

# Under-Appreciated Classicism Bordeaux En Primeur 2011

PHOTO & TEXT: HUBERT LI



The weather condition of the 2011 vintage has made it challenging for the winemakers. It began with a hot spring, followed by a drought and a cool summer. As a result, the berries were small, with thick skins and not a lot of juice. Luckily the sunshine came back in September to allow the cabernet sauvignon to ripen. This will not be a legendary vintage as 2009 and 2010, but could this be too good to overlook?

## LEFT BANK

I've started my tastings at La Mission Haut Brion located in the centre of Bordeaux city, where I have had the opportunity to taste their full range of reds and whites, including Chateau Quintus, their new acquisition in Saint Emilion. Tasting the wines at 8am in the morning may not be doing them justice, but even so, I am rather impressed with the wines.

La Mission Haut Brion – A dense and powerful wine with mulptile layers of black fruits, but also extremely tannic.

Haut Brion – I prefer this to La Mission as I find it more elegant and refined, with better balance between ripeness of fruit, acidity and tannins, at least at this early stage.

Haut Brion Blanc and La Mission Haut Brion Blanc - The quality of dry white wines came as a pleasant surprise, with excellent concentration and rich citrus fruits. Both wines are a step up in complexity, body and length compared over previous years. Unfortunately, with their tiny production, there will always be a premium to pay.

I then drove up north for subsequent tastings at Chateau Margaux and Chateau Palmer.

Margaux - Their wines are always the most seductive and showing in the region and it doesn't take an expert to appreciate. For the first time, they have added 2% of petit verdot from a new plot planted 20 years ago to add another dimension to the wine.

Palmer - It is always my great pleasure to visit Bernard De Laage at Chateau Palmer to taste his wines. Their 2011 vintage has the concentration and length of the 2010, with the balance of tannin and fruit as the 2006. Unfortunately, their harvest is the smallest since the legendary 1961 vintage, so quality will come at a price!



*Chateau La Mission Haut Brion*



*Chateau Haut Brion*



*Nine wines to taste at Chateau La Mission Haut Brion*





*Lacoste Borie. My top value pick!*



*Xavier Borie presenting his three wines at Chateau Grand Puy Lacoste*

I then headed up further north to Pauillac to visit Xavier Borie and his daughter Emeline at Chateau Grand Puy Lacoste to taste their 3 family wines: Lacoste Borie, Haut Batailley and Grand Puy Lacoste. Their style is all about achieving the right balance between level of fruit and tannins, and they have achieved exactly that, even with the Lacoste Borie.

Lacoste Borie (2nd wine of Grand Puy Lacoste) – This wine has pure fruit and good concentration, thanks to the vintage character. The palate is classic elegant Pauillac with a hint of dark chocolates. What a fabulous value wine for everyday drinking!

Grand Puy Lacoste – A classic Pauillac with perfect balance between ripe black fruits, acidity, and very fine tannins that follows seamlessly from the aroma to the palate. Always a pleasure to taste!

Visiting Chateau Mouton Rothschild is more than about tasting wines, but to appreciate the architecture and artwork on display as well.

Clerc Milon – This wine is a real pleasure to taste and is much more showing than D'Armailhac. Complexity and fruit are consistent from the nose to the palate, with a medium finish. This would be another value pick!

Mouton Rothschild – My expectation is always high with this wine. The distinctive tobacco and cigar shows on the nose, although quite restrained. On the palate this is very bold, complex, with plenty of black fruits and a dark chocolate aftertaste. Great potential.



*Chateau Clerc Milon. Great value!*



*Chateau Pontet Canet*



*Cross-road between two great chateaux*



*Cellar of Chateau Mouton Rothschild*

Upon departing from Mouton, we headed across the road to Pontet Canet to visit Melanie Tesseron. Despite coming here with a high expectation, their wine can always deliver a surprise!

Pontet Canet - On the nose it has a plenty of ripe blackcurrants, aftertaste is very long and tannins are strong but very acceptable for this level of concentration. It's not a 2010 vintage but it really doesn't come far off!

