hard. One fundamental facet of the 2016 reds is that the alcohol levels tend to be lower than the 2010s by about one degree, thanks to the lack of heat spikes and even more importantly, cooler nights. Much of the Merlot came in at around 13-14% potential alcohol instead of 15%, the Cabernets hovering between 13-14%, which makes a huge difference to the overall feel of the wine. If 2010 was a powerful sports car, then 2016 is the same model refitted with a lighter chassis.

Hereon, the alcoholic fermentation was pretty normal, though I have noticed more properties such as La Cabanne in Pomerol fermenting without any SO2 addition until after malolactic fermentation, whilst others such as Les Carmes Haut-Brion, Clerc-Milon and Rouget have begun trialing stem addition, the latter no surprise since proprietor Edouard Labruyère is from Burgundy. Investments in wineries means that more and more accommodate smaller vats of variegated sizes, tailored to specific vineyard plots. The proliferation of brand new, no expense spared, easy-on-the-eye wineries is a crucial factor in the 2016 vintage. Vat-rooms and barrel cellars are meticulously clean, spacious and easy to work in. Concrete vats are popular since they are now much easier to clean than the antiquated vessels (for example at Cheval Blanc, Les Carmes Haut-Brion, Pontet-Canet and Beauregard to name four that have had a head-to-toe refit in recent years). Pressed wine has improved dramatically in recent years and my feeling is that the contribution of the vin de presse is slightly higher than normal in 2016. As I have already mentioned, extraction times were a little shorter than average and gentler, sometimes at lower temperatures and using pigeage instead of remontage, or in the case of Les Carmes Haut-Brion, a giant rubber ring that pushes down the
cap. Malolactic fermentation was generally quicker than normal, which advantaged the condition of samples during en primeur, giving them more time to settle. Of course, the barrel maturation will be crucial in 2016 in order to maintain that structure and freshness. Levels of new oak continue to decrease to more modest levels, including high-profile names such as Pavie and Ausone, whilst there is a subtle move to larger 300 and 500-litre barrels.

Sauternes

Like the rest of Bordeaux, the region of Sauternes was beset by abnormally high amount of rainfall in the first half of the year up until June. I asked Bérénice Lurton at Climens whether farming her vineyard biodynamically was difficult during this period, but she replied that natural preparations staved off any outbreak of rot. Sauternes enjoyed a long, dry and hot summer like everyone else, but of course, the vital ingredient for pourriture noble is fog or rain. The latter came on 13 September, albeit in the form of light showers, ergo small subsequent tries if fine in quality, particularly in Barsac where noble rot developed earlier than in the rest of Sauternes. The vineyards dried out and it was not until 40 millimeters of rain on 29 and 30 September that the conditions became ideal for the development of noble rot. Cold nights between 7 and 11 October slowed down transformation from the pourri plein to the rôti stage, although a shower on 10 October nudged that along. This set everything up for what Bill Blatch described as a “magic week” of picking between 17 and 25 October. The sun shone, an easterly breeze cooled the vineyard and this formed the heart of many of the 2016 Sauternes. There were further pickings, up to eight in some cases, stretching into the first few days of November, producing concentrated but lower-quality berries.

“We had no problem with the dryness in the summer,” Xavier Planty of Château Guiraud told me. “The 2016 is the first vintage where the chaptalization is totally forbidden. You find [2016] is a different style from other vintages. The sun was marvelous during the harvest, but the nights were fresh and this meant that noble rot developed slowly. The botrytis took some time to arrive and the differences in the vineyard were expressed when it did. At Guiraud we picked two times. The noble rot developed at the beginning of October concentrated between 20-27 October when 95% of the crop was picked. Certainly the noble rot was not heterogeneous [throughout the vineyard]. Fortunately, there was no bad rot this year. It is the biggest harvest we have done at Guiraud and at 23 hectoliters per hectare, that is the largest yield in my 35 years at the château.”

How The Tastings Were Done

Slowly—in a word. It is absurd that journalists speed-taste through unfinished samples, not learning about the samples from the people that made them and then publish meaningless scores with nary a word of explanation or reason. The tastings were conducted over three weeks, just as I did last year, taking up residence in the “deluxe” Hotel Ibis in Saint Emilion (clean bed, flaky croissants...what more do you need?). As is customary, several days were devoted to individual visits to the properties where I could taste in quiet and silent conditions. The length of my stay is not to increase the number of tasting notes, lest we forget that only 200 to 300 are actually sold en primeur. Rather, that time is used to taste and re-taste samples, to make further inquiries to winemakers and reschedule visits, taking two, three and sometimes four snapshots to join the dots together. As customary, I was accompanied by photographer Johan Berglund, whose images furnish this report. (You can see hi-res versions of these images plus more Bordeaux and primeur-releated photographs on his website at www.johanberglund.com).
Most winemakers will tell you that the samples change according to the weather. Indeed, during one week it was surprisingly cool and overcast, the rest blissfully sunny and quite warm. But to be honest, the wines during that inclement week of châteaux visits performed extremely well. Maybe the change is as much in the mind as the glass?

One other point I should make is that I punctiliously checked the date of sample bottles, rejecting any more than three days old. I would say around 95% of the tasting notes in this report were taken from samples no more than two days old. This year I noticed more variation between samples taken at the château and at organized tastings with associations such as the UGC and Syndicates. “Precision” is a keyword for 2016, however to really experience that you had to really taste at the property. Beyond the tasting room, it was as if they lost a little sparkle, which begs the question whether their bewitching pixilation will be intact once the wines leave home permanently to reside in our cellars. I hope so. This year I tasted a few wines directly from barrel à la Burgundy and it was interesting to see how different cooperages influenced the wines. Furthermore, I inquired exactly how winemakers had assembled the samples in order to factor that into my assessment. Branaire Ducru comes from a new barrel and Palmer from a used barrel, even though both use approximately the same final proportion of new oak in the final blend. If you don’t ask, then you don’t know, and if you don’t know, then how can you comment on what the wine will become? Answers on a postcard.
Michel Rolland tasting behind me. He had to put up with my music, apologies for that. Helps the mind relax.

The Verdict

Let’s cut to the chase: 2016 is unequivocally a great vintage in Bordeaux. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise. There are some caveats: properties with younger vines or less propitious, sandier soils whose fruit was unable to reach full phenolic ripeness levels, also the occasional hardness of tannins. That aside, we are looking at a vintage that can send tingles down the spine and back up again. Over twenty years of tasting Bordeaux from barrel at en primeur, this was my most pleasurable tasting experience alongside the 2009, albeit in a very different style. The 2005 and 2010 are both bona fide great vintages, however their girder-like tannins, the alcohol levels of the latter and obduracy rendered the exercise far more arduous. It was weeks before my tongue no longer felt furry.

The rhetoric from the mouths of winemakers was either “Our 2016 is the best we have ever made” or “It is the wine that I have always wanted to make.” A number downplayed the quality of the 2015 to emphasize those claims, unfairly in my opinion. The two vintages are different, but there is no gulf in general quality between them. The differences are stylistic and in terms of performances of each appellation, and here we are only talking nuances. On the Left Bank, Saint Estèphe did not quite excel in 2015, but shines in 2016. Vice versa, Margaux flourished in 2015, but lags a step or two behind the northern Médoc. Pomerol might be slightly better in 2015 than 2016, but the other way round in Saint Emilion. Pessac-Léognan? About equal. It is these comparisons that make Bordeaux so fascinating. They are just two great vintages whose evolutions will be constantly juxtaposed, whose wines are going to give great pleasure.
The traits of 2016 at its best are their fruit, freshness, precision, fineness of tannins and articulation of terroir. It is also a vintage where there are quirks in the hierarchy. Let's tackle each in turn:

**Fruit:** All wines need fruit and 2016 has a surfeit thanks to those sunshine hours. Fruit profiles tended more towards the black rather than red side of the spectrum, perhaps showing more blue fruit at this stage both on the nose and palate. Aromatics were often incredibly detailed, enhanced by floral aromas that render them flattering even at this prenatal stage.

**Freshness:** Words that consistently appeared in my notes were energy, tension and freshness. The absence of heat spikes coupled with cool nights took a needle and thread and wove in the acidity, many châteaux recording low pH levels post-fermentation. These samples just sang and they should still be singing for many years to come.

**Precision:** I remarked to several winemakers that 2016 is the first vintage were Bordeaux delivered a level of precision hitherto unknown. It is the first vintage whereby investments both out in the vineyard and inside the winery have manifested wines so pixelated and so crystalline, that there seems not a stitch out of place. Even when given the chance to juxtapose them directly with the magnificent duo of 2009 and 2010, neither of those two vintages have the “HD” quality of 2016.

**Tannins:** Related to the above, there has never been a Bordeaux vintage, thus far, with such breathtaking fineness of tannin—this despite relatively high IPT levels (Clinet clocking in at 94). Where does that come from? Well, the fact that château no longer approach harvest as a single rudimentary sweep through the vines, but practice bespoke pickings according to weather conditions and individual vine/bunch maturity. It comes from the rigorous sorting methods. It certainly comes from the growing number of state-of-the-art wineries, spotlessly clean and equipped with vats tailored to house specific parcels in the vineyard instead of lumping them together. During my visit I had time to inspect new facilities at Beychevelle and Calon-Ségur, to name but two whose vat-rooms are barely recognizable from just a few years ago.

**Terroir:** One aspect of 2016 that heightened my zeal is that terroirs are clearly translated into the wines. The characteristics of each appellation are evident, to put it prosaically—the Pauillacs are very Pauillac, the Saint Estèphes are very Saint Estèphe and so forth. Part of the reason for that is that alcohol levels are lower than recent vintages. I have always found that place of origin and respective terroirs are more visible at lower levels, when alcoholic warmth does not blur the detail. That is not to say that vintages with higher alcohol levels cannot express their terroir. They can. However, it takes longer for it to come through because in the first few years, it is the growing season that influences the wines. Even at this embryonic stage, their places of origin are in most cases, very clear to see.

**Hierarchical Quirks:** Some of the most arresting and beguiling samples did not necessarily come from the top of the hierarchy. Though quality of terroir corralls quality here and there, the 2016s do not conform to preconceived notions set back in 1855. Certainly, the First Growths have potentially made incredible wines. However, my most memorable visits, perhaps the most thrilling wines, were located in lower echelons from Second down to Fifth Growths. Unexpected surprises, wines that were not just the best that I have ever tasted in 20 years, but dazzling wines that forced me to reconsider the potential of a château. We are talking new benchmarks.

I am talking about Château Beychevelle, where Philippe Blanc created a wine that promotes it alongside the likes of Léoville Las-Cases or Ducru Beaucaillou. I am talking about Brane-Cantenac, where Henri Lurton has created a 2016 imbued with astonishing finesse and intensity without compromising the essence of the château style. I am talking about Lynch-Bages, who whilst demolishing most of their old winery and purchasing Haut-Batailley, produced an audacious Pauillac that is a modern-day equivalent of the 1990. I am talking Figeac whose 2016 is a step up...
from the stunning 2015 (if that seemed possible), surpassing everything in the post-war period. I am thinking of Calon-Ségur, aesthetically unrecognizable from the time I would walk through a never-ending maze of ancient timeworn wooden vats to reach a tasting room. Or the newfound finesse of Grand-Mayne with the help of Louis Mitjavile, the astonishing complexity of Clinet and the reinvention of Les Carmes Haut-Brion, perchance the “Lafleur of Pessac-Léognan.” Wines like the 2016 Carbonnieux, not the trendiest or coolest château name to drop, but simply the best I have tasted from the estate.

I am not implying that they are the very best in 2016, though that might well turn out to be the case. They do not represent the peaks of the vintage. Rather, these are wines that are charting new waters in terms of quality, château that reached their own apotheosis, writing new chapters for themselves.

At this level, the role of the critic is to nitpick, to seek weaknesses and deficiencies in wine in order to parse the good from the great and the great from the exceptional. Some producers were more affected by the dry conditions than others, and whilst I found few instances of clear under-ripeness, it resulted in hardness caused by a lack of fruit. Here it is important to pause and focus on the balance, consider that during élevage they will gain roundness and possibly flesh out, notwithstanding that tannins will polymerize over time, soften and become approachable. Therefore, in allocating scores I considered the specifics of the élevage and used my own experience observing how previous vintages tend to age. Sometimes it gave cause for concern and others times I felt confident that the hardness will eventually soften. Modern-day Bordeaux wines are far more approachable than before and drinking windows have been brought forward. Yet the best wines will require five or six years in bottle, will only reach their drinking plateau with 10 to 12 years in bottle and then, for those with the wherewithal to cellar long-term, develop the kaleidoscope of secondary characteristics. To sum up, 2016 cannot be described as a “hard vintage” even if from time to time it felt that way. Most are robed in satin-like textures that made a handful of them temptingly drinkable, even at this embryonic stage.

There are a handful of wines that may achieve perfection. Note the absence of certainty in that statement, because the real test will come in bottle. A wine is not finished en primeur. It’s not even finished when the cork goes in and the capsule goes on. There is still maturation in bottle, that long and winding road towards its plateau of maturity. However, there is a clutch of spellbinding wines that have a chance to achieve that, just a chance mind you. For me, to attribute that 98-100, I contemplate what that means, reflect upon it away from the Bordeaux circus back home. Does it belong on that peak alongside the 1989 Haut-Brion or the 1961 Latour or the 1945 Mouton-Rothschild? Certainly, 2016 has given birth to a handful of nascent wines that made an indelible impression. There are the twin titans in Pauillac: Mouton-Rothschild and Latour. There is Cos d’Estournel, in fact, the first visit over three weeks of tastings and I returned at the end of my trip just to confirm my sentiments. Léoville-Lascases just seemed to make it effortless and La Mission Haut-Brion oozed class and sophistication. There is Figeac, unimpressive the first visit as winemaker Frédéric Faye had forewarned and then the second, third and fourth encounters merely reaffirmed its brilliance. There is Pavie, a different Pavie from before, translating that amazing terroir with style, likewise Ausone, both possibly the best wines that I have tasted at these properties in twenty years.

Appellation Summaries

Saint Estèphe: A brilliant vintage for the most northern appellation, partly thanks to the clay soils and partly due to huge investments in wineries. In many ways, the most dynamic enclave of Bordeaux, this is a fertile hunting ground for wine-lovers.
**Pauillac**: The reputation of Pauillac is there for a reason. I’m playing the same record, I know, but there are unquestionably stellar wines in 2016 thanks to their peerless Cabernet Sauvignon. There are a clutch of legends in the making here.

**Saint Julien**: This appellation might not attract the kudos like Pauillac, but trust me, this is a very consistent, intermittently fantastic vintage. Some of the best values could come from here, since you don’t pay for the caché of Pauillac.

**Moulis/Listrac**: This is home to some truly great 2016s, such as Chasse-Spleen and Branas-Grand-Poujeaux. The insiders’ choice? Do not overlook these oft-forgotten parts of the Left Bank.

**Margaux**: Great wines, but generally the 2016s did not shine as brilliantly as they did in 2015. There are exceptions, notably Brane-Cantenac, although you could cheekily argue that its terroir is more like Pauillac!

**Pessac-Léognan/Graves** *(Rouge)*: Not quite as consistent as other appellations in 2016, but it is speckled with incredible or over-performing wines. Occasionally the Merlot felt a little heavy and over-egged that led to unbalanced wines, but there are some gorgeous, fleshier expressions of the vintage.

**Pessac-Léognan/Graves** *(Blanc)*: The one weak link in the 2016 vintage. The warm and dry weather denied wines the acidity and tension of 2014 and 2015. Most of the dry white Bordeaux will be for early-drinking and few wines are exciting, even at the top end.

**Haut-Médoc/Médoc**: Though not quite as consistent as other appellations, as usual, it hosts a number of outstanding wines that might be overlooked by label hunters, not by those that love great Bordeaux and would prefer not to secretly remortgage the house.

Olivier Berrouet at Petrus showing me a video clip of how to taste primeur blind on his smartphone.

**Pomerol**: The question is, will the 2016s be as good as the 2015s? This might be controversial, but the jury’s out on this one. My reservation stems from the lower contribution of Cabernet Franc, which was affected more by the dry conditions this year. There are astonishing wines such as Le Pin, Trotanoy and Clinet, but overall it is a close call between the two vintages as to which has the upper hand.
Saint Emilion: The usual extreme highs and head-scratching lows, as you would expect in such an all-encompassing appellation. There are many fabulous wines here, especially on limestone soils and the côte: Ausone, Pavie, Angelus, Le Tertre-Rôteboeuf, Canon, Clos Fourtet and Grand-Mayne to name a few. There remains a tendency to pick too late and over-extract, however, the tide is changing in the right direction and there is a different mindset growing and there is a different mindset gaining acceptance.

Right Bank Satellites: Like Moulis/Listrac, you will find excellent wines, especially in Fronsac, Lalande-de-Pomerol and Côtes de Castillon (or whatever it’s called these days).

Sauternes: A very good vintage, if not as great as 2014 or 2015. It is surprisingly consistent at the lower end and less well-known properties. It just lacks the clutch of breathtaking Sauternes that mark an iconic vintage.

