

ROBERSON WINE FINE WINE TASTINGS

BORDEAUX 1989: THE HORIZONTAL

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## 1989

As the 1980s drew to a close, Jive Bunny were topping the charts and the England team were stumbling to qualify for Italia '90, but Chateau owners and drinkers alike could look back fondly at a decade that had given them more top quality Bordeaux vintages than most others in the 20th century.

After a good vintage in 1988 (one which turned out better than initially expected), the Bordelais were in buoyant mood and reacted with their customary gusto to excellent weather conditions right from the off. Following a mild winter May was hot and dry, prompting early flowering and setting a trend for sweltering temperatures that was to continue throughout the rest of the growing season. The summer started early and remained hot and dry until after the harvest was completed - so hot and dry in fact, that 1989 was the hottest year on record since 1949 and the earliest harvest since 1893.

With all of this sun it would be easy to think that the '89 vintage was plain sailing, but that was not exactly the case. While the high temperatures meant early ripening for the fruit in an analytical sense (sugars and acids), the shorter growing season left the grapes without the required phenolic (or physiological) ripeness. This presented the chateaux owners with a dilemma - should they pick early to preserve acidity levels and prevent the wines from taking on too much sur-maturité (over ripeness), or should they wait for full phenolic ripeness to avoid massive sugar levels and green, harsh tannins. The answer to this difficult question would dictate what sort of wines each chateau made and there was no universally accepted 'right' way to do things.

This issue of physiological ripeness was particularly acute for Cabernet Sauvignon and therefore it had a much bigger impact on the wines of the Médoc. Estates on the right bank picked relatively early (some getting started in August) as Merlot doesn't need so long to achieve a high level of phenolic ripeness - the Moueix properties in Pomerol and St Emilion delayed picking until the first week of September and the fruit they brought in was superb so expectations were high for the quality of the wines. With things a bit more complicated over on the left-bank many winemakers lost their nerve and on the advice of their risk-averse oenologists they sent out the pickers early, missing the opportunity to harvest fruit that would've proved to be spectacular if they had waited. Those that did wait were rewarded, producing wines that stand up to those made in the other great vintages of the 20th century.

So how was the vintage received by the critics? Well, at the time there was a great deal of positive press for the '89s, resulting in proclamations that it was the vintage of the century. Of course, a century in Bordeaux tends to mean 2 or 3 years, but nevertheless the feeling was very positive and the wines showed very well when they were young, fetching the highest prices of any vintage released up to that point. Michael Broadbent scored the vintage 5\* and called it *"Unquestionably a great vintage"*. Robert Parker has never been quite so enthusiastic as other commentators (with the notable exception of Pomerol), feeling that it pales in comparison to its younger sibling 1990.

The Roberson team have always felt '89 has been an excellent performer in the many verticals we've hosted, but 21 years on it will be fascinating to taste how the wines have developed with their combination of low acids and high tannins.

ST JULIEN

As one of the three communes in the Haut-Médoc that are more northerly (Margaux is much closer to the city of Bordeaux), St Julien avoided some of the heat exhaustion suffered by those communes further to the south. Still, the conditions were very hot and many top estates produced wonderful wines.

At 17ha, the small but beautifully formed **Langoa-Barton** is the original property owned by the Barton family and is in fact the Château pictured on the label of their other (and adjacent) *Troisième Cru* property in St Julien - Léoville-Barton. Both estates turn out consistently superb wines and, although Léoville-Barton is considered by many to be superior in quality, Langoa is well known for offering great value claret that is a classic example of its appellation. 1989 Langoa wasn't rated by Michael Broadbent, but Parker scored it (a somewhat disappointing) 86 and Jancis gives it a very respectable 18/20.

Owned by the Cordier family since 1917, the wines of *Troisième Cru* Château **Talbot** have always enjoyed particular acclaim in the UK, perhaps because they are named after the British General that led his troops into the battle of Castillon unarméd. An impressive 107 hectares are under vine here, with around 86% being devoted to Cabernet Sauvignon. '89 was a decent, if not spectacular vintage for Talbot in the eyes of the critics - Parker scoring it 88 points, Jancis giving it 17/20 and Michael Broadbent giving it 3\*.

Château **Léoville-Las Cases** is the bulk (97ha) of the old Léoville estate that was broken up after the French Revolution (the other chunk is the aforementioned Léoville-Barton) and with no *1er Cru Classé* properties in St Julien, *Deuxième Cru* Las Cases is thought by many to be the greatest estate in the appellation. While Parker rated the '89 Las Cases 95 when tasted from cask, he has since downgraded this to 91 points. Broadbent scores it 3(4)\* while Jancis hasn't rated it.

1: 1989 Château Langoa-Barton; St Julien 12.5% ABV	Available 2	Retail price <del>£73.95</del>	Tasting bottle price £66.56
2: 1989 Château Talbot; St Julien 12.5% ABV	Available n/a	Retail price <del>£105</del>	Tasting bottle price n/a
3: 1989 Château Léoville-Las Cases; St Julien 13.5% ABV	Available 20	Retail price <del>£105</del>	Tasting bottle price £166.50

Even more so than was the case in St Julien, Pauillac was where many of the best wines of the 1989 vintage came from. That said, Robert Parker felt that the 1er Cru Classé properties (with the exception of Haut-Brion) under performed in '89 and with three of them in Pauillac it was left to the other estates to ensure that the general quality of wine was excellent. We will be tasting the highest performers (according to Parker), all three from the southern part of the appellation.