I have also tasted several other very fine wines:

Lafite Rothschild - This wine strikes the perfect balance, with a very elegant nose and full-bodied structure. It is always a challenge to assess this wine, as it does not have the power of Latour, or the seduction of a Margaux, or the distinct character of Haut Brion.

Montrose - With alcohol at 13.0%, the style is very classic Bordeaux, with rich fruits and smooth tannins. Their clay and limestone soils bring freshness to their merlot for the blend.

Clos du Marquis – In the olden days, Clos du Marquis is a blend of grapes from their own plots, blended with Merlot grapes that didn't make it into Leoville Lascases. Nowadays the same merlot goes into the official second wine Petit Lion, so the blend of Clos du Marquis is higher in cabernet sauvignon, giving more depth and punch!

Leoville Lascases – They have once again produced a very impressive wine for the 2011 vintage. This is the complete package with full body, ripe and fine tannins, lots of dark fruits, best representation of the Saint Julien style.







*Cellar of Pichon Baron, with vintages dating back to 1930s*

Pichon Comtesse de Lalande – This chateau has consistently produced wines of excellent quality over the past few years. For 2011, they have produced a well structured wine with concentration and elegance, tannins are smooth and seductive (thanks to the merlot!).

Pichon Baron – It would be normal to draw comparison between Pichon Lalande and Pichon Baron, as the two plots are literally opposite the road. The 2011 Pichon Baron is very impressive, with plenty of fine and delicate black fruits, and is extremely powerful and dense on the palate that makes me think of Latour (their vineyards are connected to Latour!).

This year, most Chateaux in Saint Julien have presented their wines at the Union des Grands Crus (UGC) event held at Chateau Lagrange. I have bumped into many friends there and we all find the wines from Saint Julien to be very consistent in quality and style. Given their price levels, I would particularly recommend Lagrange and Leoville Poyferre.



*UGC Tasting at Chateau Lagrange*



Meeting Denis Durantou of L'Eglise Clinet



Tasting the full range from Saintayme to L'Eglise Clinet

## RIGHT BANK

My first appointment in the morning was to meet with Mr. Denis Durantou, the famous winemaker of L'Eglise Clinet in Pomerol. For those who have never been to Pomerol, do be prepared to spend some time locating this Chateau as it has no signs on any road whatsoever. My tip is to drive around Clos L'Eglise and look for a small sign outside a small house on a side street.

L'Eglise Clinet – One of my favourites of the right bank, pure fruits and very floral, with a lingering finish. This wine always possesses the quality that almost rivals Petrus!

I then headed to Chateau Petrus located a mere 2 minutes drive away. I always feel privileged and honoured to enter this sacred gate. We were guided to the tasting room where glasses of red wines await, and I just couldn't resist to taste!

Petrus - This magical wine combines extremely complex fruits with silky smooth tannins, even in such a tannic vintage. This is the only wine you can naturally drink straight away (too good to spit!). This is the most expensive wine in Bordeaux, but also a must-have for every serious wine lover.



Chateau Petrus building a new cellar, ready in 2013.

I have also tasted a few fine Pomerols, in particular:

Gazin – Plenty of ripe fruits complimented with fine tannins, with great concentration and length. This great value Pomerol should never be missed!

La Conseillante – This is a fine effort from Jean Michel Laporte, with good structure and elegance. I just wish they have a little more fruit to match the level of tannins. I am more than happy to cellar it for a decade before enjoying.



Every year, I spend a good time visiting at J.P.Moueix to taste their wines, from Magdelaine to La Fleur Petrus. One thing I noticed going through their wines is their consistent style, focused on achieving the right balance rather than power and intensity. All their wines are gently and carefully extracted, so none of them are over-tannic.

Magdelaine – A classic Saint Emilion with dark fruits and hints of minerals, surprisingly soft and sexy especially compared to past vintages. Tannins are smooth and with good length.

Bourgneuf – A lightly structured wine with fresh ripe red fruits and soft tannins. Great wine for everyday drinking. My pick for an everyday Pomerol!

La Providence – Very expressive aromas, with plenty of dark fruits and minerals, but a touch medicinal. Give it a few years of cellaring and enjoy from 5-10 years on.

Hosanna – Elegant and refined on the nose, with expressive red fruits and follows through seamlessly to the palate. Thanks to the gentle extraction, the balance between fruit and tannin is spot on!