The Market

Where do you begin? There is no precedent for the tumultuous times that these 2016s are born into. Putting political views aside, the combination of Trump, Brexit and French elections is a cocktail for economic unease, unpredictable exchange rates and a general feeling of not knowing what lies just around the corner. So when you have a buying mechanism called "Futures" when the future is so unclear, then it lends to an unstable backdrop for a campaign. If merchants and consumers are willing to invest, then they will look for sure-bets, therefore the negative impact of global uncertainty impacts upon those that previously took long-standing positions on a vintage. Speaking directly to several merchants, their shopping list will hone in on a select group of châteaux that they feel are reasonably priced vis-à-vis quality; wines with loyal followings, names that shift in quantity and do not gather dust unsold. This approach does not really feed back to châteaux, because they enjoy the buffer of négoçiants who do continue to take positions on vintages, especially great ones like 2016. So we will doubtless hear the “I sold all my wine in five minutes” rhetoric, though the real success will be the number sold through the distribution system to the people that will actually drink the wines or in some cases, flip them for a tidy profit.

At the time of writing, the UK Sterling rate makes it unfavorable to buy en primeur. Even if properties release at the same price as 2015, consumers are facing a 20% increase in prices; the rates are so volatile that this might be out of date by the time this report is published in three weeks' time. Expect the usual vociferous protests if release prices go north, which you can bet in most cases they will. The United States and the Far East is an entirely different scenario and certainly the Bordelais have their eyes peeled in those directions. The US market tends to blow hot and cold depending upon vintage and in 2016, importers clearly booked their tickets to Bordeaux to taste the wines and seem interested in opening their wallets. Also, China is coming back. I noticed more in Bordeaux this year and spent many a moment posing for photos with entire buying teams—I must have been trending on Weibo. But after the hullabaloo of 2009 and 2010, it would seem that China’s wine industry has reorganized, matured and become more savvy. Whilst the atmosphere is not as febrile as it was, there are certainly solid grounds for optimism.

How will the châteaux react? Well, the same as before, I expect. It usually begins with one out the traps early, this year Château Guiraud even before UGC week. They will be releasing on Christmas Day soon! Most proprietors anticipate a long campaign, building up in momentum from mid-May until Vinexpo in mid-June. Several estate managers told me how they had explained to proprietors that it would be unwise to “max out” prices and the market would rebuff anything where consumers felt ripped off, irrespective of quality or critics’ praise. There are some that I think price intelligently, such as Bernard Magrez, who see prestige not in a price tag, but in their wine being consumed and enjoyed. But in 2016, reputations are at stake. Shareholders expectations must be satisfied.
Final Thoughts

Lucky, lucky, lucky. That's 2016. Lucky that flowering was unaffected by rain. Lucky that the weather changed and the vines enjoyed a dry and warm season. Lucky that just when the vines were about to suffer hydric stress, they were relieved by short rainfall. Lucky that the harvest was undertaken in perfect conditions. If winemaking is a game of poker, then Bordeaux was dealt a royal flush. Of course, behind that luck are armies of hard-working people, passionate and dedicated, and a wealth of knowledge and experience that make all this grape-to-wine alchemy possible. But every person would admit that you need a bit of luck on your side to make great wine. In 2016, they almost feel embarrassed by the generosity of fortune, especially in consideration of what befell Burgundy and elsewhere.

Dress down day. Sporting my Grimes t-shirt at the merchants' UGC tasting performing final checks on the wines.

The 2016 vintage is the first Bordeaux vintage defined by precision. Even compared to 2009 and 2010, the tannic profile of 2016 feels so different that the wines could originate from a different wine region. There seems to be consensus that as a region, they have moved towards a fresh, elegant and purer style of Bordeaux than before—whose virtues of freshness and detail are just as important as fruit intensity, which is naturally bestowed by terroir rather than winemaking techniques (in part due to global warming). Even a cynic, and trust me to review Bordeaux it is always best to be cynical, must admit that these 2016s live up to expectations and the superlatives I heard consistently over three weeks. The pleasure they will give Bordeaux lovers is immeasurable. At what cost? Well, that is going to be decided in the next few weeks. I just hope that they will remember that quality is measured not by price, but by what pours from bottle into glass.

DETAILED BORDEAUX ACs
What follows below is a detailed look at each Bordeaux AC. To skip to a specific AC, please use the jump-links below:

- Saint Estèphe
- Pauillac
- Moulis/Listrac
- Saint Julien
SAINT ESTÈPHE

At A Glance

- St Estèphe shines with a clutch of stunning 2016s.
- Clayey soils helped mitigate against hydric stress, enabling vines to attain complete ripeness.
- Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Merlot excelled, although Petit Verdot was much more variable.
- Most memorable Saint Estèphe in 2016: Cos d’Estournel.
- Best potential value-for-money: La Dame de Montrose, Lafon-Rochet, de Pez and Lafitte-Carcasset.

Saint Estèphe played a blinder in 2016. Sure, winemakers were piqued that they missed out on the fanfare surrounding the 2015s last year, when every appellation was praised except Saint Estèphe. What’s the saying? You can’t win ‘em all. While I do concur with winemakers impressing upon me that their 2015s have since improved in barrel, the wines are still a couple of steps behind...
others. However, the 2016 makes amends, because the vintage bestowed a clutch of sensational offerings that could one day graduate into legendary wines.

There are underlying reasons why Saint Estèphe did so well. The most important is that if you look on the soles of your shoes whilst traipsing through the vineyard, you will find them stuck with clay, more so than elsewhere. The clay acted like a sponge during the dry period from July up until harvest, keeping those vines ticking over, as stressed as a child taking an important school exam, until rain on 13 September. Another critical factor is manmade. There is no question that the entire top tier of Saint Estèphe has invested heavily in recent years and this has meliorated the wines, rendered them less rustic than even just a decade ago. I used to think of Saint Estèphe wines as being built like a bull. Muscular, sinewy, obdurate and masculine, occasionally with steam coming from its nose whenever angry. The introduction of precise viticulture in tandem with modern wineries that can translate that precision into bottle has manifested more approachable wines with finer tannin and purer fruit. The bull has turned into a thoroughbred horse.

My first visit of the entire three weeks was to Cos d'Estournel. The Grand Vin served immediate notice that the 2016 was bejeweled with stellar wines. In fact, when I got back into my hire car after the tasting, I had to sit for a moment, reflect and ask myself whether the 2016 Cos d'Estournel really was as brilliant as I thought. Or was my objectivity compromised because it was visit number one? The only way to find out was to re-taste the wine and so I dropped in again a fortnight later. Thankfully, it reconfirmed my initial note, vindicating this as the best Cos d'Estournel that I have tasted since I began en primeur 20 years ago.

"It was not a boring year," commented Aymeric de Gironde in typically sanguine manner. As usual he was attired in a smart, heavy weave suit whilst at the end of the tasting table, proprietor Michel Reybier looked on hawk-like. Even though his boss was watching, I detected that Aymeric had a skip in his step. He knew the quality of his 2016 was up there with the best. "We started with rain. After a very dry November and December, we had a lot of rain and by the end of March the soils were saturated. It's a normal thing in Bordeaux, but by June we were afraid that rain would just continue. Fortunately, flowering was fast and homogenous. We have a lot of 80 to 100-year-old Merlot that is sensitive to flowering and in some vintages they can suffer damage, however in this vintage they flowered well, though a little later on 11 June. So we had to be wait to be sure of the quality of flowering. Then the weather turned completely hot and dry, which is exactly what we needed after the late flowering. We kept the leaves on the vine. You have to be careful. Now we know there is no recipe, so we prudent with the effeuillage [de-leafing], just a little on the east and northern sides. Since 2010 we have more vigor so we need canopy cover to protect the fruit. In August, the nights were fresh and this allowed the vines to rest; enhancing the anthocyanins, maintaining the balance of the fruit and keeping freshness."

"Until 13 September we had very little rain: 20-25 millimeters between July and beginning of September including the rain on 13 September. We had a little difficulty with the young vines, but the old vines react better to extreme conditions. The level of alcohol is higher in clay soils than gravel soils, which is the opposite for 2015, since there was probably a blockage with the gravel. The coolness of the clay soils probably slowed down the ripening as well, so the level of alcohol is 13.07% for the Grand Vin. We sorted in the vineyard with an intra-block sorting, which we have done since 2005, and then separated the young and older vines. This was very important. The sanitary conditions were very good and it was a large harvest. All sorting is manual here—no optical machines. The length of maceration is around the same as 2015. The berries were ripe and the juice came rapidly, so we worked in good conditions. We did a cold fermentation and a maceration for six to ten days depending on the plots, followed by a slow extraction."

"It was not easy but the result is completely unique. There is no living person that can remember this kind of harvest. For the 2016 Cos d'Estournel Blanc, we had to do a lot of selection as we have a lot of clayey soils. Because of the weather conditions we did not think the gravel soils would be
able to make the Grand Vin. You needed to keep a bit of water so the clay soils worked well. We will end up doing a third less than usual."

The 2016 Cos d’Estournel is a candidate for the wine of the vintage. From the kaleidoscope of aromatics, the mineralité and tension, the bewitching sense of harmony and precision, this is a Saint Estèphe that looks at all the previous vintages from the estate and goes one better. Even given its terroir and reputation, the efforts that are expended each year, frankly I never anticipated their 2016 to be this good. Aymeric himself made a pertinent remark when he said: “You had to make a lot of decisions that made a true impact on the vintage. There are no more patterns.” In other words, irrespective of reputation or mega-bucks investment, winemaking teams must be on their toes and never take anything for granted. As Aymeric commented, the team now understands that there is no recipe. Even if you refit the entire winery and employ the most talented people, that does not imply perfect scores will come raining down tomorrow. Rather, a wine the quality of their 2016 has to fit exactly with the nuances of the growing season and then you just need that extra bit of luck, that touch of magic. And this is what happened at Cos d’Estournel this year.

I drove directly from Cos d’Estournel to its great Saint Estèphe rival, Montrose, and likewise I made two visits to this address. The one difference is that whilst Cos d’Estournel was totally convincing on both occasions, the Montrose performed better on my second visit, which proves just why it is so important to go back and take as many snapshots of wines as possible within the time allocated.

“There were two different parts of the season, one until June during the flowering when it was rainy, though the subsoil of clay absorbed a lot of the water,” Hervé Berland told me. “Then there was the second part that started with flowering when it was sunny and dry. Until the rainfall of 13 September it was perfect. We thought it would be a late crop, although [as it transpired] it wasn’t, since everything was over by 14 October. That was because of the beautiful weather and the slight acceleration due to the rainfall in mid-September. Something that I have never seen before is the stress upon the berries until this rainfall on 13 September and then afterwards, when the rains appeared, it seemed to accelerate all the parameters such as malic acid and IPT and so on, except the sugar level that remained constant. This is why we ended up with 13% alcohol.”

“The yield was lower than in 2015: 35 hectoliters per hectare for Cabernet Sauvignon and 42 hectoliters per hectare for Merlot, which is lower than 42 hectoliters per hectare and 48 hectoliters per hectare respectively in 2015. This was due to observing a lower number of berries on the bunch and berries being smaller in size. So we had to master the vinification. We needed to be careful with the extraction. You could see the color in the juice after a few hours with the young vines, so we immediately realized that you had to control the extraction, not to extract all the tannins and to work more with the vin de presse, which this year contributes around 14% in the Grand Vin. This is something we have done since 2014. It is rare to have such massive tannins, yet so silky and refined. And I was surprised by the Cabernet Franc this year, which is easy to blend into the Grand Vin, however, the yields for the Petit Verdot were too high. We cut a lot of berries but not enough and there was still 52 hectoliters per hectare. You could not make a Grand Vin from that, so it was blended into the La Dame de Montrose. It just did not seem necessary to add it to the Grand Vin.”

“We have a more classic Bordeaux compared to other vintages such as 2009 and 2010, where the sugars were more concentrated and I feel that the wine bears so much the signature of the estate. The profile [of the 2016 Montrose] is a little different: a lot less Cabernet Sauvignon than in 2010, and it takes us back to vintages such as the 1989 and 1996. When we did the blind tasting of the lots, most of the Cabernet Sauvignon was top quality. Some of the Merlot was slightly below and these were not able to join the Grand Vin. The Cabernet Sauvignon was nicely controlled and expressed the terroir, the tannins are very polished and the powerful.”
Having recently published a Montrose report bulging with over 60 vintages of Montrose tasted back to 1893, I am pretty au fait with the château at this precise moment. The 2016 Montrose will definitely be up there on the top tier, as Hervé commented, alongside the 1989 that I recently upgraded to a perfect score, 1990, 2009 and 2010. Maybe it is the 1989 that the 2016 bears the most resemblance. It is not quite as detailed as the Cos d’Estournel at this premature stage, more backbone and structured as expected, faithful to their signature style. This is important, more important than scores in fact. Montrose must always be Montrose and let the quality twitch with the vagaries of each growing season. It will be flirting with perfection once in bottle.

From Montrose, the next port of call was Calon-Ségur and (again) I dropped in on two occasions, the second unannounced. This is a property that is being reborn after the Gasqueton era came to an end and the estate sold to Suravenir, who wisely ensured continuity with talented winemaker Vincent Millet and appointed Laurent Dufau to oversee a head-to-toe renovation of the estate and a long-term reorganization of the vineyard. This will take 25 to 30 years, replacing vines to increase planting density and shifting the focus away from Merlot towards Cabernet Sauvignon. Of course, the winery takes much shorter to build than for a vine to reach maturity. Laurent gave me a tour of the new two-tier gravity-fed winery, spotlessly clean with bespoke stainless steel vats, so much so that it seems strange to think of it as the same place where Headmistress Gasqueton would escort you through a maze of Jurassic wooden vats, to an austere and rather spooky tasting room located somewhere in its inner sanctum. Welcome to the 21st century Calon-Ségur.

“The vines did not suffer too much during the summer because of the quantity of water of in soil thanks to the percentage of clay,” Laurent explained. “It didn’t rain between mid-July and mid-September. The Cabernet benefitted from the diurnal change in temperature. There was a good uniformity of quality between the Merlot and Cabernet, a homogenous maturity and we were able to harvest between 1 and 15 October, the same date as 2012. We needed the water and this fell on 18 September. The Cabernet Franc was remarkable this year, which we didn’t even use last year. Even though they have different blends, the alcohol on three wines is the same at 14%. There is plenty of freshness, balance and structure.”

This is a fabulous Calon-Ségur. It’s not quite up there with Montrose and Cos d’Estournel—although wait until the improvements in the vineyard start feeding through. However, the 2016 is not far behind. There is much more refinement and breeding in the Grand Vin these days, as it has shifted away from Merlot towards Cabernet Sauvignon, thereby instilling a sense of nobility. Having tasted most vintages back to the 1960s, the bucolic wines of yore have gone, yet the DNA of the estate is intact. It is also worth mentioning how the Château Capbern (previously Capbern-Gasqueton) has come on leaps and bounds in recent years: an excellent and one suspects, keenly priced 2016.

There are three other Saint Estèphes that make the appellation more than this triumvirate. and that is vital if it is to nurture an identity to rival that of Pauillac or Saint Julien. They are Lafon-Rochet, Phelan-Ségur and Haut-Marbuzet.

“I would say that until June, the flowering period, it was quite difficult with the mildew,” explained technical director Lucas Leclercq, who joined Lafon-Rochet in 2009. “Since we have begun with organic viticulture, it was tough. But finally we found that there was a very good profile for the vines and by the middle of June, the vineyard was perfectly green and the vines were perfect in health and size. We wondered if we had to de-leaf or grow grass between rows to absorb the rain. As we were late with the work we did not de-leaf and we were lucky. From July until harvest, we realized that we did not have to do anything in the vineyard. By the end of August, we saw some of the young complanté [intermixed grape varieties] vines of Merlot that suffered stress, but not the older vines, even on gravel either on clay or gravel. There was just a tiny bit of blockage for the Merlot, but the Cabernet was perfect.”
I inquired to what extent the fruit had to be sorted in 2016. “There was a difference between the interior and exterior of the bunches so yes, we had to sort both in the vineyard and entering the winery. The Merlot was picked plot by plot, which meant that the vats did not correspond to the origin, so we asked Jean-Claude Berrouet whether we could blend the Merlot on gravel with Merlot on clay. He said yes, go ahead. For the Cabernet Sauvignon it was far easier. The harvest took ten days for the Merlot instead of the usual three days, which is the longest ever. In fact, some of the Cabernet Sauvignon was picked before the Merlot. We used optical sorting more for the Merlot than the Cabernet Sauvignon, because there had been a little coulure and millerandage, but hardly at all for the Cabernet Sauvignon. This year we were a bit disappointed by the Petit Verdot though it was green harvested twice, so it is only 2% of the final blend, whereas the Cabernet Franc was very good and represents 6%. The IPT was round 85, which is not so high.” It is a very fine Lafon-Rochet, balanced and refined, perhaps a little gawky out of barrel as it occasionally tends to be and yet it always melds together once in bottle. It should drink sooner than the likes of Montrose and yet having recently tasted a rare bottle of 1955 Lafon-Rochet in London, do not be surprised to find the 2016 lasting many years.

Château Phelan-Ségur is another property that is certainly going places. I was not able to visit the property this year, although I tasted the 2016 on several occasions. It has a slightly Pauillac-like bouquet, a trait that it shares with Cos d’Estournel, whilst the palate offers plenty of tobacco-tinged fruit and far more substance and complexity than vintages just a decade ago. Meanwhile, Haut-Marbuzet, an oft-overlooked property owned by the Duboscq family, maintains its much more upfront, sensual and flamboyant style that seems anomalous in the context of Saint Estèphe’s traditionally more austere and “serious” fraternity. But these wines are deceptive in terms of ageability and in any case, you’ll probably have more “fun” with Haut-Marbuzet.

Elsewhere there is much to admire in Saint Estèphe. Check out the likes of Château de Pez, Beau-Site (located just behind Calon-Ségur) and Laffitte-Carcasset.