**Château Pichon-Longueville Baron** was once the junior partner to Pichon-Lalande, but since 1987 it has gone about the business of investing heavily so it can compete with its neighbour, and with spectacular results. The 70ha *Deuxième Cru* produces a wine that is full-bodied and typically Pauillac in style. The '89 Baron was hailed as their best effort for 30 years and scored 95 points by Robert Parker. Michael Broadbent was slightly less effusive, although still complimentary when scoring it 3(4)\*, while Jancis gave it a healthy 18/20.

Next door is **Château Pichon-Longueville Comtesse de Lalande**, the *Deuxième Cru* property owned by Champagne Louis Roederer and historically thought of as one of the very best 'Super Seconds'. Only 45 of their 84 hectares are planted to Cabernet Sauvignon, which is relatively low for Pauillac but may explain the sublime elegance of the wines. 1989 Comtesse was given a full 5\* by Michael Broadbent and described as 'Marvellous', while Parker scored it 92 and Jancis gave it 17.5/20.

Slightly further to the north is the esteemed *Cinquième Cru* **Château Lynch-Bages**. One of the few properties that almost always outperforms its status in the 1855 classification, Lynch is a rich, opulent and sometimes exotically flavoured Pauillac from 100ha of vines. The 1989 was one of their best ever efforts, scored 95 points by Parker, 3(4)\* by Broadbent and 17.5/20 by Jancis. We hosted a Lynch-Bages vertical just over a year ago and the 1989 was one of the standout wines of the night.

4: 1989 Château Pichon-Baron; Pauillac 13% ABV	Available n/a	Retail price <del>£225</del>	Tasting bottle price n/a
5: 1989 Château Pichon-Lalande; Pauillac 12.5% ABV	Available 1	Retail price <del>£230</del>	Tasting bottle price £207
6: 1989 Château Lynch-Bages; Pauillac 12.5% ABV	Available 3	Retail price <del>£245</del>	Tasting bottle price £220.50

## MARGAUX

As we have already discussed, '89 was a vintage with results that varied wildly between communes and producers within those communes. St Estephe (the northern-most commune in the Haut-Médoc) and Margaux (the southern-most) have been seen as the relative under-performers. This is especially true of Margaux where, as was the case in 1982, there was a surprising lack of quality. Many of the early pickers were in Margaux, meaning that some of the wines were overloaded with green and underripe tannins. In St Estephe, only Montrose of the big hitters received a high score from Parker (96).

**Cos d'Estournel** is arguably the finest estate in St Estephe in 2009, although around the time of the '89 and '90 vintages that accolade would surely have gone to Montrose. Still, the ambitious Jean-Guillaume Prats is committed to making Cos the most highly respected of all the *Deuxième Crus*. Back in 1989 Cos scored just 88 points from Robert Parker, with Michael Broadbent rating it 3(4)\* and Jancis giving it a highly satisfactory 18/20.

Further south, at the glorious *Première Cru Classé* **Château Margaux**, Paul Pontallier was very happy with his 1989 - it showed very similar characteristics to their fantastic '82 in terms of acidity and alcohol levels, with just a bit more tannin. Opinion of the critics was divided - Parker was quite dismissive of it, calling the '89 "*good but not stunning*" and placing it well below the '82, '83, '86 and '90. His final score for it (at this point) is 89, a shocking score for a first growth in a great vintage. Michael Broadbent and Jancis are far more enthused by the '89 Margaux, giving it 4(5)\* and 19/20 respectively.

7: 1989 Château Cos d'Estournel; St Estephe 13% ABV	Available 4	Retail price £146	Tasting bottle price £131.40
8: 1989 Château Margaux; Margaux 12.5% ABV	Available 3	Retail price £395	Tasting bottle price £355.50

ST EMILION

Perhaps more than any other commune in Bordeaux, St Emilion threw up all kinds of inconsistencies in 1989. Merlot dominated properties produced some highly rated wines, with Angelus, Troplong-Mondot and Tertre-Rotebeouf among the stars. However, there is the Cabernet issue to consider and things were tricky for those properties with high proportions of Franc or Sauvignon in the vineyard.

One such property is **Château Figeac** in the northern section of St Emilion towards Pomerol. The 40ha estate is one of the leading *Première Grand Cru Classé (B)* addresses, famed for the high proportion of Cabernet Sauvignon in the blend and often referred to as the 'Médoc lovers St Emilion'. It is often a wine that divides critical opinion and the '89 was no different - Parker scored it a woeful 83 points and pointed out the "pronounced green, vegetal character", while Michael Broadbent gave it 4\* and hailed it as "Figeac at its fragrant, mouthfilling, flavoury best". Jancis scored it 17+, but was of the opinion that there was plenty more development when she tasted it in 2005.

Cheval Blanc is the most famous and revered of all St Emilion estates and it is an often forgotten fact that it was once part of Figeac - two of the five famed Figeac gravel mounds form part of the 37ha estate that is one of only two *Première Grand Cru Classé (A)* properties (Ausone is the other one). The most distinctive thing about the wines is their high proportion of Cabernet Franc and this, of course, had an impact on the quality of their wine in the 1989 vintage. A slightly negative impact according to Parker, who scored it 89 points - but a very good thing in the eyes of Broadbent (5\*) and Jancis (18/20 most recently, but 19/20 before).

9: 1989 Château Figeac, St Emilion 13% ABV	Available n/a	Retail price £105	Tasting bottle price n/a
10: 1989 Château Cheval Blanc; St Emilion 13% ABV	Available 2	Retail price £430	Tasting bottle price £387