La Fleur Petrus – A masculine Pomerol that combines concentrated dark fruits, power and finesse, decorated with a touch of mineral and truffles. Extremely smooth tannins that can almost match the level of Petrus! Love it!

Everytime I come to Bordeaux I am lucky to receive invaluable lessons from the experts, and it was great to have Edouard Moueix to share his winemaking philosophy with me. His three key factors are:

- 1) Keeping the fruits
- 2) Stay away from the tannins of the seeds (as they produce rough tannins)
- 3) Careful fermentation process to manage the acidity levels

When wines age, they lose fruit but gain complexity from the tannins. Winemaking is all about striking this balance for the target drinking period of the wine.

Edouard drew parallels of the 2011 vintage to the 1975 vintage, both with very high levels of tannins. I remember drinking wines from the 1975 vintage that are not very showing, but further cellaring may not help, as those wines would probably have lost too much fruit over time before the tannins soften. Those who have extracted the tannins gently in such vintages have produced great wines, like the legendary Petrus 1975!

At the Saint Emilion UGC tasting , I am also particularly impressed with the following wines:

Figeac – For the first time I am seriously impressed! I have not tasted a Figeac that is as concentrated, yet maintaining its elegant Burgundian style and smooth tannins. This wine has a strong following for a good reason. Prices were too high last year, so we shall see!



*New vintages of La Fleur Petrus have “LFP” engraved on bottle.*

Clos Fourtet – This wine came under the spotlight following Mr. Parker’s re-rating of the 2009 vintage to 100 points, so they are definitely on a roll! This is another elegant Saint Emilion wine that struck perfect balance between fruit and tannins, touch of minerals and truffles and a long finish. Could be another value pick!

Troplong Mondot – This is a powerful blockbuster with layers of blackberries and plums, expressive and dense but not over-extracted. Tannins are strong and well matched with the fruits. Excellent potential!

Pavie – Mega blockbuster as usual that is incredibly dense and powerful, with tonnes of black fruits and jam. Tannins are a bit rough, so a lot of patience is required.

Monbouquet – This wine follows the same style as Pavie with a sweet and ripe nose, very dense and powerful with lots of black fruits and jam. As with Pavie, this wine will need a good 5-10 years to soften up. Should be a great value wine for matching a steak or strong cheeses!

## SUMMARY

Following two legendary vintages of 2009 and 2010, the 2011 vintage is more classic in style with average levels of alcohol and very high tannins and acidity, so quality will come from those who carefully extract and balance the high levels of tannins and acidity to the moderate fruit they have.

The quality of the 2011 vintage does come as a pleasant surprise. This classic vintage didn’t have the blessings as the great 2000, 2005, 2009 and 2010, but it is easily on par with other very good vintages like 2006 and 2008, and 2001 for the right bank.

I have no doubts that prices will be lower this year, but the question is by how much. For a good vintage, a price reduction of 20% or thereabout from the 2010 vintage is simply not attractive enough. Given that I have seen much less visitors from Mainland China over the past week, Chateaux owners can no longer count on the China market alone to sell a big portion of their production. Let’s hopes that prices will be reasonable, fingers crossed!

I would particularly recommend wines from Pomerol and Pauillac this year. The quality of first growths remains very high, but among the others, I would not hesitate to recommend the following:

	Top Picks	Value Picks
<b>Left Bank</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leoville Lascases, Saint Julien</li> <li>• Pichon Baron, Pauillac</li> <li>• Pontet Canet, Pauillac</li> <li>• Lynch Bages, Pauillac</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lagrange, Saint Julien</li> <li>• Clerc Milon, Pauillac</li> <li>• Grand Puy Lacoste, Pauillac</li> <li>• Lacoste Borie, Pauillac</li> </ul>
<b>Right Bank</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• La Fleur Petrus, Pomerol</li> <li>• L’Eglise Clinet - Pomerol</li> <li>• Troplong Mondot, Saint Emilion</li> <li>• Figeac, Saint Emilion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gazin, Pomerol</li> <li>• Bourgneuf, Pomerol</li> <li>• Clos Fourtet, Saint Emilion</li> </ul>