**PAUILLAC**

**At A Glance**

- An exceptional vintage for Pauillac due to the peerless quality of the Cabernet Sauvignon.
- Impressive aromatic typicité (frequent graphite aromas) with fine tanins, extraordinary purity of fruit, freshness and complexity.
- Textures can occasionally be hard, although they will soften with time.
- Best potential value-for-money: d’Armailhac, Pédesclaux, La Fleur Peyrabon.
Discussing the minutiae of the vintage with Eric Kohler, head winemaker at Lafite-Rothschild, and all under Domaines Barons de Rothschild.

Pauillac was rife with rumor during en primeur. Who was the mystery buyer of Haut-Batailley? The Castèja family, reuniting the vines with Château Batailley? Stan Kroenke, so that he has matching Burgundy and Bordeaux estates after buying Bonneau du Martray? Or the Cazes family? When I visited Grand Puy Lacoste and asked whether I could taste the 2016 Haut-Batailley as per normal, Emeline Borie politely declined with a slightly resigned expression. It was not theirs to show anymore. The estate had recently been sold by their aunt, the de facto proprietor. Since no papers had been signed at the time of my visit, Emeline never disclosed the buyer but the obvious purchaser were the owners of Lynch Bages. Sure enough, it was announced one week later that Haut-Batailley would enter their fold, thereby making them significant landholders in Pauillac.

It is testimony to Pauillac that there was such fevered speculation over the sale. Significant estates do not change hands often these days, least so within the most blue-blooded and aristocratic appellation in Bordeaux. Why does Pauillac attract such reverence? Why is it held up as the apotheosis of Cabernet Sauvignon? Probably because of vintages such as 2016 and the stellar wines born upon its deep gravel terraces. Pauillac is awash with remarkable 2016s, simply because the Cabernet Sauvignon thrived in the dry and sunny conditions. The free-draining gravel soils could have disadvantaged some estates, but the wealth of old vine material ensured that their roots could penetrate deep undergrowth and stave off hydric stress. This, plus the technical know-how, state-of-the-art wineries and perfectionist ideals all combine to guarantee that Pauillac flourished in 2016.

There are two wines at the pinnacle, one sold en primeur and the other not. So let’s begin with the one that will be released this coming campaign at Mouton Rothschild. As I reported in Wine Journal, I was there to witness the commencement of the picking last September when I ventured out into the vineyard where the first Merlots were being picked, then witnessed the optical sorting machines saying “Oui” or “Non” at lightning speed, as the berries passed underneath their scanners and the vivid foaming purple juice as it entered the vat. “It is the first great vintage in the new facility,” estate manager Philippe Dhalluin explained when I returned the following March, not once but twice.
"At Mouton, the picking was a little later than usual. The maturity was delayed by the drought and we just had to wait. The average temperature was 13.8 degrees Celsius and 2016 it was 13.9 degrees Celsius, so it was not especially hot. We had some rain on 13 September, 34 millimeters, and this really helped. We found that the levels of sugar were lower than expected before the rain, which allowed the vines to restart the photosynthesis. After that, the level of sugar started increasing. The berries were very small because there had been hardly any rain from the end of June, with thick skins, very concentrated."

"Analytically we were surprised by the 2016. At Château d’Armailhac we have the highest quantity of tannin, close to 5 grams per liter, which is very high. I have never seen that. The Cabernet Franc gave good results this year [just like in Saint Estèphe], although only a small part went into the Mouton-Rothschild since the maturity was delayed because the soils there are more sandy. The Petit Verdot was more advanced, because it was the first to be cropped, so we vinified one lot together in a 50/50 proportion with the Cabernet Franc. This was used in the Grand Vin."

The 2016 Mouton-Rothschild is a startling wine, a sublime follow-up to the equally remarkable 2015, a one-two for Philippe Dhalluin and his team. This is another property that I visited twice (unfortunately the second time unannounced and forgetting my French cousins strictly observe their lunch hour between 12 and 2pm). Thankfully, Philippe put down his jambon buerre to accompany me through his wines once more. It is not just the astonishing purity, complexity and refinement of the Mouton-Rothschild. I was gob-smacked by the structure and backbone of the 2016 d’Armailhac, usually much more easygoing and corpulent at this early stage. Is this a one-off or a change in direction? I certainly found it more arresting than the Clerc-Milon this year. I will also mention the Deuxième Vin, Le Petit Mouton. As I commented to Philippe, gone are the days when you could pick this up for a tenner at Asda superstore. It has become one of the best second labels on the Left Bank in recent years, and regularly stands equal to its fellow Grand Vins in blind tastings.

Of course, Château Latour marched out of the primeur “party” after the 2011 vintage and have since embarked upon late-released wines whose timing is governed by when they believe the wine is entering maturity. Personally, I wish they would rejoin en primeur, even if it were a partial release of their total crop. Just as if omitting Latour from this report leaves one part of the jigsaw missing, likewise there is a piece missing from the subsequent en primeur campaign. And yes, I do feel foolish regaling a wine that none of the readership will be able to drink for a number of years. What’s the point? I guess the pursuit of comprehensiveness means that there is a duty to include one of the standouts of the vintage. Frédéric Engerer was not at the property when I visited. No disrespect to him, but it is always a pleasure to meet with winemaker Hélène Jeunin, who gave me her own insight into the 2016 vintage, beginning with a progress of their introduction of organic and biodynamics...

"There were two periods of the 2016 vintage. Firstly wet in winter and then from mid-June to mid-September, it was very dry. For Latour it was a great challenge as it was the first vintage that is 100% organic, therefore we had to watch for mildew in more vigorous plots when it rained. But we managed to maintain sanitary conditions and the vineyard of L’Enclos was perfect. The only areas affected were several parcels of Merlot in the north where there is a hollow (even if we grow cover crops of grass) plus some vines in [the lieu-dit] “Batailley”—due to excessively vigorous vine material. In any case, it was a good experience to learn more about controlling the canopy. We learned that de-leafling is good but it important to lightly spray copper, because there can be a bit of mildew in the canopy. We use herbal tea using plant that contains Silesia, le prêle [horsetail].

Now, around 23 hectares are biodynamic and we are learning more so that we will increase to 41 hectares in 2017. We have had good trials controlling vigor of the Merlot, where sometimes you can have botrytis at the end of the season."

We then moved onto a conversation about the 2016 Latour and I was intrigued to learn about some of the experimentation being undertaken at the property.
“The wine is very rich in polyphenols, more than 2015 and close to 2010 with not excessively high alcohol level (13.5%). We started the harvest on 27 September with the Merlot and because of the good weather, it was actually the last to be picked. We began the Cabernet Sauvignon on 7 October and we were surprised that there was little hydric stress, just one parcel of one young vines. We have a small team of around 150 pickers who finished picking on 19 October. The maturation advanced slowly so we could go from one plot to another leisurely. We extracted a little more than usual, especially with respect to the Grand Vin. We did two délestage during the alcoholic fermentation, and this year we then did a third délestage because we knew the quality of tannins and seeds was high. We also did several trials of vinification in barrels and I think it could be used in a small volume just to soften the tannin. It can be used for small volumes for the Petit Verdot and Cabernet Franc and some new vines in Grand Enclos that will enter the Grand Vin for the first time this year. We have also trialed whole berry fermentation on sand and gravel soils to compare. Aromatically it is different and perhaps not as elegant as we would like. But it was still blended in the Grand Vin. Now we use two grams per hectoliter of SO2 instead of four to six grams per hecatoliter, although we always check that it is a good moment to adjust.”

After all that, I am not going to say too much about the 2016 Latour. I'll save that for whenever it is released onto the market. It is as good as Bordeaux gets. That's all you need to know.

At Lafite-Rothschild I met with head winemaker Eric Kohler, who is responsible for both the Pomerol and Sauternes estates, L’Evangile and Rieussec. These were both tasted at Lafite-Rothschild. “The 2016 is a vintage of surprise for us,” Eric told me. “It was not an easy vintage in terms of the viticulture. The beginning was not easy because the spring was rainy and even by the end of summer, it didn’t begin fantastically. The first stage is to have good conditions during flowering. It was not so easy between 15-20 June, the conditions were rainy and quite cold. We thought the flowering would be bad but it turned out good. For the Merlot there was no coulure or millerandage here, or in Pomerol and the Cabernet Sauvignon was a little affected as the rain arrived in the middle of flowering. After this rain there was mildew pressure, but fortunately after the beginning of July the rain stopped. On the Right Bank it was still a tricky situation. Afterwards there was excellent conditions and we even thought it would be too dry. The vines suddenly had little water and they had to adapt. We did a little de-leafting at the end of July. The vines on gravel soils were stressed by the dryness to the extent that by the end of August we were not confident of a good vintage. We thought there would be powerful wines but not the maturation because of the rain and stress from no rain in July and August. On 13 September we had around 20-30 millimeters of rain and this really finished the maturation, then after that, we had excellent conditions and we arrived at a level of maturity we had not expected. It was not until the middle of vinification that we realized that we had a good vintage. It was an easy harvest beginning around 23 September. The conditions were excellent with good sanitary conditions. Others decided to wait but there was no botrytis, so there was little point in waiting if we were to keep the freshness and a low pH. We have optical sorting here, but it was almost not necessary.”

I asked Eric if the 2016 has taught him anything: “I will remember that the vines can cope with more stress than we imagine. You can lose leaves. The berries are too small. You start to think it is too much. You are so anxious. But we have to now reevaluate this view.”

The 2016 Lafite-Rothschild is an excellent wine and to me, a step up from the 2015 last year. It is always a difficult wine to evaluate out of barrel, since it is much more defensive at this stage. By that, I mean it baulks at being examined at such an embryonic stage, like a shy child prodigy, reluctant to demonstrate its potential, which is why you have to coax it out of its shell for 30-40 minutes. However, it eventually revealed unerring focus and wonderful purity, plus an extraordinarily persistent aftertaste.

The biggest surprise in Pauillac was the sheer audacity of Lynch Bages. In 20 years, I cannot recall tasting a wine with as much daring-do, as much braggadocio as this wine. It is remarkable that it has coincided with a time where all but the old vat-room has been flattened to make way for a long-overdue new winery designed by “starchitect” Chien Chung Pie—a.k.a. the bloke who designed the glass pyramid outside the Louvre.
“We ended up harvesting less than we thought,” explained avid globe collector, Jean-Charles Cazes. “The Cabernet Sauvignon berries were small and so we did quite a lot of extraction. We cropped at 42 hectoliters per hectare. We did not have too much hydric stress and only some parcels were slightly affected. We did a bit of crop-thinning and not too much effeuillage [de-leafing] either. The harvesting was a bit later than in 2015: on 28 September with the Merlot. It was a laid-back picking where you could take your time. We finished on 12 October.”

The 2016 Lynch Bages is wine that seems to throw caution to the wind, aims higher than ever before. Often it can result in a wine overstretched itself and it ends up unbalanced and a bit embarrassing. Somehow the winemaking team has pulled it off despite all the upheaval at the winery-building site. It is the arching structure, the precision and focus that really took me aback, a crystalline beauty that makes out the best wines of this vintage. It might require long to reach its drinking window compared to its peers, but it will surely become a benchmark for the estate, just like the 1990 Lynch Bages did for his father.

What Jean-Charles and his family plans to do with the 2016 Haut-Batailley is another question. I don’t think even he knew when I asked him in Bordeaux. Certainly it was an odd situation to find Haut-Batailley in absentia at Grand Puy-Lacoste (and yes, how many like me had incorrectly assumed that it belonged to Xavier Borie?). Here was the team that made the wine unable to show it, prized away from their hands on primeur eve. Fact is, there is nothing the Borie family can do, though Emeline Borie remarked that they were extremely happy with the 2016 Haut-Batailley. It will be interesting to see what the Cazes family do with the wine and when they will eventually release it.

Back to Grand Puy Lacoste, I asked Emeline about the growing season. “It was hard. We were pretty scared until late June. There was a good flowering, however, during one week of beautiful weather. The week before and after were shitty. We had to be careful with the mildew. The weather changed around 14 July. The first two weeks had been fine, but it started to be really warm after that. The 2016 was picked between 28 September to 13 October at 45 hectoliter per hectare. We put the wine in barrel straight after vinification: three weeks in vat and then we transferred the free wine into new barrels, the pressed wine into used barrels. The blending was done in December, whereas we used to keep the wines in vats and blending in later January and the beginning of February. We had 55 lots to make the Grand Puy Lacoste and Lacoste-Borie. We used to do a plot by plot vinification but now it is intra-plot so that we can select and vinify separately.”

Readers will know that I hold Grand Puy Lacoste up as the bastion of quintessential Pauillac. It is a style that I adore and no, it is not the most flattering out of barrel. There are no frills when it comes to Grand Puy Lacoste. It can seem a bit aloof and distant at first, not unlike its stylistic sibling Montrose. Yet like that Saint Estèphe, it has changed over the last ten years, become less stubborn and more amenable to those that prefer not to wait a couple of centuries before it broaches maturity. The winemaking team has discretely made this Pauillac more approachable without compromising its intrinsic style. Part of that success has been down to oenologist, Christel Spinner, who has worked at the estate since 2012 and Emeline feels that she has made a big difference. The 2016 Grand Puy Lacoste exudes effortlessness this year, underpinned by very finessed tannins and beguiling purity of fruit, though it will still require several years in bottle.

Now to Pichon-Lalande where estate director and Robert Smith fan Nicolas Glumineau has seen a transformation in the last four or five vintages. The winery has been renewed after the acquisition in 2007 by champagne house Louis Roederer and at time of my visit, they were building an extensive building to the north side of the original château that will accommodate an old vintage cellar, offices and gardens. The builders made amazing progress during my stay in Bordeaux. When I visited at the beginning of my trip, it was a detritus-strewn building site. By the time I departed, they seemed almost finished. I wish the builders who did my loft conversion had been as efficient.
"Unexpected. Miraculous. Call it as you want. In June we were so scared about the rain before the flowering," Nicolas commented in typically effusive mood. "In August we were scared of the drought. In the end, I think I've never made a wine like this. There are few things we cannot manage and in agriculture, you are dependent on the weather. Once the wine is done, you try to look back to the conditions to learn something about the earth, the vineyard and your work. The one thing I know is nothing. There was so much work in the vineyard until June—we could not have expected such a result. The best Merlot are great, but it is definitely a Cabernet year and we knew that when we saw the juice before fermentation. During vinification it was very impressive. The 2016 is very homogenous in terms of quality and it is the direction I want to give for the winemaking, with strength and refinement. I love the 2015, but there is something on top for the 2016. You have the silkiness of the tannins in this vintage and this came after the rains in September (18-19 millimeters in September and 10 millimeters in October)."

The 2016 fits in with those classic, Cabernet Sauvignon-driven Pichon-Lalandes such as the 1986, 1996 and 2009, the proportion increasing from 65% in 2014 to 68% in 2015 and 75% in the 2016 (I am discounting the anomalous 2013 here, which was pure Cabernet Sauvignon!). Much like Lynch-Bages, it is an ambitious Pauillac that aims high and achieves high, demonstrating great structure and plenty of freshness and mineralité. There is a newfound confidence running through the veins of Pichon-Lalande, a property synonymous with historically female proprietors and what some might terms a more “feminine” style of wine, becoming a little more masculine. Well, gender fluid is fashionable these days.

Across at Pichon-Baron, definitely an “all man” Pauillac since as long as I can remember, Christian Seely and winemaker Jean-René Matignon guided me through their 2016s. I began by asking Christian his own view on the vintage. "I don’t think they will be 2009 inasmuch that you can drink them early, though not unlike 2005 where you have to wait. But I think they will reveal most when given time. I think it’s a great vintage in a fresher style, perhaps closer to 2010 than 2009, although 2010 was relatively closed and the 2016 is not. We are now more precise for the old Cabernet Sauvignon vines and gentle with the extraction. The 2016 has 15% Merlot, smaller than before and overall there is 20% less crop in 2016 than in 2015, because the Cabernet Sauvignon had small berries and yields were low. We felt that it was Cabernet year and increased the proportion."

I then asked Jean-René about the viticulture and harvest in 2016, “We reduced the canopy density to increase air circulation and we only de-leafed the first two or three rows. We did two pickings to separate the young and old vines. We found the young vines very good but they did not work in the blend of the Grand Vin. They seemed to dilute the blend. It was important to judge what we could use. We were very prudent.”

“We used optical sorting machines in 2016. They discarded about 4% of the crop, either Rosé or too small berries," continued Christian. “Nothing made us think it would be a great year until September, until we had the rain really. The vines were beginning to shut down a little at the end of August. Had we not had the rain, we would not have had a great vintage.”

The 2016 Pichon Baron is another in a string of beautifully crafted wines. It is more “correct” and “foursquare” than the Pichon-Lalande thanks to the dominance of the Cabernet Sauvignon. There is stunning delineation here, extremely focused and aristocratic, one of the more “serious” Pauillac in 2016 that will require several years ageing in bottle, but will give drinking pleasure measured in decades.

I visited Pontet-Canet on two occasions and looked on with awe at the organization of their team during en primeur week. It runs like clockwork. Alfie T. withdrew his wine from the UGC tastings three or four vintages ago, ergo hordes now descend upon his château. Groups assemble in the reception downstairs, as if the entire wine trade is awaiting to be called into their doctor’s surgery. Fleets of young girls, and it does seem to be 100% female, communicate through headphones so that each group ascends up to the spacious tasting room with perfect timing. Everyone has an ulterior motive when they visit and that is the Tesseron’s “school canteen” in one of the outhouses,
where tasters amass for a quick delicious lunch. All that's missing is the school bully poking his finger into your sticky toffee pudding and as far as I recall, Westcliff High School for Boys never served Pontet-Canet. (That was probably reserved for prefects.) Also, the selection of French cheese has to be seen to be believed, though I refrain because it interferes with my taste buds.

