

SE **Business**

HD **A cautionary tale for best Bordeaux buyers**

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With one sniff and the pungent burst of baby poop, band-aids and barnyards swirled into my olfactory. The first tentative taste revealed the hard metallic edge and flavour-stripped palate that told me I was going head-to-head with brettanomyces.

Not a life threatening pandemic about to wipe out the human race but a rather nasty divisive bug that can ruin **wine** in one fell swoop. It is a destructive infection.

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Divisive, because brett, as it is most commonly referred to, divides opinion as to its influence on **wine**. While its existence is not denied, its impact is one of the most curious things in the world of **wine**. For while some people are immediately repulsed, others will see virtues that they claim are distinctive characters that enhance a **wine**. They prefer terms such as rustic and earthy to dirty and plastic. They presumably find enjoyment in picnicking near an open sewer.

This recent encounter was confirmation of my worst fears about the direction of Bordeaux and should be cause for alarm among the world's buyers of top-end Bordeaux.

Quite simply, if you are investing in Bordeaux then you might be in for a rude shock, especially if you are planning to drink it.

Perhaps, if all you want to do is cash in on the inflated prices of these wines then it might not matter because many are simply traded and never consumed by anyone who actually knows what they are drinking.

It was the most striking outcome of the 2013 Master Blend Classification, a special tasting hosted by Wolf Blass Wines in Montreal, London and Melbourne, in which **wine** critics, sommeliers and judges tasted the same 30 cabernet-based wines from the world's major **wine** producing regions.

The Master Blend Classification, inspired by the Bordeaux **Wine** Official Classification of 1855, assessed wines from France, the US, Chile, South Africa, Italy and Australia.

The wines included all five Bordeaux First Growth producers, which are internationally recognised as the benchmark of cabernet. All the wines were from the 2009 vintage, which in many of the regions, including Bordeaux, is considered one of the best vintages in recent years.

They were tasted blind (in that there was no indication of what they were until revealed at the end) with wines bought from retail stores.

The wines were all marked out of 100 and the scores in each city collated and then combined into one master list.

The discussions in each city were earnest to say the least, but might have resulted in pistols at dawn if all the judges were actually in the one room.

The common themes were vintage conditions, the appearance and tolerance of brettanomyces, use of oak and effect of **wine** closure.

And the opinions differed wildly.

There is no doubt that most New World **wine** critics find brettanomyces an anathema while some of those in Europe appear to have developed a scotoma, a blind spot, to its very existence.

It is why so many Bordeaux that are loaded with the stuff and reek of all manner of poxy smells are rated so highly and attract such incredible prices.

The results were a mix. Disturbing, confirming, surprising and certainly worrying. Australian winemakers have managed to all but eradicate brett with better winery management and hygiene but in the hands of the Bordelaise — and supported by sommeliers and **wine** critics — in Europe it seems to be reaching epidemic proportions. There are some exceptions such as Chateau Beychevelle where the wines have been cleaned up and looked tremendous in the tasting.

I see no virtues in brett and would be mighty annoyed if I had just spent \$2000 on a bottle of First Growth Bordeaux only to find the **wine** unpleasant and unpalatable when I came to drink it.

Now here's the thing. In the new world of **wine**, you would generally taste the finished **wine** in the bottle, perhaps seek a little advice and then go ahead and **buy** it if you liked what you had tasted.

Bordeaux is still locked into the en primeur system where each year the wineries trot out their latest offering and present them to **wine** buyers and the media who pass judgment on the quality.

And this is where it all gets so messy.

The wines at the time of tasting are around six months old and often blended especially for the purpose from the best parcels, before they have been put back into oak to finish maturation before final bottling.

Yes, that's right. People are basing purchases worth thousands of dollars on assessments of incomplete wines by winemakers and buyers keen to sell them at exorbitant prices, and the media who are prepared to pass judgment before the wines has been bottled.

For me this issue was perfectly illustrated as a result of the recent tasting combined with notes from a visit to Bordeaux in May 2010 when I tasted wines at a number of the major Bordeaux producers. Included among them was the Chateau Margaux, where I tasted the 2009 vintage wines immediately after the annual en primeur tastings.

My assessment of these wines and a few others at the time is that they were extraordinary. I was convinced the Margaux was simply one of the finest wines I had tasted and agreed with all the hype.

Three years later and with the **wine** having been matured in oak and bottled my comments were dramatically different.

The **wine** was riddled with brettanomyces and on my scoring sheet worth a paltry 84/100. I was not alone in this assessment and it raised serious questions about the structure and the value for the en primeur system.

However, the combination of extraordinary recent prices fuelled by winery hubris and **wine** buyer and media hype, plus rising demand in **China**, is starting to force cracks in the system.

Earlier this year, the fabled Chateau Latour pulled out of the en primeur system with the 2012 vintage, which will probably not be **sold** for another 10 to 15 years.

The argument they put forward is that too many consumers are drinking the wines when they are too young, particularly the new generation of **millionaires** from Asia and Eastern Europe. These so-called "new market" customers, attracted by the **brand** rather than the product, are then unable to appreciate its complexities, the Chateau claims.

For the moment, we still have the system, flawed as it maybe. If you want them, **buy** them, but be mindful: caveat emptor.

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