

Vintage

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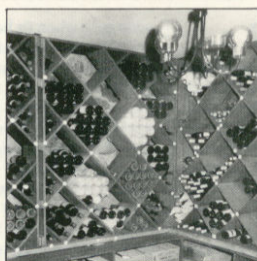
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The 1949 Clarets

A Perspective

By Dennis J. Zeitlin



From early on, it looked like a troubled vintage. The winter and spring were rainy and cold, and the low temperature continued into the early summer. Flowering took place under this handicap, and there was a great deal of *coulour*—the dropping of the new grapes. Temperature fluctuated, and at Ch. Cheval Blanc, for instance, the vines blossomed three times before the flowers held. A severe drought with high temperatures prevailed throughout the rest of the summer, broken finally by rains near the time of harvest for most chateaux. Ripening had in general been uneven, and while some chateaux achieved optimum sugar levels, many had to pick slightly early, just when the grapes reached maturity. However, the berries were more concentrated due to the small crop.

All things considered, when the wine was finally in barrel, spirits ran high in Bordeaux. The quality was felt to be close to the great '47's, if not quite up to the '45's. Three fine vintages in five years was indeed a cause for celebration—this had never occurred in this century. Yet the specific nature and future of the '49's has remained controversial to this day. Alexis Lichine, in his first (1951) edition of *Wines of France*, gave the vintage a 16 out of 20 rating, equivalent to "great." Since the wines were not in bottle, this appraisal may well have depended upon reports from the various chateaux, since extensive barrel sampling by the trade was a number of years away, waiting for the advent of the "futures" market. By 1955, in his revised edition, Lichine had upgraded the vintage to 18 out of 20: "very great." His written description, intended as a consensus of the Bordeaux trade, follows: "A very good year, the soft red wines have matured quickly and are apt to disappoint those who wait too long to drink them."

However, I spoke with several of the "older guard" of the San Francisco Bay Area wine subculture, connoisseurs who were on the scene when the wines first arrived. Their impressions were very different. To them the wines seemed big, sturdy, hard, and rich; wines designed for long aging. Barney Rhodes, who owns both a legendary cellar and palate, recalls being "quite impressed. The wines were big, fairly hard, with a lot of fruit and richness—somewhat similar to a big, sturdy California cabernet sauvignon. I purchased a lot of them, feeling they had a great future. But by the early sixties it was apparent that they were dropping fruit. But I'm certainly not sorry I bought them." The same general impression is shared by Karl Petrowsky, a prominent wine importer and writer who began his extensive and varied career in the wine trade with this vintage. He comments, "There was a very early development of bouquet, yet they have never seemed to be growing old. They remained hard, dark, full bodied. The wines never quite reached their anticipated peak, the absolute greatness." He likens the vintage to the '28's, '37's, and '52's in terms of hardness, but finds more fruit in the '49's than any of these. Robert T.A. Knudsen, well-known collector and lecturer, holds the vintage in higher esteem. His memory of the wines extends to their cost, which ought to make today's collector blanch: "The early prices were

high—higher than for the '47's and '48's due to the fine quality and small crop. I bought the first growths at Macy's for \$5.69-5.89. A bottle of a second growth wine went for \$2.49-2.99. The wines were much heralded. They were hard and intense; even Lafite tasted in '61 was still hard. The wines softened in the mid or late sixties. They're holding beautifully—there seems to be no real drying out. I had five of them together a couple years ago, and there wasn't a weak sister in the bunch."

George Linton, a wine importer with perhaps the world's greatest collection of old California wines, is even more sanguine about the vintage. "I first tasted the wines in '54. They were enormous wines then. They're holding much better than the '47's or '53's. They are more like the '61's; not past their peak at all." That experienced and expert tasters can disagree is part of the fascination of wine. Indeed, these four men met and became friends shortly after the arrival of the '49's, and in 1963 established the original "First Growth Group" (see *Vintage*, July 1979) where they meet quarterly to assess and debate the relative merits of the Grand Cru clarets.

"From early on, it looked like a troubled vintage."