“The growing season was spectacular,” estate manager Jean-Michel Comme told me. “We had a rather wet spring, especially in May and June. There was a high pressure of disease, but we now have knowledge and experience from previous years [when the vineyard has converted to biodynamics]. It was important to prepare the vines [during the rainy first half of the growing season]. Downy mildew was a concern and we used preparations and copper, although we use a fraction of what is advised. Then from June it became hot and dry for more than three months, but the water reserves were sufficient because the roots here are very deep. There were sunny conditions throughout the harvest, which started on 28 September for the Merlot and 4 October for the Cabernet Sauvignon and finishing on 12 October.” I asked Jean-Michel whether the maceration was different compared to other years. “Since we have used biodynamics, we have found a lot of changes with the skins of the Cabernet Sauvignon in terms of the texture. I find there is a tactile difference. So there was a light pumping over because the skins give the tannins and color alone.”

This is a very sumptuous and thoroughly pleasurable 2016 from Pontet-Canet. It lies on the slightly more exotic style, a trait that I have detected since the introduction of amphora, whose use I am still not convinced of with respect to Bordeaux. Tasting the wine three or four times, I felt that it did improve each time, though I am still seeking just a little more typicité, more Pauillac in my Pontet. Nevertheless, it is a very accomplished wine, perhaps the most sensual within the appellation.

And talking of typicité, you could argue that they don’t come more typical than Château Batailley. That said, it is undergoing a discrete reinvention, partly motivated by the consultancy of the late Denis Dubourdieu and the recent and long overdue introduction of their second wine, Lion de Batailley—which Frédéric Castèja promises is not an ode to the British Lions rugby team. “It was a beautiful flowering: quite short and then a change of weather. It was dry with a lot of temperature differences between day and night, which helped the vine continue its growing cycle despite the lack of water. On 13 September there was the 40 millimeters of rain over two or three days that helped finish that maturation. There was late picking starting 3 October for the Merlot and 11 October for the Cabernet Sauvignon for Haut-Madrac [their Haut-Médoc estate]. We are picking later, but we do not want over-ripeness. We want to pick quickly when we want, which is especially important for the Merlot. We have three teams of pickers that we move from one property to another.”

As I mentioned in the beginning of my look at Pauillac, it is a relatively traditional appellation compared to Saint Emilion or arguably even Saint Estèphe in recent years. But there are changes. There has to be. Apart from the acquisition of Haut-Batailley and the pleasure-dome being erected at Lynch-Bages, there are new entrants on the scene such as the admittedly confusingly titled Château Paulliac, whose name alone gives the Wine Advocate search-engine a migraine. This 1.5-hectare vineyard in Saint-Lambert was courting First Growth interest until the owner of Château Fonbadet, Pascale Peyronie came in with a better offer. When I met her at Michel Rolland’s laboratory in Pomerol, she explained how her ancestor had purchased the rights to the generic name that she uses, despite protests from its incumbents. Legally she is free to use the title and so why not? (Apart from making it a bugger to search on the Internet.) I thought the 2016 Château Paulliac was good, but there is better to come, quite ravishing in style. Also there is the rejuvenated château-in-a-goldfish-bowl, Château Pédesclaux. I actually toured the winery last spring and admired the no expense spared modern winery. The 2016 Pédesclaux is perhaps the first vintage that genuinely delivers and impresses a hard-nosed critic like myself. It needs to build up a track record and build a loyal audience, so I do hope that prices remain reasonable, so that people can taste the wine and judge for themselves.
• A top performing year for both Moulis and Listrac, especially on those vineyard with clay-limestone soils.
• Most memorable Moulis or Listrac in 2016: Chasse Spleen.
• Best potential value-for-money: probably all of them!

Tasting upstairs at Château Lestage.
The communes of Moulis and Listrac in the hinterland between Margaux and Saint Julien are too often overlooked by cognoscenti. Mea culpa, I did not have time to visit any château during en primeur, not from not wishing to do so, but due to lack of time. That said, I did visit Château Lestage for one of many tastings. and organizers seemed almost gob-smacked that I had taken a detour to visit them. But one should, even if it is to give an indication that they are an important part of Bordeaux coverage and during my trip, I tasted as many wines from Moulis and Listrac as I could.

Away from the perceived spine of quality that follows the D2 from Margaux up to Saint Estèphe, there is an assumption that the further you go away from the Girondes, quality immediately plummets. That is not the case and Moulis and Listrac are advantaged by superior terroir. For sure, neither has witnessed the mega-bucks investments seemingly omnipresent in Saint Julien and Pauillac, and so in those terms, you could argue that they cannot keep up with the pack. On the other hand, there is excellent, propitious terroir here. In 2016 the clay-limestone sub-soils on the Grand-Poujeaux plateau advantaged those properties and enabled those with deep root systems to fully ripen the bunches without hydric stress.

Maybe this is the year to take another look at Moulis and Listrac, not least because their wines often represent outstanding value. Chasse Spleen probably leads the back with one of their best offerings for years, but take a look at the consistently over-performing Branas-Grand-Poujeaux, Poujeaux (owned by the Cuveliers of Clos Fourtet), Fonréaud, Brillette and Fourcas-Dupré to name a few.

SAINT JULIEN
At A Glance

- A-team effort. Consistent high quality wines that affirms Saint Julien's reputation as one of the most reliable communes.
- Lower alcohol levels than in 2015 and more precision.
- Good yields, mostly between 45-50 hectoliters per hectare.
- Best potential value-for-money: Clos du Marquis, Lagrange, Saint-Pierre.

Philippe Blanc, estate manager at Beychevelle, who crafted a sensational 2016 that redefines the property going forward.

I am going to begin with Beychevelle simply because their 2016 totally blew me away. It's the best Beychevelle ever made. Period. I have been joking in previous reports about the château constructing a new branch of Aldi on the D2 selling everything from cat food to dog food. Now I was afforded the chance to look around the new facility and there are no supermarket shelves or crackling Tannoy announcements for any available trained cashiers to report to Maureen on tills. Instead, there is a simple, functional, no frills winery designed to translate fruit into wine with maximum efficiency beginning in 2016. What a way to start.

"The winery gives us more space and give us more options. Punching down was difficult because the tanks were too small, so we have another way to extract in better conditions," Philippe explained. "When you do pumping over, it is always the same skins. They give everything they have got and then you can have bad tannins. By punching down we renovate the pumice or the cap and we use all the potential, not only at the top. It's a good mix between innovation and tradition. We can do pumping over 24 hours a day now when it used to be one hour in the morning and one in the afternoon. But we don't want to go too far—we want more frequency but less intensity. [See also Les Carmes Haut-Brion for their own unique solution.] We also use gravity to fill the tank and barrels instead of pumps, which can oxidize the juice. Finally we have increased the size of the barrel cellars with one room for each vintage, so we don't have to move the barrels. We prefer to use a more reduced atmosphere." It is all very tastefully designed; however, what is more important is that it has a tangible affect on the quality of the wine.

"The weather was so friendly after June. Before that it was stressful because our vineyard is organic. We had a few dry days during the flowering so it was very homogenous and summer was just perfect. We harvested over one month, picking each of the 60 different plots separately in 73- to 160-hectoliter tanks. It never quite works [in terms of the quantity of fruit fitting exactly inside the vessel], but this year we more or less have one block per vat. This year we used an outside refrigeration unit to cool the fruit. It gave us a pause, a chance to assess the quality of the plot before it goes into the tank."
The 2016 Beychevelle rewrote my preconceptions about the estate accumulated over two decades of visiting the property. I had never encountered a Beychevelle that came close to the finesse, complexity and purity of their latest vintage, a wine that hoists it up to the first tier of the appellation. That must partly be down to the winery, partly the expertise of Philippe Blanc. But also, I think that the addition of former Clinet winemaker Romain Ducolomb has made a difference, imparting a soupçon of opulence without detracting from the intrinsic character of the estate.

From the southern limit of Saint Julien to the northern, we go to Léoville Las-Cases, which is so good you’ll happily pawn your children’s favorite toys to secure a case or two. Jean-Hubert Delon, whose deep voice makes Barry White sound like a soprano, was enthusiastic about the vintage “When the Cabernet Sauvignon is at this level of ripeness, we don’t really need the Merlot, but we find that the Cabernet Franc is complementary. We had lots of rain during spring, but we had that week during flowering with dry weather. We were very lucky. We had some hydric stress mainly on the sandy soils. You needed old vines and some clay to prevent hydric stress. The richness came naturally so we did not have to extract too much.” The 2016 Léoville Las-Cases matches the Pauillac over the tributary aka Château Latour, pound for pound. Seamless, beguiling and almost ineffably complex, it is a scintillating Saint Julien that cruises to gold medal in the competition of best wine for that appellation, in what is a strong field this vintage.

On to Ducru Beaucaillou, where Bruno Borie first introduced his new team of winemakers and announced that an entirely new winery is planned for 2020. “The 2016 vintage was biblical in the sense that it was so difficult at the beginning. We had rain and pressure of mildew, oidium etc. Then there was a wonderful summer and then an Indian summer that was almost endless. We picked the grapes at the last moment. The picking took three weeks, waiting for the ripening of the Cabernet. It is a unique wine in terms of style: the juice seems to explode in your mouth and it is the first time I have had that impression. It was the longest season ever: 125-130 days after flowering, which was very long. That resulted in this kind of richness with big levels of anthocyanins. The Merlot was worked a little harder, but the Cabernet much less with almost no intervention.” This was a very impressive Ducru Beaucaillou, one of the best that I have tasted at the estate in recent years. Maybe like Léoville-Poyferré, I feel the growing season capped the exuberance that the wines sometimes convey, resulting in a 2016 that is extremely poised and more mineral-driven than ever.

How about Léoville Barton? Lilian Barton-Sartorius, always a jolly sort, escorted me across the road to the tasting room that looks unchanged from the 1950s (and I write that as a complement). “We were lucky when you compare to the rest of France,” she remarked, cognizant of the fate that befell Loire, Burgundy and Cognac in 2016. “The spring was pretty cold and wet with a late flowering, but by some miracle we did not have coulure or millerandage. Then it was hot and dry, but we had cool nights. We had the rain in mid-September and it was a bit more than we really wanted. But when we checked the grapes they were fine and there were no split berries. We could be comfortable in our picking and there were just two afternoons when there was a bit of rain. For the sorting, we have one line that is manual sorting and the other, the optical sorting machine. [Though Lilian not a big fan]. We conducted a soft maceration, but we always do that anyway. We started the malolactic fermentation via co-inoculation, which seems to prevent brettanomyces rather than bringing anything to the wine.”

Someone commented recently that Léoville Barton has never produced a superstar wine. I thought about it. He was right. I could not cite a vintage whereby Léoville Barton kicked the ball out of the park, transcended everything else that year. So what? Year-in, year-out, they produces delicious, well-crafted, high-quality Saint Julien that its legions of devoted fans—including myself—finish down to the very last drop. And without question, that is the more impressive feat. It is why we love Léoville-Barton. And no, whilst they did not produce best in show, it is the kind of wine that is going to give so much pleasure to so many people. As customary, I tasted the previous vintage alongside and that seemed to convince me that here, the 2015 Léoville Barton has the edge, although they are both superb. That is not the case for Langoa-Barton. I was a bit disappointed with the 2015
and re-tasting the wine a year on, I have no cause to change the view. But here the 2016 Langoa-Barton is much better and could be one of the standout values of the appellation.

"It’s a great vintage," remarked Didier Cuvelier when I dropped in at Léoville Poyferré. "It is the same level as 2009 and 2010, perhaps better. The level of alcohol is less and the wines have great freshness. The fruit is a bit like 2009 with the freshness of 2010. The Grand Vin is 13.5% alcohol. Everything was great except the yields that are 44 hectoliters per hectare compared to 48 hectolitres per hectare in 2015. This was because the yield of Cabernet was not good due to the small size of the berries. We started the harvest on 5 October and finished on 20 October. As Michel Rolland said, you could watch the harvest from a chaise longue. There was no stress.” Didier is right. Poyferré is always one of the most opulent and modern-styled Saint Julien wines, but in 2016 that opulence seems to be contained and it is struck through with wonderful freshness and precision. The 33% Merlot really lends this roundness towards the finish, so those seeking a more generous style of Saint Julien should come here, even if it does not have the dimension of the 2009 or 2010. What it does possess is killer focus and delineation.

At Château Gloria, proprietor Jean-Louis Triaud took us back up to his crows nest tasting room, the one you see on you left as the D2 curls round opposite the entrance of Ducru-Beaucaillou. It’s the one that photographer Johan Berglund damaged last year when he sat somewhere he should not have. Fortunately, Jean-Louis must have read my complaints and the room was vastly improved insofar that you no longer feel as if you are tasting in an incubator and I can rest my laptop somewhere horizontal.

“Something that surprised me at the end of August when we analyzed the grapes was how low the total acidity showed,” he explained. “Usually the Cabernet Sauvignon is around five to six grams per liter, but it was between three and four grams per liter. So I was quite anxious when we started harvesting. It is the first time that I have seen after fermentation with that level of free acidity, around 4.5 grams per liter at the end. It is the first time I have seen such a big difference between the field and winery analysis. We have a new technology to spray the cap that we can do throughout the day: 50% in the morning and 50% in the afternoon, ten minutes every two hours so that the extraction is better.” Gloria has a bit more caché than Château Saint-Pierre, however in 2016, I preferred the Saint-Pierre, likewise Jean-Louis when I asked him to choose one over the other. It just has that touch more focus and energy, wonderful delineation and persistence on the finish. It comes highly recommended and will hopefully represent great value.

At Château Lagrange, one of the largest estates in Bordeaux, I wondered whether it had been easy to cope with those wet and then dry conditions over such a wide area. “We had 747 millimeters of rain up until 23 June and then 22 millimeters until 13 September,” winemaker Matthieu Bordes explained. “We had hot weather that was incredible. At the end of July we saw that the vines had stopped growing and the berries changed color on 25 July. We had 10 millimeters of rainfall on 10 August and then 20-25 millimeters on 13 September. It increased the level of tartaric acid and increased the quality of phenolic compounds. Some plots in the beginning of September were blocked, specifically those whose roots were not so deep. We did some effeuillage at the end of flowering but immediately afterwards we stopped because of the heat-wave, so there was sunburn on some berries especially for the Cabernet Sauvignon. We started to pick the Merlot on 3 October until 13 October, then we stopped for four days and started the Cabernet Sauvignon on 17 October and finished 24 October. It is the longest harvest we have ever made at Lagrange. We had the best Petit Verdot since 2009 even though none went into the Grand Vin that year. There is 6% in the final blend in 2016. Analytically everything was higher than 2010 but we did not have to extract as much as in that year. But the tannins are better. The bunches were 30% less in weight for every grape variety due to the size of berry.”

Château Lagrange is such a dependable property. Maybe like Léoville Barton, it has never made what you might call a "superstar" wine and I cannot envisage it happening. That is no crime. Isn’t consistency something to be praised when it is at such a high level? I often think that the size of the property and the reasonable prices of its wine counts against Lagrange, but truth is that if you plonk a bottle of Lagrange in the middle of a dinner table, its contents will be imbibed quicker than
many a more aggrandizing château. It is yet another fantastic Saint Julien that really does not have a weak link this year and whilst it will not set investors’ pulse racing, it will for oenophiles.

At Branaire Ducru, sadly Patrick Maroteaux was unable to join us for health reasons (I wish him well), though his son was there to greet us. “There was a lot of humidity earlier in the season but this helped the vines develop good canopy and roots,” he told me. “This helped the second period. This meant that the old vines did not suffer from the drought, just some of the younger vines. The quality of tannins is very high thanks to the harvest. We started the Cabernet Sauvignon on 10 October, which is one of the latest ever. All the grape varieties had a great success. The IPT is 71 compared to 63 in 2015 and I feel that the 2016 is a good ambassador for the style of Branaire Ducru.” Again, this is a fine Branaire Ducru, one of the best in recent years. I maintain that they could ratchet up the concentration a couple of notches without losing the typicity of the property, but it should give two decades of drinking pleasure, possibly more.

**MARGAUX**

**At A Glance**

- Perhaps the one commune where the 2015s are generally better than 2016, although the qualitative difference is small.
- Why? The 2016 barrel samples did not quite exude the crystalline nature of 2015. But most have good concentration levels and complexity.
- Margaux has never had back-to-back successes like 2015 and 2016 for many years.
- Occasionally quite high yields thanks to the Merlot.
- Most memorable 2016: Brane-Cantenac.
- Best potential value-for-money: L’Aura de Cambon, Deyrem-Valentin, Dufort-Vivens, Ferrière.

*Henri Lurton, proprietor at Brane Cantenac, an estate that has produced its finest wine ever in 2016.*

This time last year during en primeur, word was circulating about the health of Paul Pontallier. Within days he had passed away far too young. I know that I am not the only one with the words “I’m here to see Paul” on my lips, whenever I visit this First Growth. Winemakers come and sadly,
winemakers go, but their legacies and their wines live on and so, Château Margaux must look towards the future. Philippe Bascaules, the former Château Margaux estate manager who had left to run Inglenook in Napa, returned last year to succeed Paul and joined us during the tasting, along with deputy managing director Aurélian Valence and estate manager Sébastien Vergne. We parked ourselves in the new tasting room that is spartanly furnished and rather austere. Next time Sir Norman Foster drafts plans for a winery or tasting room, perhaps he could design a table high enough so that writers do not have to lean down to reach their keyboard. If I wanted to do myself a back injury, I would become a harvester. Anyway, once I had parked my laptop on a sideboard positioned at a more comfortable height, I asked Sébastien to summarize the growing season at Château Margaux.

