

2022 BORDEAUX: SOMETHING NEW UNDER THE SUN—CATCH 22

A growing season of extreme heat and very low rainfall has somehow produced generous reds with fine tannins and remarkable freshness that are already being compared to some of the greatest vintages in Bordeaux's history, says Simon Field MW as he introduces his extensive report on a "miracle" vintage

HEADLINES

- Excellent quality in reds; generous, harmonious wines with great aging potential
- Yields reduced by frost and, still more, by the effects of drought and heat on berry size; concentration ensued; old vines key
- A wonderful balance of natural acidity, generous fruit, and powerful but very finely honed tannins
- Diurnal variation, protracted heat spikes, and timely June rain all conspired favorably. The heat, although more intense, is less evident in the wines than those from other *solaire* years such as 2003 or 2018
- An early vintage cycle with a protracted, balmy harvest and little pressure to pick
- White wines are less crisp and focused than in the cooler 2021 vintage; some good examples, however
- Sweet wines are varied, with the harvest dates (late botrytis) the key to the very different styles

What a year! Severe frost, mildew, brown rot, a lack of hydric stress, a cool summer, then rain at harvest and a final burst of mildew for good measure. Incredible. I refer, of course, to 2021, not one of Bordeaux's finest. Everything rehearsed above was turned on its head, however, in 2022, which is already being indented in the same marble as the greats of the past, 2016 and 2010 among them. Even better, many are saying, 1961 has been mooted (Henri Lurton), as has 1945 (Damien Barton Sartorius), and at Léoville-Las-Cases, based on empirical experience, no doubt, they suggest a comparison with 1870, the year of the Paris Commune.

Luminous

Let's get the clichés out of the way first. During my three and a half weeks of tasting in Bordeaux, certain terms came up again and again: the "luminosity" of the wines, the "resilience" of the vines, and the overall "miracle" of the vintage. How could a year that broke records for prolonged high temperatures and unprecedented dryness yield wines of such freshness and vibrancy, such sapidity, and with such highly refined tannins? Many theories were offered, some more plausible than others. There was unanimity, however, in recognizing that 2022 was rather special.

Noblesse oblige

Let's read a few words from those close to the vines. Christian Moueix, the urbane patriarch of the empire that has been built around (often quite literally) Petrus, is positive: "It was a year of sun rather than heat—a nuanced but significant difference. Reports of the death of Merlot are greatly exaggerated," he adds wispishly. It is hard to argue. Henri Lurton at Brane-Cantenac, meanwhile, praises "*un millésime chaud qui (ne) fait pas comme un millésime chaud*," ("a hot vintage that didn't act like a hot vintage")—testament to all the hard work done in the face of climate change over the past 20 years. Similar conditions 25 years ago would not have bestowed similar jewels.

Jean-Dominique Videau at Branaire-Ducru is not a professional anthropomorphologist, yet he concludes that the vines may have "got used" to the hot conditions; they are just like humans, he maintains: "Over time, they adapt to the intense heat and are therefore less

likely to suffer from sunburn. We should have more confidence in nature; there is no merit in describing 2022 as a miracle, for all the miraculous quality evidenced," he concludes with a flourish of Gallic wordplay. The vines are also humanized by Guillaume Fredoux, *mître de chai* at Petit-Village, who maintains that it was their unprecedented resilience that presaged the quality on display. For him, the warm spring was key—significantly warmer than in other recent warm years.

The wines were more heterogeneous and more impacted by the climate in both 2018 and 2020, says Aymeric de Gironde at Troplong Mondot. He has been involved with properties on both sides of the estuary (previously at Pichon Baron and Cos d'Estournel) and cannot remember such felicitous conditions. He is very happy to confirm that this, his eighth vintage in St-Emilion, is certainly his best—to date, that is.

Gonzague Lurton, meanwhile, a scion of one of the region's most influential dynasties, maintains that 2022 offered the bonus of two excellent vintages rolled into one—"*solaire et classique*"—and that the vines at Durfort-Vivens were not distressed. (Stress does not mean distress, is his pithy conclusion.) He knows all about the effects of heat from his California vineyard and recognizes how the vines behave in the face of hot and dry conditions. In his 25 years of experience in Margaux (and elsewhere), he has seen the vines struggle only once, and that was in 2003. More of that instructive comparison later.

One or two more overview comments before we look at the season itself. "A mind-blowing vintage," according to Daisy Sichel at Château Angludet,

“a surprise and a relief. The vine is able not only to recover from punishing conditions but actually to benefit from them. No *blocage*, no stress. A great year.” Meanwhile, François Mitjavile at Tertre Roteboeuf uses the word “*époustouflant*,” which means breathtaking. He also, interestingly, selects the epithet “*rôtie*”—not as in the roasted slope of Côte-Rôtie in the Rhône Valley but, if I understood correctly, with the word assuming its full etymological meaning—rotation, in the round, the meat or grape, in this case, perfectly “done from and on all sides.” I may be reading too much into the word, but herein lies the logic of the whole, the essence of harmony, in vinous terms.