The controversy has continued in the literature. By the fifth edition of Lichine's *Wines of France* (1969), the consensus of the Bordeaux trade is markedly different: "A very good year. The big red wines matured slowly. Many held their own remarkably well and were most enjoyable through the sixties." The rating remained 18 out of 20. In 1971, Edmund Penning-Rowsell, in his comprehensive book, *Wines of Bordeaux*, wrote of the '49's: "This year was greatly acclaimed initially, but has not always fulfilled its promise, for many of the wines have an edge and hardness that have persisted. Others... it may be that another few years must pass before the status of this vintage is finally established." One year later, Harry Waugh, in *Diary of a Winetaster*, commented on the '49's as "a vintage which was heralded by a fanfare of trumpets but then for years remained numb and unexciting. Now, at last, some of the finer 1949's are blossoming out to fulfill early predictions." A recently issue of "Medoc" magazine rates the vintage as "very good... vigorous and full of finesse, wines of great bouquet."

Although I have been interested in these wines for years, a chance for a horizontal assessment appeared at a March, 1979 dinner of another First Growth Club. Though the wines were not served blind, or formally rated by the group, ample time was allowed for their evaluation prior to the arrival of the entrée. The wines were served immediately upon being uncorked and decanted, to ensure

that we would miss none of the initial nuances of bouquet. My tasting notes and rankings follow:

Ch. Ausone (St. Émilion): Medium red and some central browning and a moderately tawny rim. A lovely, aged, spicy bouquet, with elegant floral, cinnamon, and anise scents. A touch of volatile acidity lends complexity and charm. Along with Lafite and Haut-Brion, the most gorgeous nose. Medium-bodied, with good acidity. Initially elegant on the palate, though less complex than the nose, the taste cycle progresses from a mélange of early flavors to a somewhat hot center taste and quite hot, drying finish with considerable tannin. Very close in quality to the great but relatively unsung '47 (which has always taken a back seat to the overwhelming Cheval Blanc), and not that far from the utterly superb '34. Ausone displays real first growth quality in these years that it has never achieved since. Rank: 3

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Ch. Cheval Blanc (St. Émilion): Slightly more mature in appearance than the Ausone. Nose initially closed. With swirling develops some spicy, briary scents, and with still more time, a crescendo of berries, hints of chocolate and coffee. Yet the nose is not as exuberant as the Ausone. Quite full-bodied, with good acidity. Very soft and velvety on the palate; a wine of great finesse and integrated of this complexity. Still, there have been more magical bottles of this vintage. In a vertical Cheval Blanc tasting several years ago, I ranked this number one out of nine wines going back to the '29 (see *Vintage*, December, 1976). Rank: 4

Ch. Petrus (Pomerol): The youngest in appearance of all the wines; only a slightly tawny rim. An absolutely classic Petrus nose of aged merlot; moderately complex, but less so than the others. Medium-bodied, with good acidity. Soft, round, and fruity on the palate, with young, ripe, berry flavors and a long, simple finish, with plenty of tannin for aging. Not drying. For all the softness and accessibility merlot lends in other settings, it is remarkable that

Petrus, with its cépage of 70% merlot and 30% cabernet franc, matures almost as slowly as Latour and Mouton with their preponderance of cabernet sauvignon. This Petrus is an excellent but somehow unexciting wine on the palate. Perhaps a few more years will bring this about, but it is hard to see it ever approaching the greatness of the '47 or '45. Rank: 7

Ch. Haut-Brion (Graves): Similar to the Cheval Blanc in appearance. Incredibly deep, buttery café-au-lait nose with elegant Gravesian earthy muskiness and packed jams in the background. Tremendously full, rich, and complex overall; a masterpiece. Enormous body, good acidity. On the palate, very parallel to the nose, bordering on a “late harvest” style (as does the '34, '29, and '28). Velvet center surrounded by smoky, leathery, earthy flavors. Three months later, another bottle was remarkably consistent, though with a little less of the late harvest component. A greater wine than the '47, and perhaps even the '45, this is approached only by the completely different, almost Lafite-like '59 for current drinking. Rank: 1