"Between January and March we had a lot of rain, 150 millimeters more than average, but between April and June we averaged the same level as the last 30 years," he explained. "There was about 550 millimeters from January to the end of June. The pressure from mildew was very high, although in the end there was no impact on yield. We were lucky in June during the flowering since there were four or five days of sun during this period, therefore the flowering was very efficient and there was no millerandage. We just did a small effeuillage on the top of the bunches. The summer temperatures were not too high apart from two weeks in August but the nights were pretty cold. Then there was very little rain until 13 September, which was the last day of the white harvest. From 22 June until 13 September there were just 8 millimeters of rain and then on that day we had 36 millimeters. We started the harvest for the white on 8 September and finished on 13 September, and the red from 23 September until 18 October—almost four weeks, one of the longest harvests ever. The berries were in perfect condition so we had the opportunity to wait. The grapes were small but we had a large number of berries per bunch, also with a lot of pips. There is about 13% vin de presse in 2016, which is about the average at Château Margaux in recent years. The alcohol level is around 13% for all three wines."

The 2016 Château Margaux is a spellbinding wine for sure. The final word in my tasting note, crystalline, neatly sums it up. I must admit that this was one where, during my evaluation, I deliberated about whether it might achieve something close to perfection—though my gut feeling is that the 2015 Château Margaux may just have the edge. However, let there be no doubt that the 2016 is an exquisite Margaux of breathtaking pulchritude, suave and sophisticated, a brilliant wine that is going to age with style and grace.

In 2016, Brane-Cantenac is to Margaux what Beychevelle is to Saint Julien and Lynch Bages is to Pauillac. By that, I mean that Henri Lurton and his team have created a benchmark wine that immediately impelled a reassessment of the potential of this property. Many Bordeaux-lovers form a mental hierarchy: Château Margaux at the top and Palmer and Rauzan Segla on the tier below. The 2016 positions Brane-Cantenac firmly on that second tier and dare I say within touching distance of the First Growth. Yes, it was that good. During en primeur, I always keep my ear to the ground as to which property winemakers themselves are excited about. In 2016 it was Brane-Cantenac. Often during chit-chat, a winemaker would express their admiration for Henri Lurton’s wine, the implication being that this vintage, they surpass all expectations. And they have. Tasted on four or five occasions including at the property, this is a benchmark Brane-Cantenac. “It was the first year we grafted some Cabernet onto some 25-year-old Merlot and it was the best fruit,” the quietly-spoken Henri told me. “It is located behind the cellar. We are using less Merlot in the blend these days. I like the structure of the 2016. It is like a work horse. The season was on the limit of dryness. Less powerful than 2010, but more finesse. It is a style that I really like.”

What is different about this Brane-Cantenac compared to others? (Keeping in mind I have tasted all recent vintages in vertical tastings in recent months.) Well, it still upholds its nom de plum as “the Pauillac of Margaux” since it is more structured and masculine than its peers. However, I find the 2016 less austere than recent vintages. The tannins are finer, there is more tension towards the finish and it is endowed with greater substance. In its youth, Brane-Cantenac seems to have “gaps” that would be filled in by bottle age. It is as if their new winery allows them to fill in these “gaps” to create a more cohesive and harmonious wine. Make sure Brane-Cantenac is on your primeur shopping list.
At Château Palmer, estate manager Thomas Duroux offered us a quick tour of a temporary exhibition of photographs by Sébastien Salgado. I can thoroughly recommend a look at these startling images—almost as good as Johan Berglund.

"We were extremely fortunate to have the second part of the growing season," said a relieved Thomas Duroux. "It was tough for us with the mildew pressure being organic and biodynamic. We lost part of the crop. What saved us was the quality of the vintage. We had to spray the vineyard within 12 hours and in June we did not have a window to spray. This especially effected the Merlot and the old Merlot used for Alter Ego. Our yield is 29 hecoliters per hectare, which is not bad compared to the top vintages in the past. Properties around us could produce a much higher yield. We lost around 20% of the crop. This was not too bad as there are parcels where the vine suffered from drought. We decided to reorganize our treatment and now we spray in less than six hours. We did not have too much hydric stress apart from young Merlot and on gravelly parcels, but it was not a lot. By end of September we knew we could have a great vintage, however it was a question of achieving ripeness. The 37 millimeters of rain completely changed the vintage. We started the harvest on 3 October, the latest on record and finished on the 18 October. The vinification was normal and this is our third vintage without sulphites before fermentation. Maybe we did a little more extraction than in 2015 as we felt the tannins were so good. There is less alcohol than last year, 13.1% for the Palmer and a IPT at 77."  

Palmer has furrowed a path in recent years, a more opulent style of Margaux, perhaps more flamboyant than its peers. Then that recedes during its bottle age, though it does mean that many drink Palmer way too young, so tempting it is during its youth. Yet the 2016 falls in line with the leitmotifs of the growing season, especially towards its finish that felt more masculine and linear than previous vintages, a trait that I welcome.

"I was thinking ‘shit’ by June," confessed head winemaker Nicolas Audebert when I visited Rauzan-Segla, using the same vernacular as Philippe Blanc (although I think all winemakers felt there were “dans le merde" that month). "It was humid with a lot of rain. There was a huge pressure of disease. We left more leaves on the plant to protect the bunches and also more bunches on the vine to keep the freshness. We have a very permeable soil so we didn’t have water staying on the surface. The orientation of the vines also helped. Then we had 38 millimeters of rain on 13 September. You could touch some of the berries and they would have burst [explaining their fragility]. Fortunately, there was a wind that dried the vineyard and there was no botrytis. The team conducted two harvests on each parcel to parse out those vines that showed excessive ripeness and those with very good density of berries. Just 45% [of the total production] went into the Grand Vin this year, the lots selects through blind tasting. The 2016 has a little more Cabernet Sauvignon than previous years. We fermented the riper bunches at a low temperature and at low extraction, and separated them from those with the elegance and acidity with what you would call a classic extraction."

The 2016 Rauzan-Segla is a supremely accomplished follow-up to the 2015, although if push comes to shove, I suspect that last year’s benchmark wine will have the upper hand. It is still a fantastic Margaux. What Nicolas has imparted is a bit more ambition, more bravado in Rauzan-Segla that consistently made excellent wines but rarely reached for the stars (though anyone who has tasted the 2005 recently will disagree). Again, this was a sample that blossomed only with 20-30 minutes in the glass. It was also fascinating to taste directly from barrels, both new and used, with the winemaking team to gauge the influence of each cooperage.

Alexandre van Beek showed his two Margaux properties under his charge, Château Giscours and Château du Tertre. I asked him his view on the 2016 vintage. "It’s the best of both worlds," he responded. "We were very lucky with the flowering during ten days of clear weather and having the rain just when you need it. You have sex appeal in the vintage and the intellect. I think the wines will last a long time. You had to be a little understated during the vinification." I was expecting a little more from Château du Tertre this year, although the Château Giscours continues its purple patch and follows the 2015 Giscours with a 2016 that is almost as good. Giscours is
certainly a property that should be up there with the likes of Palmer and Rauzan Segla, and it is heartening to see that investments in the property are finally being felt within this vastly improved wine compared to 15-20 years ago.

At Château d’Issan, a femme fatale escorted us upstairs to the tasting room replete with antique furniture that lends this historic medieval château a sense of timelessness. "This year I used more Merlot in the Blason d’Issan," Emmanuel Cruse explained. "The vats were so homogenous that we could have had more Merlot in the Grand Vin, but it would have changed the DNA of d’Issan. So this is why 2016 turned out to be one of our latest blending sessions, done at the beginning of February. In the end we decided not to use the young Merlot. We did not suffer any hydric stress. I think the 2016 has a little more precision than the 2015 since we are conducting more trials, during which we fine-tuned the Cabernet by one or two percent. We recovered the yield at d’Issan at 55 hectoliters per hectare, the second wine representing 55% of the total crop." This is a property that has discretely improved in quality in recent years, the wines now far more consistent and imbued with far greater substance than just a decade ago (which reminds me—I still have a vertical of d’Issan to publish). It may be the dark horse of Margaux this year and one hopes that prices remain reasonable, so that more people can enjoy the wine from this historic estate.

Elsewhere, there is plenty to delight in 2016. Proprietor Edouard Miaillhe oversaw an excellent 2016 Château Siran that puts some of those misfiring and occasionally over-egged wines from the nineties far behind. Consumers need to reassess Siran, because it is a vastly different Margaux that is now more elegant and refined. Likewise, there are superb wines from Cantenac Brown and one of my favorite lesser-known crus, Deyrem-Valentin.

HAUT-MÉDOC/MÉDOC

At A Glance

- Quality is dependent upon terroir, with the dry conditions causing vine stress and blocking maturity in less propitious soils.
- Those blessed with the best soils, such as La Lagune and Sociando-Mallet, produced outstanding wines.
- Most memorable Haut-Médoc or Médoc in 2016: La Lagune.
- Best potential value-for-money: take your pick.
“You looking at me?” Bernard Magrez is the proprietor of Pape-Clément of course, but this was taken at Château La Tour Carnet, his excellent Haut-Médoc and one of the most beautiful properties in Bordeaux.

As you would expect, since 2016 is a vintage whose quality is so frequently determined by quality of terroir, the appellations of the Médoc and Haut-Médoc are not as consistent as the communes of Pauillac, Saint Julien inter alia. But ignore the best wines from here at your peril, because in 2016 there are real gems waiting to be discovered and many of them will cost a fraction of more famous names.

Take La Lagune as just one example. I understand that Caroline Frey—whose family purchased the property in 2000—and her team might be a bit miffed that I was never taken with the 2015 last year, nor was I when granted an opportunity to re-examine it in February this year. However, their 2016 is a serious return to form with stupendous structure, impressive fruit concentration and wondrous freshness. Or moving north of Saint Estèphe, a 90-minute drive from La Lagune, there is a brilliant offering from Sociando-Mallet. This property can be a little up and down sometimes, but in 2016 they produced a fabulous wine that might be the best I have tasted from barrel. We have Belgrave, the estate just outside Saint Julien next to the equally impressive La Tour Carnet that consistently produces one of the best values and offers enticing Margaux-like aromatics. Or there is the 2016 de Villegeorge, owned by Marie-Laure Lurton, which instantly bought back memories of the 1961—one of the hidden gems of that epochal vintage.

I will let the tasting notes do the talking and guidance here. Not all of these wines will be released en primeur, but I am certain that some of the best value-for-money wines are included here.

PESSAC-LÉOGNAN/GRAVES

At A Glance

- An excellent year for Pessac-Léognan and the Graves, equal to 2015.
- Vineyards with more clayey soils had a slight advantage in terms of regulating water during the dry period.
- Some over-extraction with lesser crus trying to compensate for a stuck maturity cycle.
- Most memorable Pessac-Léognan in 2016: La Mission Haut-Brion.
- Best potential value-for-money: Carbonnieux, Pape-Clement (if Bernard Magrez adopts a similar pricing policy to 2015), Feran, Bouscaut.

Jean-Philippe Delmas, winemaker at Haut-Brion and La Mission Haut-Brion, has overseen a raft of splendid wines from the estates in recent vintages.

Pessac-Léognan is not unlike Margaux in some ways, in terms of its perception, rightly or wrongly, of it constituting a handful of top-performing estates and a plethora of others who could do better—unlike Pauillac or Saint Julien, where there is a strong top tier of consistency. However, like Margaux, it is so pleasing to see more and more properties raising their game, so that Pessac-Léognan becomes synonymous with more than one name, that of Haut-Brion. Just a quick glance how the likes of Smith Haut Lafitte, Malartic Lagravière and Haut-Bailly consistently furnish wine lovers with fermented grape juice far superior to those produced even just a decade ago, and you can understand why more consumers are paying just as much attention to Pessac-Léognan as elsewhere—merging the best of the Left Bank with the best of the Right.

Of course, this is the only appellation that gives you the choice of white or red, although as I stated in my introduction, the dry whites suffered during the long, dry growing season and most were unable to lock in the acidity levels, the tension that marks a great vintage for that genre. Consequently, many were clearly well made and yet there was no escaping the fact that they felt a little flat compared to the previous two vintages. To quote Jean-Philippe Delmas: “The rain in September was too late for the white, but perfect timing for the Cabernet Sauvignon.” He went on to explain how the Sémillon in particular suffered during the dry growing season, which is why for the first time their La Mission Haut-Brion Blanc is a majority of Sauvignon Blanc. I think it loses something in the process. Speaking to Fabien Teitgen at Smith Haut-Lafitte, he said: “When I picked the first young vines [of the whites] they were affected by the drought, but after the rain it developed the aromatics and the flavors. I picked quite late and slowly, parcel by parcel. It is not a crisp vintage. The 2016s white are more like 2010 and 2012 with more ripeness and volume.” That is just the way the cookie crumbled in 2016, but fortunately there is a raft of outstanding reds that more than make up.
We begin (where else?) at Château Haut-Brion, where I met with Jean-Philippe. “As you know, we had a lot of rain for the first six months. In terms of total rainfall we had around 700 millimeters, which was huge. By mid-June everyone in Bordeaux was anxious. The pressure was so strong in terms of mildew and we had to forget biodynamics in some plots where we are conducting that. The flowering was very homogenous and fast, which is difficult to understand due to the weather. We did some light de-leafing on the north and east side of the vine. From mid-June to mid-September there was no rain. When you have such a long period of drought you need to have a special terroir, which is clay. If you only have gravel and sand with a lot of drainage, then the vine suffered. You could see the difference between the parcels with clay and with less clay, such as those towards the University of Bordeaux. There is slightly more clay in La Mission Haut-Brion than Haut-Brion, so the vines suffered less and the yields are slightly higher at 55 hectoliters per hectare. In terms of quantity we have a higher quality, but if we add First and Second wines, it is the same as 2015. That is because we increased the quantity of the of the Third Wine. The yields was 52.1 hectoliters per hectare for Haut Brion. In 2016, we have more First Wine than Second Wine. The ripeness was quite slow and the result is that we have less alcohol than last year and more freshness, almost one degree in alcohol less than last year.”

I asked Jean-Philippe is he could make any comparisons between 2016 and other vintages. “It is difficult to compare with other vintages,” he replied. “In the last 15 years it is difficult to think of a similar La Mission. If you look at the analysis it is close to 1998.”

It is always a fascinating and educational exercise to juxtapose Haut-Brion and La Mission Haut-Brion. It should be part of the WSET curriculum. When doing so, it is unwise to just sniff, swirl ‘n swallow. They are both mutable wines that change “shape” in the glass and therefore you have to monitor their changes over the course of 30-40 minutes. This is exactly how I approached both samples. In the end, although both are sensational wines, in my opinion that extra bit of clay within La Mission Haut-Brion makes that extra bit of difference. It is an awe-inspiring wine, a multidimensional, profound La Mission blessed with otherworldly precision and astonishing persistence. That’s to take absolutely nothing away from the 2016 Haut-Brion that similarly has perfection within its sights. If you can afford it, then buy both so that you can spend a lifetime comparing the two, because the afterlife was created so we could savor these wines at their peak.

But there’s a new kid on the block (no, not Joey or Donny) with the same surname; first name Les Carmes. Last year, the suburbs of Bordeaux city were rudely awoken by a submarine surfacing above the tarmac and houses. This was the Philippe Starck-designed winery commissioned after Groupe Pichet acquired Les Carmes Haut-Brion in 2010. For all intents and purposes, it does look similar to the turret of a submarine, notwithstanding the fact that it is surrounded by water, which regulates the temperature of the barrel cellar below. Personally, I can take or leave ostentatious designs by the latest “starchitect,” however, there is no denying that it is quite brilliant piece of arresting architecture and at least we were able to photograph it, post-inauguration. Of course, all of this would be of little consequence if the wine did not match up to its architectural ambitions and the state-of-the-art winery that gives ex-Chapoutier winemaker Guillaume Pouthier practically everything at his disposal, from lines of amphora to specially-designed concrete vats each painted by a commissioned artist. I will not mention everything here since it deserves an article of its own, though I did like the giant rubber ring that is used to gently punch down the cap and mix up the solid matter as it funnels up through the center. Simple, but clever. “The rubber ring (we call it ‘donut’), is positioned on the marc during the alcoholic fermentation,” Guillaume explained, “It facilitates the infusion of the grapes by maintaining the whole clusters in permanent contact with the grape juice. When the rubber ring inflates, it is blocked by the top of the vat and pushes down the cap, maintaining it into the juice. This passive infusion allows to extract only what the nature is offering for the vintage. The idea was imported from the Loire region, where people work with a high proportion of Cabernet Franc.”

I asked Guillaume about the 2016 growing season. “First, it was a lucky vintage. We avoided the frost, hail and sunburn. In other regions there was a lot of problem with that. You need a bit of luck. It is a very great vintage in Bordeaux because normally when you have a great vintage you have a lot of power with a lot of tannin, but you have less perfume. This year you have the power with
good extraction with a very interesting perfume. It is also important that when the last grape variety is ripe, all the other grape varieties are ripe, so you can decide when to pick. I started the harvest 14 September and finished on 28 September in order to keep the freshness and acidity. For the 2016 Les Carmes Haut-Brion, the alcohol level is 1.5% less than 2010 and the pH is the same as in 1970. It is a different style of 2015 Les Carmes Haut-Brion. There is lot of salinity that enhances the drinkability of the wine. It has very fine tannins. It will drink early, but will last for 50 years.”