And since we are in philosophical mode, Stephan von Neipperg at Canonla-Gaffelière detects an almost Hegelian pendulum in the evolution of his profession: The winemaker was the most important; now it is the vines—but things must not and will not go too far in one direction, or the golden mean will be sacrificed. The humanist inclination must live side by side with a more pantheistic approach. To Stephan, and to many others, 2022 is a vintage to showcase human virtue in the face of natural benevolence—only achieved by giving precedence to the latter. A year of harmony in every sense.

The four seasons

What, then, were the conditions that gifted us such a special year?

The wet 2021 must surely, finally, bear some credit for replenishing the water table and succoring the vines through the ensuing drought. December 2021 was especially important in that respect, with more than 11 inches (228mm) of rain falling, above the monthly average. The early months of 2022 were relatively dry and mild, however, provoking a relatively early budbreak and, with it, the now annual anxiety over the prospect of spring frost.

And sure enough, there was quite a widespread frost in early April. During April 2–5, the nighttime mercury dropped dramatically, in some low-lying areas getting as low as 16°F (-9°C), causing sleepless nights for vigneron. I well recall driving through the vineyards of Pessac-Léognan at the time, when there was a strangely apocalyptic atmosphere. The candles of the hours around dawn had been replaced by bonfires, and hay or

GONZAGUE LURTON SAYS 2022 OFFERED TWO EXCELLENT VINTAGES ROLLED INTO ONE—“*SOLAIRE ET CLASSIQUE*”—AND THAT THE VINES WERE NOT DISTRESSED. (STRESS DOES NOT MEAN DISTRESS, IS HIS PITHY CONCLUSION)

straw or whatever came to hand was lit up; the miasmic fog that resulted was eery indeed, and the near-religious experience of the ordered and frankly beautiful pageantry of the evenly spread candles was replaced by something far more sinister. The methods may have been varied (fans and heaters are more and more common), but to a greater or lesser extent they did protect most of the vines and avoided the risk of decimation. The frosts did, however, have a minor impact on yields and partially explain why the crop in 2022 was relatively short. This, for many, has been the only source of complaint throughout the entire growing season.

Warm and dry weather followed until the mid-May flowering, which was earlier than usual and described by Marielle Cazaux at La Conseillante as “explosive.” Herein lies one of the key explanations for the resilience of the vines. In 2003 and 2008, the other significant hot years of the past two decades, the spring was, in fact, rather wet. The vines were lulled into a false sense of security in terms of water retention and were not ready for the shock that was to come. In 2022, however, they seem to have taken stock of the situation and prepared for the long haul. “The vines love heat and dryness,” insists Cyrille Thienpont at Pavie Macquin, “as long as they are not taken by surprise.” They were not, clearly; the skins got thick, and the antioxidant capacity gifted by the polyphenols served to protect and also, as a bonus, to enhance aromatic potential. The vines were ready for the onslaught that was to come.

June was crucial for two reasons: first, rain, much needed and seemingly redemptive. But second, the not unrelated

but alas not remotely redemptive phenomenon of hail, localized over two corridors: one in St-Estèphe across the river to the Côtes de Blaye, the other in the southern Médoc, between Macau and the city of Bordeaux itself. The elaborate hail canons and balloons that have been invented to minimize the risk of hail damage (changing the ambient temperature to avoid its formation or reducing the size of the hailstones) were not brought to bear quickly enough, such was the ferocity of the storm. There was a huge impact on those whose vines were in the tempest’s path: Charmail, Beau-Site, Phélan Ségur, and Sociando-Mallet, for example, all suffered significant losses because of the destruction wrought on part (but only part) of their vineyards. The hail was, thankfully, localized; the rain, however, was not and proved to be a real fillip.

Thereafter, there was practically no rain at all until the harvest. A long-drawn-out spell of hot and dry weather ensued, but with heat spikes rather than the intense prolonged heatwave of 2003. This is important because the spikes were of relatively short duration, so the vines were able to continue to function, albeit with somewhat reduced photosynthesis taking place during the dog days of August. The water-retaining clay and the porous, sponge-like limestone were best suited to weather the (lack of) storm; the gravelly and, especially, sandy soils, less so. The younger vines suffered most because of their lack of deep-penetrating root systems.

A long, hot summer ensued. July was the driest since 1959, and there was even a derogation to irrigate as an emergency measure in Pessac-Léognan, Pomerol, and St-Emilion. It was generally not taken up (for logistical and cost reasons, as much as anything), which was maybe just as well, given the quality of the wine that eventually emerged. 2016, 2018, and 2020 all had dry summers, but nothing like 2022. The rainfall in July was 0.1 inch (3mm), and in August it was 1 inch (27mm), the ten-year average being 1.5 inch and 1 inch (37mm and 27mm) respectively, the 30-year average up to 2 inches (50mm) in both cases. Heat and dust, with little respite. Hydric stress, however, is essential to nurture the tension required in all great wine. Guillaume Pouthier at Les Carmes Haut-Brion describes it as “hydric