Ch. Margaux (Margaux): Rather light garnet with a very tawny rim. Similar in style to the Ausone, with “high pitched” finely wrought tracery of fruit with hints of musk. Extremely graceful and feminine. Moderate body with good acidity. Complex, equally high pitched flavors. Some fruit still there, but drying, with a tannic finish. With wines this old, storage and bottle variation figure importantly. Two years ago I had a superior bottle at a dinner with the Latour and La Mission Haut-Brion, and found them of equal quality though of course markedly different in style. The Margaux was soft, quiet, elegant and perfumed in the nose with spicy blackcurrants, violets, and “bright points” all around, with palatal impressions to match, though still a bit hard. Ranks close to the '47, outranks the '45, and yields only to the perfection of the '53. Rank: 6

Ch. Latour (Pauillac): Younger in appearance than all the others except Petrus. A balanced nose of great breed, which emerges after being initially closed. An integration of coffee, jams, and subtle vegetal hints, with less of the cedar one typically finds in other great Latour vintages. Full-bodied with good acidity. Initially simple flavors become more complex, with a soft center, exuberant berries, briary edge, and tannic finish. This bottle needs years; others have been more developed. Long considered one of the great successes of this vintage, it is also a great Latour. At an extraordinary dinner of the San Francisco Vintner's Club in 1976 featuring eighteen vintages of Latour, the '49 was close to perfection, eclipsed only by the amazing balance and power of the '06, the soft, floral-cedar eloquence of the '29, and the undeniable potential of the '45. Rank: 5

Ch. Lafite (Pauillac): The only wine served in half-bottles. Similar to Cheval Blanc in appearance. Initially a worrisome atypical nose of pimento, green olive, and other vegetal scents. With time and swirling, these disappear and

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Ch. Pontet-Canet (Pauillac): Similar in appearance to the Talbot with a bit more oranginess. But the nose is much deeper, with Pauillac "jammy" fruit. Complex and elegant with the promise of unctuousness on the palate. Quite full bodied with good acidity. Surprisingly simple flavors, with more fruit than the Talbot, but a similarly high pitched, hot, drying, citrus, and even more tannic finish. My Rank: 5 Group Rank: 5 Group Points: 32

Ch. Pichon Lalande (Pauillac): Lighter red than either of the above, with moderately orange rim. Initially musky, remained wide open with very little fruit, complexity, or interest. Quite full-bodied with good acidity. Surprisingly gentle, intense fruit and interesting almost Pomerol-like flavors with less drying than either of the above. Tannic finish. My Rank: 4 Group Rank: 4 Group Points: 28.5

Ch. Cantemerle (Macau): Slightly deeper red than any of the preceding, with moderately orange rim. An elegant healthy nose, not quite as deep as the Pontet-Canet, but very complex, with hints of coffee, tobacco, and an interesting touch of volatile acidity. Full bodied with good acidity. A delicious wine; round, deep, fruity, and complex, with long flavors, very little drying, and a lingering fruity finish with ample tannin to hold for years. My Rank: 3 Group Rank: 3 Group Points: 17

Ch. Calon-Segur (St. Estèphe): Similar in appearance to the Cantemerle, with perhaps a bit more yellowing at the rim. The bouquet is a masterpiece—a marvelous integration of lush, soft, olive-green pepper merlot scents, intense elixir-like fruit, and a deep perfume of roses. A younger bouquet than the others. Full-bodied with good acidity. Flavors parallel the nose, with generous, intense fruit and merlot flavors (a distinguishing characteristic of this chateau whose cépage includes 50% of that grape). Hot, fruity finish. Not drying out, perhaps partly a function of the larger bottle. My Rank: 1-2 Group Rank: 1 & 2 Group Points: 15 (av.)

Although there was some controversy in the discussion that followed, it was generally held that these wines would not improve, and that with the exception of the superb Cantemerle and Calon-Segur, were continuing to dry out. Even with the first growths, which have understandably

fared better, it is only the Latour and Petrus that may still be on their ascent. The Haut-Brion, Cheval Blanc, and Mouton-Rothschild are at their peak and should hold for several years before beginning to dry out with the Ausone, Margaux, and Lafite. Ch. La Mission Haut-Brion, generally accorded first growth status, is also at its peak; a wondrous, lush, elegant wine that is rivaled only by the '47 and '29.