The word that Guillaume kept saying was “salinity.” That certainly comes through in this Les Carmes Haut-Brion that has the audacity of say the Lynch Bages, to wit, wines that throw down a marker. It is not an instant wine. It is a cerebral wine, broody at first, one that unveils its virtues gradually, prized open by aeration. After examining the wine closely for 25-30 minutes, I appreciated how this Pessac-Léognan is beginning to furrow its own path thanks to the significant contribution of the Cabernet Franc, which here represents 41% of the blend. To that extent, I can see why you could compare it to Lafleur in Pomerol, and it would fascinating to compare the two side-by-side. It is clear that the Pichet family have grand ambitions for this previously “also-ran” estate that has always been over-shadowed by nearby château born with the same surname. Yet this is the first serious wine from Les Carmes Haut-Brion and their 2016 marks its arrival.

We then drove down to Smith Haut Lafitte where I dreamed about a soothing massage in the Caudelié hotel. After three weeks of tasting my joints and muscles were beginning to ache. But no, there were wines to taste and Florence and Daniel Cathiard to meet. Florence was in sparkling form and when I asked my “If your 2016 was an animal...” question (see Wine Journal), she professed her secret penchant for zoos. Who knew? Moving on to all things vinous, winemaker Fabien Tietgen gave his impression of a vintage that their booklet describes as “a catastrophe that never was,” which could equally be applied to my life so far. “We tried to keep the shape and balance [of the wines] to keep the freshness and acidity. The 2015s were more black and spicier without the same level of acidity. This is closer to 2010 in style. We did not know we would have a good vintage until the end of August, but the rain of the 12 September kept the freshness...”

That date: 12 September. I checked the fiche technique and sure enough it stated that those crucial September rains fell one day earlier than everywhere else. I asked Fabien if he was certain and he was convinced that it was 12 September. But unless a raincloud sped ahead of the pack and lodged over Smith Haut-Lafitte 24 hours in advance, then I presume it is a typo.

“The seeds became ripe very early, but we had to wait for ripeness of the skin. Then we commenced picking on 29 September with the Merlot.” Interestingly, this is one of several properties like Les Carmes Haut-Brion experimenting with whole bunch fruit and to that end, there is 10% included in the Grand Vin this year. Now, this is a brilliant Smith Haut-Lafitte. Fabien has the exacting standards of his bosses and that shows through on this sublime Pessac-Léognan that in some ways shares the saline undertow that I mentioned apropos Les Carmes Haut-Brion. There is a subtle marine influence at play, lending this Smith Haut Lafitte disarming complexity, an additional dimension compared to the 2015 last year.

At Haut-Bailly, sadly Véronique Sanders was not attired in her luminous green trousers like last year. Still, her 2016 Haut-Bailly is one of the standouts of the appellation this year. “There was some frost in Léognan on 29 April,” she told me. “We flirted with disaster because the temperature went down to -4 degrees Celsius. Flowering took place on 10 June and we were expecting abundant yields. During the dry period from July we did not see any stress, except for a small parcels of complanté vines. By the end of August, we knew we had a big crop but we knew we needed a warm September. Then we had the 19.5 millimeters of rain on 13 September and the harvest went perfectly.”

This is an outstanding 2016 from Haut-Bailly. One of the reasons cited by Véronique has been the improved pruning of the vines. Thanks to one Massimo Giuducci, a pruning “master” who has consulted at this estate for five years and passed his knowledge to the team. I was fascinated to learn that he teaches an old pruning method known as Guyot-Poussart that is designed to enhance the flow of sap in the vine. I loved the sappiness of this Haut-Bailly. There are recent vintages
where I felt it flirted with excess for my palate, but this 2016 manages to confer the same levels of fruit intensity upon the sense, but somehow streamlines everything, enhancing the delineation and particularly the detail on the finish.

At **Domaine de Chevalier**, the indefatigable Olivier Bernard, whilst running the entire administrative side of Bordeaux—as acting president of the Union de Grand Cru and ringing bells at the Academie du Vin dinner (story for another time)—has overseen a predictably sublime 2016. It is the perfume that is utterly entrancing, a wafer of dried Japanese nori, which admittedly I am susceptible to since my kids munch it for breakfast, lending real character on the nose, whilst the palate is beautifully balanced but powerful on the finish. **Château Pape-Clement** was a little more variable. Tasted on several occasions, with Bernard Magrez at La Tour Carnet, I felt it had slipped back into some of those excessively extracted wines of the previous decade. However, subsequent showing testified a 2016 Pape-Clement that was much more composed without compensating the level of fruit, adorned with an unexpected graphite note lingering on the aftertaste. I also wish to mention the exquisite **2016 Carbonnieux**. It is not the coolest of names to drop. It does not have investors in a lather. However, what a gorgeous wine Eric Perrin and his team have produced: exceptionally pure and refined, complex and with great depth on the finish.

**POMEROL**

**At A Glance**

- An excellent vintage, though perhaps not quite at the level of 2015.
- Best 2016 located on old vines on the plateau. The finest are exceptionally pure with outstanding minerality.
- Younger vines, those on sandier soils to the west of the appellation, suffered vine stress/blocked maturity.
- Often structured wines with higher IPT levels than other years.
- Tendency for some of the lesser crus to over-compensate in the winery via heavy extraction.
- Cabernet Franc suffered more than the Merlot, so occasionally the percentage blend is less than 2015.
- Most memorable Pomerols in 2016: Clinet and Le Pin.
- Best potential value: Clos du Clocher, La Grave à Pomerol, Clos de la Vieille Eglise, La Croix de Gay.
Tasting in the offices of Ets. J-P Moueix. Not quite sure what Christian Moueix is demonstrating there. Flying maybe?

Pomerol evokes many fond memories from the period researching my book. Since its publication in 2012—and no, I don’t have any copies left—soporific Pomerol has changed, albeit slowly. Unlike the rest of Bordeaux it remains unclassified, though there exists an unofficial one depending how you answer: Are your vines on the plateau? In 2016, that makes one hell of a difference. In addition, below its seemingly static surface, there is a continuing discrete exchange of parcels, new crus surfacing such as Enclos Tourmaline and the inchoate Château Séraphine from former Château de Sours owner, Martin Krajewski.

The gravel terrace that ascends to a vertiginous 42 meters determined the quality of Pomerol in 2016. As recounted in the main introduction of this report, that was difficult to envisage when I was caught in a ferocious storm driving from the village of Catusseau up to Clinet. Even just past Trotanoy, in some of its best terroirs, the drains could not cope with the deluge, spilling turbid brown water back into the vineyard so that the vines were waist-deep water. Do not underestimate how vital these man-made drains are for the Pomerolais, because the land’s contours do not allow heavy rain to wash away naturally or efficiently. Until its implementation, some of its most revered vineyards were prone to flooding. Testament to the importance of the drains system, when I returned to the same spot just three hours later, there were just a few puddles evidencing the storm. However, driving down past Clinet and further to Pomerol’s lower reaches, the rainwater had nowhere to go to such an extent that roads were dangerous and impassable. How the vines here must look enviously upon those just a few meters up on the plateau. The rainwater eventually disappeared but the vines on sandier soils then had to cope with those drought-like conditions from June until harvest. Eric Kohler told me that at L’Evangile, the vines lost around half the leaves—and that’s in one of the best locations on the plateau. When I visited the region last year, some expounded the view that in 2016, these properties on sandy soils in the lower reaches had in fact made very good wine. However, this was not born out by the samples that I tasted. In 2016, basically you had to be on the plateau, and older vines whose spatial root system could eke moisture up from deep below were sine qua non. If not, then you suffered blockage in terms of the vine ripening the fruit.
Generally, the Cabernet Franc suffered more than the Merlot in 2016 and this means that some properties such as Vieux Château Certan reduced the contribution of Cabernet Franc in the final blend. That does not preclude winemakers from making high-quality Pomerol, yet it deprives those same wines of an extra layer of complexity and for that reason, I feel this is one appellation where the 2015 might surpass the 2016. I was not the only person to think that. There are a clutch of exceptional Pomerol wines this vintage, however 2015 might turn out to be more consistent. We will see.

Let’s begin our tour of the appellation exactly where I was caught in that flash flood (maybe it would be a fitting end, drowning in Pomerol amongst the vines). Fortunately, there was no torrential storm at Château Clinet and as it turned out, they produced one of the standout Pomerol wines in 2016. “We were thinking by early September that we needed a huge rain,” proprietor Ronan Laborde explained. “The leaves had begun turning away from the sun. We knew that five millimeters would not have been enough...Then we had 40 millimeters. The berries were very small at about one gram per berry. Fortunately, there were perfect sanitary conditions and there was nothing to select—flowering had been good, so it was very homogenous. The color came quickly and the juice needed only a three-week maceration, which is short compared to other vintages. Because of the high density of tannins, we increased the new oak to 70% and the remainder in one-year-old oak. The malolactic fermentation was very quick and finished on 28 November. The 2016 is not comparable to other vintage because of the high level of anthocyanins and tannins.” The 2016 Clinet surpasses both the 2014 and 2015. I admire the structure and backbone of this Pomerol that derives from the pivotal 10% of Cabernet Sauvignon. There is a sense of class and sophistication here. Where once Clinet was more about gloss and power, this 2016 has a newfound sense of sophistication without compromising an iota of fruit. It is a brilliant wine.

Round the corner at L’Eglise-Clinet, Denis Durantou was there to guide us through his half-dozen portfolio, which as usual comprises his outstanding, value-busting crus from Lalande de Pomerol—such as Les Cruzelles and La Chenade, must-buys practically every vintage. I asked Denis, what were the critical factors in 2016? “You had to spray at the right time,” he replied. “When it was sunny weather you had to spray immediately. In my opinion it would be impossible with a biodynamic approach. This year I decided not to blend 80 hectolitres of old vines and decided to sell it in bulk. The only stress was with some younger vines, four years old on sandy soils. We have lower alcohol than in 2015, for example l’Eglise-Clinet is around 14.2-14.3%. I remember it was the first time that my workers, when tasting my wines, commented on aromas such as violets.” One phrase that Denis used was that 2016 is the “…revenge of the Merlot!” By that he means that 2016 is a pertinent reminder of what Merlot can do, when much of the talk and many scribers, including myself, have focused upon Cabernet Franc. I agree to an extent. This vintage evinces the quality of Merlot, albeit when located on the right terroir and in the hands of a skilled winemaker. L’Eglise-Clinet can occasionally be difficult to taste when it is in barrel and always needs time in the glass to open up. But this is a serious 2016 from Denis this year: beautifully focused and wonderful delineated, but with a soupçon of mystery!

Talking of wines that often do not flatter out of barrel—Lafleur. Baptiste, Julie and their daughters no longer live at the château and relocated to an abode more suitable for a growing family, though just a ten minute drive away from the vines. Together with his assistant Omri, who seems to have boundless energy 24/7, Baptiste took me through his latest releases both from Lafleur and Grand Village, where parents Jacques and Sylvie call home, plus the latest Acte and their excellent white Les Champs Libres. “There were three sequences,” Baptiste explained. “One important sequence is that the last six months of 2015 were very dry. The next six months were rainy but because of the dryness in 2015, by the third week of July we were already finding hydric stress in the vines. In just four weeks the vine had started missing water. That is because after the dry conditions in 2015, the rain was not able to penetrate the soil because the clay had hardened. We were really in summer conditions. July had less than 15 millimeters of rain and August was warmer than normal. The third important sequence was the change in weather on 13 September when it became autumnal and cool at night, which created perfect conditions for a slow ripeness. We started picking a few bunches of Merlot at the end of September. One thing I should say is that we only realized the quality [of the 2016] after the malolactic fermentation. Before there were many
questions and the wines kept changing.” The 2016 Lafleur is an immense wine: beautifully pixelated, that significant 55% Cabernet Franc perhaps contradicting Denis Durantou’s playful comment that the year was revenge for the Merlot! It is one of the best that I have tasted, an introspective and cerebral Pomerol that will require a minimum decade in bottle. Is it up there with legends such as the 1982 and 2000? It’s close, but I’ll need more convincing once the wine is in bottle. Who knows?

It is interesting to compare Lafleur with Vieux-Château-Certan. Whereas the Cabernet Franc forms the mainstay of Lafleur year-in and year-out, Alexandre Thienpont is more fluid with his blending, insofar that vintages can contain 30-35% Cabernet Franc and in others, very little. “It is the year of contrast. Wet and humid in the spring, and dry in the summer. We had a lot of rain until June, around 530 millimeters, which is the same as the whole of 2015,” he told me. “Normally we have three batches of Cabernet Franc, but there is just one this year due to the drought. A block on gravel got stuck, but another parcel of Cabernet Franc with more clayey soil was fantastic. During the harvest we made two selections according to vine vigor using GPS system and marking the stakes for the stressed vines. We are told that vines produce polyphenols when they are stressed, which is why the tannins are high (the IPT is 82). You had to be patient to wait for rain. We had 30 millimeters of rain at the end of September. This was important. The 2016 is therefore more like 2009 and 2010 with more Merlot.” Now, I do love this latest VCC, however, I uphold my argument that a bona fide classic, awe-inspiring VCC contains a slightly higher proportion of Cabernet Franc. I want to feel and experience its relationship with the Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon. And it is for this reason I did not go overboard with my score like last year, though I still absolutely adore the wine.

When I was with Alexandre Thienpont and his son Guillaume, I was invited to taste the 2016 Le Pin since Jacques was away. I wrote one note here and another the following week, once Jacques was back and pouring the wines at his home rather than cellar—since the dead-end road to Le Pin was being resurfaced. Jacques had thoughtfully stuck a sign in the back of his parked Range Rover indicating where visitors should go. Now, I am not one of these critics that genuflects at any icon. There are some vintages of Le Pin that I think are great and others less so, and I write that having tasted all of them, even the declassified 2013. Certainly if I take stock of all vintages, in my opinion Vieux Château Certan tends to be the better wine... but not in 2016. It’s Le Pin’s year. This is a glorious, tensile and quite mineral-driven Pomerol that is one of the best that I have tasted in recent years. It has a disarming purity that left me smitten and certainly my colleague Lisa Perrotti-Brown, who seemed entranced. Certainly the meticulous approach, marking every stake to indicate vines that were lagging behind in maturity, has paid rich dividends and it would appear that they picked exactly at the optimal moment from 4 to 8 October. It is not going to be cheap. It will not be two-for-one in the supermarket. But it is a bit amazing.

Talking of cheap wines—Petrus! Olivier Berrouet was there to show me the latest wine —difficult to believe it is almost a decade since he took over from his father Jean-Claude. After showing me some fascinating and thoroughly educational videos on his mobile phone, we got down to the nitty-gritty. “I think 2016 was an extreme year,” he commented. “We had a very wet season until June with approximately 720 to 750 millimeters of rain and 120 millimeters just in June. We had to spray everything by hand. We went from one extreme to another. We had two or three months of drought, although temperatures were not too high, the average for Bordeaux. The goal was to find the perfect balance during the maturity in terms of picking date and vinification. We did not want to go too far, so that we could find an equilibrium between the aromatics and the tannic structure of the wine. In this vintage, the clay is perfect because it can cope with too much water in the early part of the season and too little water in the late part of the season.

“We started the harvest on 28 September and finished on 11 October. Each vine, depending on its age, rootstock and orientation, reacted in a different way—so you had to be precise and rigorous because the balance is so fragile. You need to think block by block...” One interesting point that Olivier made was about rootstock. At Petrus they use 3309 instead of Riparia; 3309 is very efficient in these conditions so that only the young plants suffered during the dry months and the canopy remained green. I can confirm that firsthand, since I walked through the vineyard during the first
day of harvest. Olivier also remarked that his father compares the 2016 to the 1975 due to its small berries and huge tannic potential.

The 2016 Petrus is an amazing wine. I afforded my sample 30-40 minutes to open and it blossomed in the glass, revealing hidden depths and complexity. Yes, there is incredible precision here. Is it the best I have ever tasted at the estate? I need to be convinced of that. Maybe it did not quite sparkle like the 2015 Petrus last year that was utterly bewitching. Carrying a deftly-disguised 14.9% alcohol, I wondered whether the propitious nature of its famous blue clay could both act as an advantage during wet conditions, but might have powered ripeness along a little too enthusiastically throughout the sunny dry period up until harvest. I remained cautious in my judgment. It is one of those wines I would like to re-taste later this year, when it would not surprise me to find it ratcheting up the ante.

Of course, J-P Moueix are no longer the custodians of Petrus, which belongs to Christian Moueix’s brother, the elusive Jean-François and his son Jean. Then again, they do have Trotanoy, in my mind one of the greatest Pomerol terroirs out there. As usual their portfolio was tasted at Libourne where Christian and Edouard Moueix were waiting. “In the vineyard, we had a difficult time until June but we were very fortunate with the flowering,” Edouard explained. “But it was the most stressed vineyard since 1990,” interjected his father and at this point, I should mention how I always appreciate the frankness of Moueix father and son. “We are discovering the 2016 vintage, which means that we know it is a good to very good vintage,” Edouard continued. “We have a small preference for 2015 as it is more complete and harmonious, but 2016 is very good with more tension. They are not as round, but they have more acidity. For example in 2015, the average pH was 3.9 and in 2016 it is 3.7 pH, so the wine will probably age well. The berries were small because of the drought. Some of the wines on lower soils did better in 2016 than 2015. On the plateau the young vines were stressed. It is an old vine vintage with an established root system. It was not too hot, it was just dry. They have a natural concentration of structure and muscle due to the size of the berries. The yields are higher than in 2015: the lowest is at La Fleur Pétrus at 32 hectoliters per hectare. Out of the main Cabernet Franc, they suffered apart from the old vines in Lafleur Petrus.”

