

# A Wine Lover's Vintage Bordeaux En Primeur 2012

PHOTO & TEXT: HUBERT LI







*Cellar at Chateau Smith Haut Lafitte.*

"This vintage reminds me of 2001" is a comment that was regularly heard from winemakers on the Right Bank during my visits, some even compared the vintage to 1998. There is a consensus that the earlier ripening merlot was successful whilst the cabernet harvest was disrupted by intermittent rain throughout the month of October.

On the left bank, most estates increased the percentage of merlot in their grand vin and with the latest optical sorting technologies, a lot of good wines have also been made.

The level of concentration is slightly lower than those from great vintages such as 2009/2010 but the wines tasted have a nice core of fruit and would be ready to drink earlier. I was expecting some astringent, unripe flavours but did not come across many.



*Chateau L'Evangile. A view from Chateau Cheval Blanc.*



*Winemaker Vincent Millet at Chateau Calon Segur*



I visited two under-the-radar estates in St. Estephe this year: **Calon Segur** and **Lafon Rochet**; both have been undergoing great transformations in recent years.

**Calon Segur** was sold last year and the new owners have made substantial investments in the vineyard and the wine making facilities. The wine this year has purity, elegance and focus.

Over at **Lafon Rochet**, technical director Lucas Leclercq (formerly at DRC and Cheval Blanc) and new consultant Jean-Claude Berrouet (former winemaker at Petrus for 44 years) teamed up to produce a wine with silky tannins. This is a wine worth looking out for since this property is a neighbour of Lafite Rothschild at a fraction of the price.

**Grand Puy Lacoste** made a classic Pauillac with the wonderful cassis notes and tobacco nose. In my limited experience, GPL excels in slightly weaker vintages and this is no exception. The second wine **Lacoste Borie** is also charming whilst the **Haut Batailley** is a bit more tannic and reserved.

Since **Pichon Lalande** changed hands in 2007, quality has been on the up and this year they have made an excellent, supple and feminine wine. The real surprise is my re-acquaintance with the **Reserve de la Comtesse**. This second wine had a strong following in Hong Kong until quality suffered in the early 2000s. The 2012 version is lush, fruit forward and aromatic, I kept going back to the wine and can't wait to order a few cases for my personal enjoyment.

At Mouton, I tasted the **d'Armailhac**, **Clerc Milon**, **Petit Mouton** as well as **Mouton Rothschild**. Unfortunately, the wines were all pretty closed and the few minutes spent on each wine was not enough to allow the wines to open. Patience is required although the ingredients are all there.



*The UK flag is half-lowered at Chateau Lafon Rochet to commemorate Lady Margaret Thatcher.*



*Basile Tesseron at Chateau Lafon Rochet talks us through the process of racking.*



*Winemaker Nicolas Glumineau is pleased with the quality of Pichon Lalande and Reserve de la Comtesse.*



*Tasting at Chateau Mouton Rothschild*



*Wooden tanks used for fermenting the cabernet sauvignon at Chateau Leoville Lascases.*

The tastings at the three **Leovilles** could not have been more different. The **Lascases** being the most serious, the **Poyferre** more exuberant and the **Barton** traditional. This year my preference is for the **Lascases** which is a statement of grandeur, a regal wine fit for a king.

The only estate that I visited in Margaux appellation is **Palmer** and this year they have made a great wine with velvety texture and superb definition. The second wine, **Alter Ego**, was also good in a more youthful way. This wine can definitely be drunk young with a lot of pleasure.



*Chateau Palmer. A popular candidate for wine of the vintage.*





*Chateau Smith Haut Lafitte*

South of Bordeaux city, we visited **Haut Brion** where a very high percentage of merlot has been used in the grand vins; for Haut Brion that is 65.5% (46% in 2009) and for La Mission 62% (47% in 2009). In addition to Lascases and Palmer, I believe that **Haut Brion** is the star on the left bank this year as the equal proportion of cabernet and merlot planted allows the chateau to have the flexibility to adjust the blend according to vintage characteristics.



*David Ornon, Sales Director at Smith Haut Lafitte guides us through the process of barrel-making.*



*Barrel sample specifically prepared for us. How caring!*





Similarly, **Smith Haut Lafitte** and **Haut Bailly** made good wines with great balance and finesse this year and would certainly be good value picks for this year.

As expected, many estates made good wines this year on the Right Bank. The Moueix range of wines (**La Fleur Petrus**, **Belair Monange**, **Hosanna** ... etc.), exhibited great freshness and charm and were some of the most pleasurable to drink in this en primeur campaign. The Moueix family has purchased a vineyard right next to Le Pin and for the first time, merlot grown on this special clay soil has been blended into **La Fleur Petrus**, giving it the extra length and complexity. One wine that deserves more attention is **Belair Monange**; being a close neighbour of Ausone and now under the ownership of the Moueix family, this is a property that will surely be propelled to the fore-front of the next St. Emilion classification.

Elsewhere on the Right Bank, **Petrus** was amazing as the wine is already very pleasurable to drink with excellent concentration. The wines tasted at **L'Eglise Clinet** were all good, from the generic St. Emilion wine **Saintayme** to the grand vin **L'Eglise Clinet** (of course). **Clinet** made a supple wine with good concentration with a hint of dark chocolate.

*Three great wines from the Moueix family estates.*



*Stamping my footprint on the damp blue clay soil at Petrus.*



*We can see bud-break on vines of Chateau Petrus.*



*Always a pleasure to taste Cheval Blanc!*

*New cellar being built at Chateau Pavie.*

**Cheval Blanc's** new winery designed by Christian de Portzamparc is probably the most beautiful modern building in the whole of Bordeaux, all the concrete vats are of different sizes to suit the production of particular plot of vines in their estate. No wonder the wines of the estate have so much precision and poise about them. I also tasted at **Pavie** where the wines have lots of structure and concentration; I think that these wines will be extremely long-lived for the vintage. For lovers of **Monbousquet**, good news: the wines are very good indeed.

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

I have not tasted all the wines but a safe bet is to stick with wines high in merlot: Pomerol, St. Emilion and Pessac Leognan.

	Top Picks	Value Picks
<b>Left Bank</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leoville Lascases, Saint Julien</li> <li>• Palmer, Margaux</li> <li>• Haut Brion, Pessac</li> <li>• Pichon Lalande, Pauillac</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Calon Segur, Saint Estephe</li> <li>• Lafon Rochet, Saint Estephe</li> <li>• Grand Puy Lacoste, Pauillac</li> <li>• Alter Ego de Palmer, Margaux</li> <li>• Reserve de la Comtesse, Pauillac</li> </ul>
<b>Right Bank</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Petrus, Pomerol</li> <li>• Cheval Blanc, Saint Emilion</li> <li>• La Fleur Petrus, Pomerol</li> <li>• L'Eglise Clinet, Pomerol</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clos Fourtet, Saint Emilion</li> <li>• Monbousquet, Saint Emilion</li> </ul>