The tendency of the vintage as a whole towards gradual loss of fruit may well be a result of the gauntlet the grapes had to traverse during the unusual '49 season. The drying out is remarkable in its slow, subtle march, a process that I believe has indeed been occurring over the past ten to fifteen years. I find this, along with no evidence of oxidation or significant acetification, all very reassuring. Collectors who may have some '49's stashed away need not rush to drink them up. They may well outlive us. The best are great, classic clarets of a size, spine, richness, and quintessential bouquet that may never come again.

Some experts view this vintage as a stylistic pivot point in Bordeaux, feeling that even the wines of the '50's decade were made in a lighter, softer, more rapidly maturing fashion. It seems more likely that these wines varied primarily as a function of the weather in Bordeaux, and that it was not until the sixties that the new generation of wine makers trained the decade before took the helm, and under the increasing financial pressures of a world wanting to buy and drink their wine *now*, shifted toward less contact with skins and wood in their vinification. The first growths, which have always immediately had a home, should be able to continue to resist the pressure. Hopefully, the other finer classed growths will also.

Apart from the notable exceptions that occur in almost every year, when taken as a vintage, the '49's emerge as the finest twenty-plus-year-old clarets for current drinking. (the '28's, '34's, '37's, and '52's are harder and lack the fruit. The '47's show a distressing degree of volatile acidity. The once elegant, soft '29's and '53's are gone or fading away, along with the tired '55's with their short finish. The '59's lack the richness and concentration and are drying out. The incredible '45's still need time, if we can keep our hands off them.) At the dinner table, the ultimate destination of a fine bottle of claret, issues of dryness are quickly forgotten in the marriage with fine cuisine. The transcendent bouquet of a great '49 fills the room.



the classic floral perfume cloud of Lafite emerges, redolent of Pauillac's intense berry character. Medium-bodied, with good acidity. The taste parallels the nose, but is rather evanescent, with some drying, and a tannic finish. Two months later, at a Houston dinner I would have given an eyetooth to participate in, the '49 (in full bottle) was served with thirty-five vintages of Lafite, going back to the 1799. The wine was rated 19 out of 20, and the owner of Lafite was heard to exclaim that this was the best vintage of the past fifty years. Rank: 2