In many ways, the portfolio reflected the comments made by Edouard and Christian, incidentally after I had tasted the wines. There was some variation. I still cannot understand what is happening at Certan de May, a potentially great terroir that seems out of sorts at the moment. To be brutally honest, I was expecting more from both Latour-à-Pomerol and maybe even La Fleur Pétrus that has furnished us with magical wines recently. As if to put these wines in perspective, the Trotanoy was truly magnificent: regal, unfathomably complex and simply up there with the very best Pomerol produced in 2016. There was just so much harmony and tension, a livewire Trotanoy that is likely to close down and then reopen before cruising at a high altitude for many years.

Over to La Conseillante that I visited on two occasions and where winemaker Marielle Cazaux is doing a fine job honing the style of this great Pomerol estate. “We had a very wet winter with a lot of rain from January to June,” she told me up in their tasting room, flanked by co-proprietor Valmy Nicolas. “In total there was around 700 millimeters of rainfall, especially in January and in June. We were very afraid. The flowering had been very good so we had a lot of grapes. But we were afraid of coulure, which had an impact. But the balance between the number of grapes and coulure was okay. Rot was a problem. It was like Bangkok in June with all the humidity! We sprayed with 95% organic products and we had to work on weekends. The guys had to be on call from June to July because this is when the vines are very sensitive to mildew. Just after 20 June, the rain stopped and there was a long and dry period when sometimes temperatures were above 35 degrees Celsius. July and August were hot and suddenly there was no more water. On the clay, the vines were hydrated because of the reserves but on the young vines, the roots were too shallow and they suffered and lost their leaves. We cut a lot of grapes to ensure that the plants survived and there is one parcel where we do not know whether it will go even into the Deuxième Vin. But the main vineyard with vines between ten and forty years old had no problem. On 13 September we had 30 millimeters of rain and restarted the vine, which is why we cropped later than in 2015 when the vines never stopped. I was thinking, ‘don’t rush but don’t wait too long.’ There is more
acidity in 2016 and the aromas are better, and I think they have better balance. The 2016 underwent a cold fermentation for four or five days at eight degrees Celsius. It is the first time that this has been done and it was because the vintage was very ripe with no botryls."

There is a renewed sense of determination at La Conseillante that I feel coincided with Marielle’s appointment. I feel that both from her and the proprietors, the Nicolas family. This is an estate that wants to be at the top of the tree and given the propitious nature of their terroir and their refurbished winery, there is nothing to suggest that it will not happen. Certainly the 2016 La Conseillante is a step in that direction. It’s not quite the perfect specimen and there is still a little way to go. However, you cannot deny the purity, delineation and persistence on the saline finish that all augur for an exceptional Pomerol. The structure suggests that it deserves several years in bottle but as I mention in my note, it will be worth the wait. In the next decade the wind will blow in their direction and you will find them making one of the wines of the vintage. That of which I am sure.

At Clos du Clocher, Jean-Baptiste Bourotte has overseen one of best wines. This address produced good, but rarely great vintages until recent years, and it should have been performing better given its location on the central plateau right in front of the church. "I was wondering what would happen during the growing season but in the end I didn’t see too many of the vines suffering," he told me. "We have a very good pH level, around 3.65 that is perfect for us. On sandy soils the wines can be a bit acidic. Only the very young vines lost their leaves, not the old vines even if they are on sand. The roots did not go far down enough to reach the clay. The eastern part of the plateau reach maturity far more quickly than the western part." Clos du Clocher might be the ‘insiders’ choice’ in 2016, not as well known as some of the aforementioned estates, but producing quintessential Pomerol wines adorned with both complexity and deliciousness.

Elsewhere, I want to mention one of the best vintages of Le Point courtesy of estate manager Eric Monoret, with the advisory assistance of Hubert de Boüard. He has overseen a rejuvenation of this Pomerol property, parsing out some of the less propitious, sandier terroirs to focus on the best. The results can be seen in the glass. Also the wonderful 2016 Gazin, which is enjoying its finest run of form since I began tasting the wine in the 1990s.

I will leave it here for now. You will find dozens of tasting notes, not only from familiar names, but also from minuscule crus that one rarely sees outside the region—most of them encountered at the Syndicate tasting, which always seems too empty. That said, I always make one or two discoveries there.

SAINT EMILION

At A Glance

- Many high quality wines, though the size and heterogeneous nature of the appellation means that there is, as always, great variation. Pick wisely.
- Terroir crucial. Best wines on gravel soils on the plateau (Cheval Blanc and Figeac) or on the limestone slopes (for example Ausone, Pavie, Canon inter alia).
- Movement towards earlier picking, less use of 100% new oak by rote and shorter extraction times. Careful and prudent winemaking resulted in excellent wines.
- Most memorable Saint Emilion in 2016: Figeac and Ausone.
- Best potential value-for-money: Grand-Mayne, Pindefleurs, Tour Saint-Christophe, Badette and Corbin.
A sublime photograph by Johan Berglund of Pauline Vauthier with her two faithful hounds that somehow captures the atmosphere at Ausone.

Saint Emilion and Pomerol dominate coverage of the Right Bank, as you expect. The difference is that whilst Pomerol can be perceived as a delimited area with a finite reasonable number of château to visit/samples to review, Saint Emilion is without horizon. It seems to go on forever, which is a good or bad thing depending upon the vintage and your affection for its wines. There is always another Saint Emilion property to visit, a new discovery or another consultant’s vast portfolio awaiting inspection. Even though Saint Emilion accounts for more tasting notes than any other appellation, there is nevertheless a personal, dissatisfying sense of tasting only part of what it has to offer. In this report, I focus on the most illustrious names, otherwise I would be there forever. I encourage readers to peruse the full list of tasting notes, since there are plenty of very commendable wines courtesy of less familiar estates this year.

The sheer size of Saint Emilion and the fact that it contains such a myriad of soil types, geology, orientation and practices, means that inevitably there are going to be highs and lows tasting so many samples. However, Saint Emilion is certainly changing and that change is accelerating. The dogma of late, or more accurately, “latest possible” picking is receding and being replaced by harvest dates that correspond to optimal picking times subject to the growing season. The notion of smaller yields being considered mandatory for notionally superior wine is also ebbing away, in fact, some winemaker such as Pierre Lurton argue that the higher yields of 40-50 hectoliters per hectare enabled them to make a better and more balanced wine in 2016, to control the potential excesses of the fruit and capture freshness. His view was echoed several times, a view that you would not have heard a decade ago. This has gone hand in hand with more considered use of new oak, insofar that 100% might be considered, but what if say, 70-80% is even better? Check my interviews at Ausone and Pavie if you are not still digesting my scores. Extraction is gradually becoming shorter and gentler, crucial in 2016 because the anthocyanins were so easy to leach from the berries.

Of course, there are those that maybe became over-enthusiastic in the winery and pushed the wines too hard. Since the style of 2016 is more classic, these tended to stick out and communicate the proprietors’ or in a couple of cases, consultants’ ambitions rather than the nuances of a particular growing season. There was one occasion where a consultants’ wines seemed to come
from a totally different vintage to a random list of others, those wines corralled in a direction often away and not towards the style of the vintage, thereby rendering them formulaic.

Let us begin with perhaps the headline-grabbing estate in 2016: Château Figeac. It is remarkable that after a period whereupon the property tried and yet failed to hit the run of form that spawned so many astonishing wines in the 1940s and 1950s, Figeac had rediscovered the potential of its terroir, to wit, the gravel croupes that extend from the Pomerol plateau via Cheval Blanc. The challenge was to meliorate the significant Cabernet components that had sometimes failed to fully ripen and then suture that with the Merlot. Bringing Michel Rolland on board was a canny move. For sure, some journalists bang on about the ruination of classic Figeac, a wine that some hold up as the antithesis of whatever they perceive an archetypal Rolland wine to be. The truth, as I have outlined in recent reports, is that Michel is a blender without equal. Even his fiercest detractors have privately remarked as such. At Figeac, that is where his contribution makes a world of difference. But the man behind the wheel at Figeac is estate director Frédéric Faye, lest we forget, someone the late Thierry Manoncourt took under his wing as a trainee, who has lived and breathed Figeac his entire life. It has been a long road to get here, but the 2016 Figeac is a wine that compares with legends like the 1947 and 1949 Figeac, and since then, only the 2015 has come close.

I made an impromptu visit during my first week on the Right Bank. The wine had been opened too long and the sample was not correct. I returned the following week and then I found the magnificent Figeac that I had been hoping for. Another encounter the following week confirmed that this is the real deal, perhaps the first “complete” Figeac that I have tasted.

“"It was difficult until June. It was cold and rainy; it was not easy," Frédéric Faye told me when I dropped in at the estate. He is a congenial man who already seems to have so much wisdom despite being the right side of forty. "We were lucky to have perfect weather during flowering. After it was very dry with a lot of sunshine, hot during the day but cold at night." I wanted to know how the different grape varieties had performed in 2016 and here, it is interesting to compare his reply with that of Pierre Lurton at Cheval Blanc. “The Cabernet Sauvignon was perfect, planted at the top of the hill, whereas the Cabernet Franc took longer to reach ripeness. The Merlot worked well and we did just a gentle de-leafing for that. The ripeness took a long time to come so it was a late harvest. The young plants and the complanté vines were parsed out in the harvest. This is the first time this has been done and these were blended into the Deuxième Vin. The ripeness of the tannin and flavor arrived at the same time for the Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon, and we had to just wait a little longer for the Cabernet Franc. The 2016 Figeac is a step up in terms of balance, precision and harmony compared to the 2015. It will remain a reference point in terms of fine-tuning tannin. I think the wine will be approachable, but with good potential for ageing."

The 2016 Figeac is a stunning wine that manages to surpass the 2015 that I hailed last year. It is the effortless nature of this wine that takes you aback. In this atypical growing season, the Cabernets component, 26% Cabernet Franc and 38% Cabernet Sauvignon, advantaged the wine—as if borrowing what makes the Pauillacs so special this year and marrying it with the sensuality that the Merlot has to offer. That 40 millimeters of rain on 13 September was the perfect amount to revivify the vines and push them on to maturity, and the result is both a candidate for wine of the vintage and the best Figeac ever made—thus far. I say that because in early April they announced that they would be constructing a brand new vat-house and cellars ready for the 2019 harvest. The mind boggles at the potential.

So let’s now skip over to Cheval Blanc because it makes for an interesting juxtaposition given the grape varieties. We were joined by the youthful Pierre-Olivier Clouet and the even more youthful Pierre Lurton, the “Benjamin Button of Saint Emilion” since he appears younger every vintage. Pierre-Olivier began with an intriguing proposition about what constitutes a quintessential Cheval Blanc...

“"The 2016 is really the DNA of Cheval Blanc," he explained. “The 1961 and 1982 are exceptional vintages, but they are not exactly Cheval Blanc. They are a bit creamier and ripe. I love those
vintages, but they are not exactly in line. This kind of Cheval Blanc, the 2016, is exceptional. It is exactly in line with what you expect from the property, more like the 1948 instead of 1947. It is a pixelated wine with huge resolution. The wine has elegance and power. From January to June we had one year of rain. By the time of flowering, the soil was 100% full of water, yet the flowering was very uniform. But the vineyard was great in the summer. It was 38 or 39 degrees Celsius without a drop of water, the driest here since 1898. The reason that 2016 is not 2003 is because we cropped at 40 hectoliters per hectare instead of 20 hectoliters per hectare [by that he means that at lower yields, the sugar levels of the grape might have sped on faster than phenolic maturity]. I think it is a vintage where we see exceptional terroir. Here at Cheval Blanc, from surface to two meters down, the soil can be clay, gravel or sand with clay below that. For the gravel, it was perfect for the old vines, which make up 80% of the population. For the sand, it depends on the age of the vine and the kind of sand. There was just one plot that was a disaster, having suffered during the dry summer and so 16% of the volume was sold off in bulk. This clay worked throughout the entire season, regulating the water supply to the vine, just like a sponge. It was like a dream. We conducted a green harvest at about 90% véraison even though the Merlot was very homogenous. Some rows, you might just cut off one bunch. We started on the harvest on 20 September and finished on 12 October, 23 days when we usually pick over 35 days. The maturation was perfect on the clay and we picked the vines on both clay and gravel approximately at the same time, whereas usually we pick the gravel before the clay.”

Whilst the contribution of the Cabernet Franc and Cabernet Sauvignon is not the same as Figeac, 41% at Cheval Blanc compared to 64% at Figeac, that is still a significant percentage that governs the style of the 2016. Stylistically the two bear similarities, that perfect synthesis of Left and Right Bank, the minerality and delineation second to none. It is certainly equal to the perfection-flirting 2015 Cheval Blanc and it will be fascinating to compare the two vintages once in bottle.

Let’s keep on the Cabernet-driven Saint Emilion theme, but focus on another area of the appellation, on the côte—the limestone slopes that lead up to the plateau. Here is a string of outstanding estates: Angelus, Ausone, Pavie and Le Tertre-Rôteboeuf to name a few, but let’s begin with Pavie where Gérard Perse and his team were on hand to guide me through their 2016s.

There has definitely been a shift in style at this address. Gérard Perse cited three shifts that have taken place in recent years. Firstly, there is greater emphasis on Cabernet proportion of the blend and as such the Merlot had reduced from 80% to around 60%. The Merlot has not had to take a back seat, but shuffle over to accommodate. Secondly is the reappraisal of new oak. Whereas previously there seemed to be a recipe for 100% new wood, there is an assessment of what would be the optimal use of new oak in proportion to the fruit and structure. Thirdly is less extraction in the winery and Perse pointed out that in both 2015 and 2016, there has been a significant ten-day reduction in extraction time.

Naturally, these have impacted upon the style of Pavie. No question, whatever your views of this Saint Emilion, it has one of the greatest terroirs and the challenge/opportunity is to translate that into the wine. Recent vintages have articulated that terroir more than ever before. Pavie is less decadent and more structured. In a way, it has grown up, entered adulthood if you will. The 2016 continues what I see as a succession of sensational wines that in some ways resemble Figeac. Just a decade ago it would have been inconceivable to compare these two properties. Sure, the terroirs are completely different, Figeac lying over three gravel croupes that jut out from Pomerol, Pavie draped over limestone slopes. But the field blend is not that dissimilar, the combined Cabernets consisting of exactly 40% of the blend with more Cabernet Sauvignon than Cheval Blanc. Like Figeac, there is a sense of effortlessness about this wine. For sure, Pavie has a little more richness and opulence, an addition 0.65% alcohol (13.9% versus 14.55%), and if these virtues are what you are seeking then you may well prefer Pavie to either Figeac. In my opinion, a decade ago, the Pavie team might have been tempted to go for more concentration and pick two or three days later, but this newfound prudence has resulted in a supremely accomplished Pavie that is without question one of the best that I have tasted at the estate.
I will also name-check Bellevue-Mondotte with Perse’s portfolio. In the past I have criticized this Saint Emilion for just being over the top, showing off its muscles as if to say “look how big I am.” However, this year I thoroughly enjoyed the Bellevue-Mondotte. Yes, it’s still a flash bastard, but there was much more purity and fine balance that countered the opulence and flamboyance. Again, picked on 12 October, I can imagine that in previous years they might have chosen to harvest last, but that decision to pick earlier has manifested a glorious, nubile and sensual wine that still manages to translate its terroir.

In a similar vein, I was deeply impressed by Grand-Mayne this year. No, the terroir is not as propitious as that of Pavie, but Jean-Antoine Nony has rethought his wines and with the valuable assistance of Louis Mitjavile, François’s son, has created the most complex and nuanced wine of his career. The Grand-Mayne is not as powerful as those produced ten or 15 years ago, when it had a tendency to feel overdone. The 2016 is more intense and yet more streamlined, clearly more terroir driven. I also adore the 2016 Canon-la-Gafflière this year from Stephan von Neipperg to such an extent that I put it on par with La Mondotte. His Canon-la-Gafflière encapsulates everything you could wish for in a Saint Emilion and like Grand-Mayne, articulates its terroir better than ever before.

Now we will move back along the limestone slope to the outskirts of Saint Emilion the village, and to the fairytale property of Ausone. When you visit the château on a blissfully sunny day as I did this year, you must pause in the courtyard and admire the surroundings: the panorama across the Saint Emilion plain, the elegant sandstone buildings and the barrel cellar excavated directly beneath the vineyard, with roots dangling from the ceiling. Then you would spot that eyesore. I’m talking about the crane that stood by the entrance since time immemorial. This year I complained to Pauline Vauthier. “Isn’t it time to take it down?” I suggested. Lo and behold when I returned a couple of weeks later, the eyesore had been removed. Enfin! Maybe it is being relocated to Château La Clotte where the Vauthier family are renovating the property that they acquired a couple of years ago?