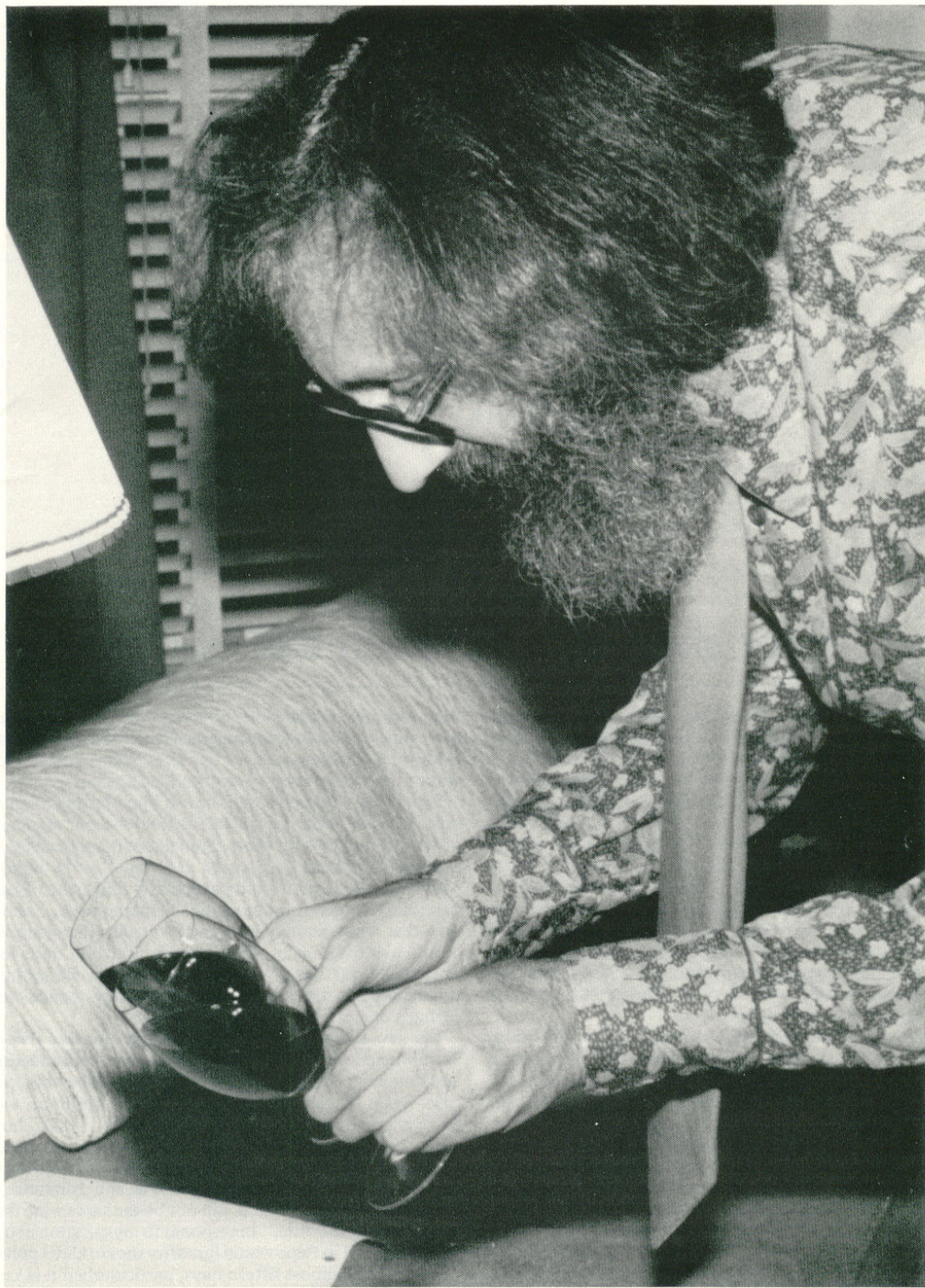
Ch. Mouton-Rothschild (Pauillac): The only ullaged bottle in the tasting; level is slightly below the shoulder. A bit older in appearance than the Latour. Defective nose—a curtain of oxidation with deep tar, truffles, mushrooms, and other vegetation in an unpleasant mélange that almost completely masks a huge, rich, Mouton nose. As full-bodied as the Haut-Brion, with good acidity. Unfortunately, the flavors parallel the nose, yet one can sense the full, round, soft, rich fruit trying to peek out. A long tannic finish. Clearly a damaged bottle; the Mouton is generally considered the outstanding wine of the vintage. Softer, rounder, and more lush than the other first growths, it has the huge richness and concentration of the '45. The cedar and eucalyptus climbs out of the glass. No Mouton since then can touch it; virtually on a par with the famed '45, one has to go all the way back to the '29 to find its equal. Rank 8

Although I rank ordered these wines, I found that my

point score breakdowns showed very little difference among them other than for the Petrus and the defective Mouton. The wines seemed very true to the varied styles of their chateaux. As one would predict, there was considerable debate at the table over where the wines were in their trajectory. More and more interested in this issue, I decided to arrange a horizontal tasting of some other classified growths. Though the '49 vintage was notable in its success across the board, at this dinner we focussed on the Medoc, it being my impression that in recent years these wines are showing best. This tasting was conducted formally, the five wines uncorked and decanted just before being served blind to the seven tasters. The instructions were to attempt identification, to rank order the wines, and to try to pair the two identical bottles of Ch. Calon-Segur that had been decanted from the only magnum in the tasting. On this occasion I interchanged the two Pauillacs, but otherwise made correct identifications. This always involves some measure of luck; the task was made easier by the forceful expression of the chateau personalities in this vintage. The results follow:

Ch. Talbot (St. Julien): Medium red with a moderately orange rim. A rather hollow nose with raisiny, buttery, vegetal elements, that gives way to a bit more fruit. Quite disappointing. Medium bodied and bordering on excessive acidity. Hot, tart, citrus, and high pitched on the palate. Lacks stuffing—needs depth and fruit. Moderately tannic, citrus finish.

My Rank: 6 Group Rank: 6 Group Points: 39.5



Rae Norman

"The author compares the color of two of the '49 first growths."