As usual, Pauline’s dogs—Cork and Gucci—bounded across the gravel courtyard, joined us briefly in the tasting room before getting bored and chasing imaginary rabbits outside. “It was quite a strange climate because from 1 January to 20 June it was rainy and cold,” Pauline told me. “So there were a lot of problems with disease pressure, especially since we are organic. After 20 June it was dry and hot. At the end of August we were anxious as the vines showed some stress. Fortunately on 13 September there was 25 millimeters of rain [less than at Figeac where they reported 40 millimeters]. Finally the harvest was late. In fact it was the same date as the 2012 vintage, on 29 September, and it finished on 20 October [the same day as Pavie]. The grapes were small and they had good acidity compared to 2015. During the fermentation we did a light extraction. I am happy with the vintage. It is precise: structured with freshness. There is the minéralité and precision in 2016.” In an odd way, there is a parallel between Ausone and Pavie in the sense of a retreat from 100% new oak and later picking to focus on a more terroir-driven, precise and elegant style compared to vintages in the 1990s and 2000s. The result is a deliriously fabulous, much more cerebral Ausone that represents one of the finest I have encountered in recent years, perhaps recalling those legends of yesteryear. Also, I must mention the Chapelle d’Ausone, one of the finest Deuxième Vin in the whole of Bordeaux and also the 2016 Château La Clotte, which the Vauthiers acquired in 2014. Located round the “back” of Saint Emilion, La Clotte has propitious terroir and with a new winery in the pipeline, there is immense potential.

Chez Angélus, there has been a discrete changing of the guard as Hubert de Boüard has passed the daily running of his estates over to his daughter Stéphanie de Boüard-Rivoal and her cousin, Thierry Grenié de Boüard. I met both of them in Bordeaux during my trip, seemingly not phased by having such big shoes to fill since Hubert took Angélus by the scruff of the neck in the mid-1980s and turned it into a top-flight, 007-endorsed, “Class A” Saint Emilion. Stéphanie clearly has ambitions for the estate, conscientious of charting her own course for the future. So what’s the next chapter?
“We want to go beyond what has been done,” she told me. “I want to find the DNA of Angélus. I think we can have more precision than before. We want to have an outstanding 2016 and this year, I think we have exactly what Angélus should be. We did a strict selection on the clay soils and the old Cabernet Franc, as we want a precise wine. We made more Carillon d’Angélus and less Grand Vin and have focused on the clay soils this year. This was a very dry vintage, wet from the beginning until June. It was warm in August when it was cold at night, although you had more potential on clay soils since the roots could absorb water. We found they had the most precision. I believe it is a great vintage for Bordeaux but when you have clay, I find it is more harmonious. In 2016, everything came at the right moment, so you have a consistent ripeness. We did not do a strong skin maceration this year, because if you forced it, you would have a bitter taste. So it is a classic vinification. We have 14.2% alcohol this year, which is 1.3% less than in 2010. 100% new oak and 50% for the second wine.”

Continuing the theme of Pavie and Ausone, the blend for the 2016 includes 40% Cabernet Franc along with 60% Merlot, attesting Stéphanie’s claim that Angelus will place more and more emphasis on Cabernet Franc in the future. It is blessed with an unerring sense of symmetry and focus, and achieves their goal of a wine with more precision than ever before. It will be interesting to plot the progress of the next few years. I can see them maybe parsing out some of the parcels to focus on the more propitious, basing a great proportion of the blend upon Cabernet Franc, which so many are doing not only due to a long-overdue reassessment of this once disregarded grape variety, but also in the light of warmer growing seasons where it often performs better than Merlot. I still think that the use of 100% new oak is unnecessary. I've placed a bet at the bookmakers that it might be dialed down to 70-80% in the next few years. We will see.

Last year saw the coming of age for Château Canon under winemaker Nicolas Audebert who oversees both this Saint Emilion stalwart and Rauzan-Segla. How do you follow an epoch-making wine like the 2015 Canon? This was one estate I looked at first-hand just prior to harvest, inspecting the vines, mounting the sorting table to see the fruit entering the vat-room and tasting that refulgent purple juice before its transformation into wine. So it was fascinating to return to the château, not once but twice.

“We were happy to have more fruit on the vine,” Nicolas explained. “We decided to leave more grapes in what we feel is a classic year. Normally we do one green harvest at the end of summer, but in 2016 we did four small green harvests, taking out a little [fruit] that had too much exposure, so that we could maintain that freshness. It was not a year to go for low yields...” This comment mirrors that of Pierre Lurton at Cheval Blanc, who opined that you needed higher yields to control the maturity of the fruit. Again, we have a significant contribution from the Cabernet Franc that here forms 26% of the blend coupled with an earlier picking than others, finishing on 10 October, some ten days before Ausone or Pavie.

This is a brilliant follow-up to the 2015 and Nicolas himself seems to rate the 2016 above last year’s Canon. It is clutching between straws. The first encounter, I agreed with Nicolas and then subsequently it never quite repeated that initial dazzling showing—that's the way it goes sometimes. Yet there is no question that it represents another incredible wine from the reborn, rejuvenated estate that like Figeac, has addressed so many of its problems in the 1990s and is now firing on all cylinders. If I upgrade the Canon once in bottle, it would not surprise me.

At Le Tertre-Rôteboeuf, François was entertaining buyers from the Far East so I missed his sermon down in the cellar, always one of my favorite moments of my primeur trip, not least because it normally coincides with a great wine. This year his daughter Nina Mitjavile took us through the wines and it was a pleasure to meet her for the first time, since in previous years she has always been out in the vineyard. “The most difficult thing was not to pick too early and not to pick too late,” she explained. “We knew that the vines would obtain more maturity and we knew we could lose what we had.” This is always one of the later-picked Saint Emilion wines, but not in 2016 when they finished on 18 October, before Ausone but after Canon. Yet it maintains the luxuriant nature of Le Tertre-Rôteboeuf, sumptuous as usual but counterpoised by freshness and tension. This
estate has been on a marvelous run of form in recent vintages and their 2016 is another great success.

Le Tertre-Rôteboeuf is a comparatively recent arrival on the Saint Emilion scene, debuting in 1978 compared to Canon and Figeac who can trace their roots back to the 18th century. However, Le Dôme’s maiden vintage was as recent as 1996 and some of you may remember my review of the wine after twenty years, still drinking well, in my 1986 retrospective. “It is a classic duo,” remarked Jonathan Maltus when I asked about whether 2016 matches 2015. “Every few years, two vintages come along together. There is a similarity although they are two young to compare.” Again, the wines that Jonathan produces nowadays from handkerchief-sized parcels around the appelation are different to just a few years ago. Maltus has changed his approach in the winery, although these are still quite dense and opulent expressions of their terroir. If they miss one thing, it is just a bit of personality in the glass and they tend to age in slightly predictable style vis-à-vis their peers. However, they certainly do exude more finesse than vintages I was tasting a decade ago.

At Pavie-Macquin, I tasted with Nicolas Thienpont and his team that includes David Siure. “It was not easy until the end of June,” David commented. “There was no blockage in the vines. At the end of August we were praying for some rain. We have never experienced such a long growing cycle, which was one of the most important things for the vintage. The bud-break was eight days before average and harvest ten days after. This helped us to develop finer tannin. It is quite a cool season in that respect.”

Elsewhere there are quite brilliant offerings from Clos Fourtet, where Mathieu Cuvelier has enjoyed so much success in recent years. I adored the Beauséjour (Duffau Lagarrosse) from Nicolas Thienpont; and there is the quite brilliant Belair-Monange from J-P Moueix, home to the world’s most luxurious outside garbage bin (I love the fact that it inhabits a perfectly manicured hedge on the left hand side of the road, which Kelly Moueix told me they inherited from Pascal Delbeck); a very poised and sensual Beauséjour Bécot; and one of the best wines from Barde-Haut that I have tasted. I could go on, but I would be here forever.

RIGHT BANK SATELLITES

At A Glance

- Impressive wines from Fronsac and Côtes de Castillon.
- Still some properties pushing their wines via excessively late picking and heavy extractions, sometimes overuse of reverse osmosis.
- Generally in 2016, there is more freshness and terroir expression than in previous years.

Beyond the boundaries of Saint Emilion and Pomerol, there is a lot of Bordeaux. And there is a surfeit of great wine. They usually get rudely shoved out of the limelight by those aforementioned
appelations, but they certainly do not deserve that, given the quality of the wines in 2016. The vintage yielded a clutch of superb wines from Fronsac, lest we forget the most revered Right Bank region in the 17th century—not that that’s much use now—has ideal soils to cope with the dry growing season. The molasses de Fonsadais, essentially limestone mixed with clay and sandstone, could act like a sponge and ensure that the vines never suffered too much hydric stress. What often blights the wines is in fact manmade, winemakers overdoing their wines during vinification to try and catch up with Saint Emilion or Pomerol, when really there is no need.

Check out some wonderful wines from the likes of Dalem, Haut-Carles and La Dauphine. There is also plenty just over the tributary in Lalande de Pomerol to admire: Chambrun le Bourg, Grand-Ormeau, Fontenil (owned by the Rollands) and La Chenade (owned by Denis Durantou). There is a lot going on in Montagne Saint-Emilion, not least Clos de Boüard, the new property owned by Coralie de Boüard and her husband, Loïc Mallet. It is too much to cover beyond the tasting notes in the time to compose this report, therefore I advise readers to peruse the notes and discover. Hopefully I can cover these regions in greater detail later in the year.

BORDEAUX AC

At A Glance

- Varied in quality from poor to very good.
- Prices should be very reasonable, especially when compared to other wine regions.
- Some famous consultants now offering wines in this region, for example: Hubert de Boüard of Angélus, also Domaine Clarence Dillon with their Clarendelle range. Hey, it’s cheaper than Haut-Brion.

Here’s a man who has a knack of unearthing Bordeaux at the top and most difficultly, at the bottom of the hierarchy—importer Jeffrey Davies. Here he is using telepathy to gauge the quality of the wine.
You might well argue, what is the point of reviewing this—the lowest rung of the Bordeaux hierarchy—since many of the wines are not released en primeur? You are not going to be able to retire on the proceeds from buying these wines upon release, however good they might be. There are several reasons. Firstly, they are just as vital to Bordeaux as the First Growths. Second, it contains interesting and diverse wines from Petit Château to dry white Sauternes. Thirdly, at least there is some essence of affordability here.

This last point is crucial. In the last 12 months I have noticed a re-evaluation of Bordeaux in terms of its value-for-money. I mean, vast swathes of these wines are sold for a handful of Euros per bottle. Pittance really. And as other regions such as Burgundy have vacated this price point, so Bordeaux has re-entered many minds of sommeliers, merchants and indeed, scribes like myself. A lot of these wines are bargains within the context of global wine production. They are produced in decent quantities and in a vintage like 2016, some of them can be pretty nifty. Whether it is Jean-Luc Thunévin’s mischievously titled Bad Boy, wonderful Premier Côtes de Bordeaux like Château Reynon or the Château Laurence—a collaboration between Hubert de Boüard and oenologist Philippe Nune—or even just properties I am completely unfamiliar with such as Château Le Doyenne... these are wines that a lot of people are going to enjoy.

SAUTERNES

At A Glance

- A very good vintage for Sauternes, if not quite the quality of 2014 or 2015.
- Slow formation of botrytis, more so in Sauternes than Barsac, but eventually perfect conditions mid-October.
- Consistent across the well-known names, albeit one or two just missing that “edge” in terms of tension and race.
- Good pickings from château lower down the hierarchy.
- Most memorable Sauternes in 2016: Doisy-Daëne.
- Best potential value-for-money: Sigalas-Rabaud, Clos Dady, d’Arche, de Myrat.
As has been tradition for a decade now, I spent an intense day’s tasting in Sauternes with Bill “Botrytis” Blatch, not only tasting the 2016 barrel samples, but also the 2014s in bottle—plus verticals of Guiraud and Filhot in the evening, all interspersed with château visits to Yquem and Climens. This is perhaps the most arduous day of primeur since the sugar and acidity levels build up, although it is also one of the most enjoyable. Some might say, why bother, when so much Sauternes is cold-shouldered at en primeur? Fair point. However, Sauternes is a fundamental part of Bordeaux and whilst it might not be fashionable, the simple fact is that whenever I open a bottle of this golden elixir, I am instantly captivated.

How the Sauternais remedy the problem is still unanswered. The idea of a legal classification for a Sauternes Sec AC was nixed by several proprietors who believe that it would dilute and muddle the image of Sauternes. You know, I would agree. It might end up like Alsace where you are never quite sure how much residual sugar is going to be inside your bottle and that dissuades consumers from buying. There is a growing number of properties now producing dry whites that have to label with the Bordeaux AC classification and you will find these within the report. It was probably not the best year for dry white, nevertheless, at least it gives those estates something to sell other than sweet botrytized wines.

With respect to the growing season, I have already summarized this in my main introduction of this report. Essentially the long period of dry weather that extended from late June and then throughout the harvest in September saved and then defined the vintage for the dry reds, but of course, what is traditionally a great vintage for the reds is not necessarily one for the sweet wines of Sauternes—case in point 1982, 2000 or 2012. Of course, the opposite is also true such as 1967, 2007 and 2011. And on rare occasions the weather is benevolent to both such as in 1990, 2005, 2009 and maybe also 2015.
When I began tasting a smattering of Sauternes on the Left Bank at château that oversee both red and Sauternes, winemakers seemed to be a little indifferent to the quality of the latter. This may have lowered my expectations before tackling the region properly, because as I discovered more about the growing season and as I tasted more of the wines, I found that it was possible to make excellent Sauternes thanks to the vital period between 17 and 25 October when there was plentiful pourriture noble after rain on 10 October.

At Château d’Yquem the vines benefitted from their deep clay subsoils that helped absorb water and prevented the vines from suffering hydric stress. They picked over four tries through the vineyard commencing on 27 September and finishing on 4 November, with the heart of the picking after rain on 18 October pushing botrytis formation on from the plein pourri stage, ergo this picking accounts for over half the final blend. It is a very very fine Sauternes without question, although to be frank, I did not depart the tasting room with a skip in my step as I did in 2014 and 2015. I felt there is something a little conservative about the Yquem this year, perhaps just missing that edginess and nerve that defines a truly great release. It is a beautiful wine, but I would have to be convinced of its worthiness of a higher score once the wine is bottled.

At Climens I asked Bérénice Lurton whether she found it challenging to manage her biodynamically farmed vineyard during the rain-drenched first six months of 2016. She seemed to shrugged it off as easily as her vines, treating them with willow and horsetail to ward off the incessant pressure of rot. She ordered her team into the vineyard on 28 September, but had to ensure that they parsed out any berries that showed signs of grey rot, therefore each cagette was inspected before allowed to pass into the vat-room. Here at Climens, it was the 39 millimeters of rain on 30 September that prompted the outbreak of what is called “the right kind of rot.” They had to keep vigilant for signs of bouïroc, the local name for bad rot, and aspergillus niger, a hitherto unseen form of rot that discolors grapes and leaves a black powder residue. The first pass through the vineyard finished on 11 October, followed by a profitable foray into the vineyard where much of the botrytised grapes were sourced from 18 to 22 October.

As usual, Bérénice had not decided on the final blend and so visiting the cellar, I tasted from each individual lot—twelve of them this year—and assembled what I predict will be something close to the final wine. This year I was assisted in that task by four micro-blends that had been submitted for a négociant the following week, tasted in order of richness. This should be a great Climens, perhaps a little spicier than usual, yet nearly all the lots showed very good acidity with plenty of botrytized fruit at her team’s disposal.

“We had no problem with the dryness in the summer,” Xavier Planty of Château Guiraud told me. “The 2016 is the first vintage where the chaptalization is totally forbidden. You find [2016] is a different style from other vintages. The sun was marvelous during the harvest but the nights were fresh and this meant that noble rot developed slowly. The botrytis took some time to arrive and the differences in the vineyard were expressed when it did. At Guiraud we picked two times. The noble rot developed at the beginning of October concentrated between 20-27 October when 95% of the crop was picked. Certainly the noble rot was not heterogeneous [throughout the vineyard]. Fortunately there was no bad rot this year. It is the biggest harvest we have done at Guiraud and at 23 hectoliters per hectare, that is the largest yield in my 35 years at the château.”

“In Sauternes everything began very late because of the dry summer,” Eric Kohler explained when I tasted the Rieussec at Lafite-Rothschild. “The first passages through the vineyard took place between 20 September and 15 October, the first try offering some passerillé berries. However, 70% of the crop was picked between 22 October and 28 October. The final tries finished on 4 November.” This was a good rather than great Rieussec, perhaps just missing some of the energy on display elsewhere.
One aspect of the vintage that I must remark upon is that I was pleased with some of the lesser-known Sauternes this year, bon mots for properties that in previous years seemed to lag behind the more well-known names. Whilst I am not expecting wine merchants’ doors to be broken down by consumers demanding the 2016s from Partarrieu, Haut-Bergeron or Clos Dady, they still produced fine Sauternes that will hopefully find homes. Perhaps my one disappointment was the 2016 from Domaine de l’Alliance. I am a big fan of ex-fisherman’s Daniel Alibrand’s Sauternes, but it just did not seem to be firing on all cylinders on the three occasions that I tasted it.

Last but not least, Doisy-Daëne and its “extravagant” counterpart. Denis Dubourdieu is no longer with us to celebrate two extraordinarily accomplished wines. His son Jean-Jacques has big—you could say impossible—shoes to fill, but if the wines continue to be as good as these, then I think Denis will still be smiling.

(Thanks to Johan Berglund for his photographic expertise and driving me around. Photographs in this report of the copyright of Johan Berglund. Thanks to Lisa Perrotti-Brown MW for accompanying me and putting up with our inane car prattle. Thanks also to Nova Radio for the soundtrack.)