

BORDEAUX 1961

ROBERSON WINE

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THE VINTAGE

"Vintage of the century" is one of the most abused phrases in Bordeaux wine parlance: no sentence is more likely to have the market-weary wine consumer rolling his or her eyes. But sometimes, just sometimes, the hyperbole is justified and there are a pantheon of truly great vintages that genuinely vie for the crown.

As winter turned to spring in early 1961, many winemakers on the right-bank of Bordeaux were still recovering after the disastrous frosts of 1956. St Emilion and particularly Pomerol had endured widespread replanting and many chateaux were gearing up for what would be one of their first vintages from the very young vines.

Winter had been very wet, but spring began nicely and the mild conditions led to an early flowering in the third week of May. As usual, the early start to the vineyard cycle had bred optimism amongst the Bordelais but this initial positivity was short-lived when a severe frost struck at the end of May, seriously damaging much of the Merlot crop. Surely not another devastating vintage like they had endured just five years previously? Thankfully no - the weather perked up quickly as June progressed and despite the significant reduction in the potential crop, the '61 vintage was back on track.

June was warm and sunny, followed by a similar July that ended with just enough rain to top up the water reserves. This moisture would prove to be crucial, as August developed into a blisteringly hot month that bordered on drought conditions. September was similar and the harvest began later than expected at the end of the month, meaning that the meagre crop had plenty of hang time and the small, concentrated, thick skinned berries were unaffected by rot or any other maladies.

One of the vintages that '61 is often compared to is 1945, but while the two years shared a similar backbone of tannin and acidity, it was clear from the very beginning that '61 had more in the way of plush, up front fruit and charm. What makes this all the more surprising is that the Merlot crop was so small that it barely figured (if at all) in the blends of many top left-bank chateaux - Lafite, Montrose and Domaine du Chevalier for example, are all 100% Cabernet.

Commentators like David Peppercorn and Clive Coates were sure of the '61s quality right from the off. Peppercorn said *"I shall always remember the first tastings of 1961s in Bordeaux, because of the remarkably characteristic bouquet which nearly all the wines had from the start. They seemed to possess an extra dimension compared to any other vintage I have seen."*

The wines were considered expensive on first release, which is no surprise considering the high quality and tiny crop. It was a vintage that was a financial disaster for many chateaux and the last year that any of the cru classé properties sold their crop *sur souche*. This system of selling the wines while the fruit is still on the vine is a high risk strategy and in a year when quantities are very low it can mean the chateau owner ends up out of pocket. So it proved in '61, as the release prices for the cru classé wines were sometimes triple that of the 1959 vintage (another superb set of wines) despite the fact that the merchants had taken a large proportion of the volume *sur souche* at discounted prices. In 1964 when the wines reached London, English bottled cru classés were selling for £1.00 per bottle, chateau bottled second growths for £1.50 and first growths for £3.50. This ratio of 2.33:1 between the first and second growth prices is in contrast to at least 5:1 for the 2010 vintage.

FLIGHT ONE: SATELLITE APPELLATIONS

Perched on the hills overlooking Blaye is **Chateau Segonzac**, a property of little repute that today stands at 33ha in size. It was founded back in 1887 by a chap called Jean Dupuy who would go on to be the Minister of Agriculture - a big job in a country like France! Since 2000 it has been owned by a Swiss family, the Herter-Marmets. They are very keen on a modern approach to winemaking, even producing a wine called LibertéR which uses the spinning cone technique to remove part of the alcohol, finally coming in a 6.5% ABV. It is difficult to say what the standing of the property was like back in '61, but the fact that our bottle is a UK bottling from Christopher & Company of Jermyn St suggests that it was thought good enough to ship by the barrel.

Across the river in Moulis is **Chateau Maucaillou**, considered today to be one of the best in the appellation. The property's name comes from the term *Mauvais Cailloux* as it was renowned for its poor soils back in the day. It stands at 68ha in size and has been owned by the Dourthe family since 1929, although 1961 was the year that Roger Dourthe took over and expanded the size of the property significantly. He also shifted the headquarters of the family firm to Maucaillou. A decent wine, if nothing more, it is considered to be a good value source although the wines don't have the ageing potential of Chasse-Spleen or Poujeaux.

Vintage	Producer	Appellation	Region	Available	Price
1961	Château Segonzac	Blaye	Bordeaux (France)	0 Btl	n/a
1961	Château Maucaillou	Moulis	Bordeaux (France)	0 Btl	n/a

FLIGHT TWO: MEDOC

None of these three properties need much introduction, with **Kirwan** a 3rd growth, **Lafon-Rochet** a 4th and **du Tertre** a 5th growth cru classé. Kirwan is one of a number of Bordeaux properties with a name displaying an Irish connection, bestowed on it when an Irish merchant owned the estate in the 18th century. He got the 'chop' in 1792, but the property kept his name. Unusually, Kirwan had a better reputation in years gone by and at the time of the Haut-Medoc classification it was considered the best of the third growths. It was taken over by the negociant firm Schroder & Schyler in 1925 and they refused to begin Chateau bottling until 1967, so tonight's wine was bottled at their HQ in the town of Bordeaux.

In the case of Lafon-Rochet the wines are significantly better now than they were before Guy Tesseron (who would go on to buy Pontet-Canet) purchased the property in 1959. Guy made much needed investment, but it has been in recent years under the stewardship of his son Michel that both Lafon-Rochet and Pontet-Canet have made big strides.

Despite du Tertre's position as the finest estate around the village of Arsac, its' reputation had slipped into the doldrums following the second world war. It was purchased in 1961 by Philippe Gasqueton of Calon-Segur and he set about restoring the property. Tonight we will taste the first vintage of that owner's tenure - he sold up to Eric Jalgersma (of Giscours) in 1999.

Vintage	Producer	Appellation	Region	Available	Price
1961	Château Lafon-Rochet	St Estephe	Bordeaux (France)	0 Btl	n/a
1961	Château Kirwan	Margaux	Bordeaux (France)	0 Btl	n/a
1961	Château du Tertre	Margaux	Bordeaux (France)	0 Btl	n/a

FLIGHT THREE: ST EMILION

As previously mentioned, many St Emilion properties were still getting over the '56 frost by the time the 1961 vintage hove into view. The tiny 1.3ha property of **Clos St Martin** is a difficult one to find much information about, but it is owned today as it was in 1961 (and actually back to 1850) by the Reiffers family. Nowadays it is something of a Parker favourite, with Michel Rolland calling the shots and big point score for their recent vintages.

The two Beausejour properties were one until 1869, when the Duffau-Lagarrosse family sold off the portion that has been known as **Beausejour-Becot** since 1969. Between those dates it was called simply Beausejour, and the wines were deemed good enough that it was classified as one of the 12 premier grand crus of St Emilion in 1955. Over the road at **Beausejour-Duffau-Lagarrosse** the vineyards have always been considered to be in an excellent location but never quite fulfilled their promise - with the exception of the much lauded 1990 vintage. Nowadays things are improving, but back in 1961 it was not considered to be as good a property as its' sibling despite being granted the status of premier grand cru.

Vintage	Producer	Appellation	Region	Available	Price
1961	Clos St Martin	St Emilion	Bordeaux (France)	0 Btl	n/a
1961	Château Beausejour (Becot)	St Emilion	Bordeaux (France)	0 Btl	n/a
1961	Château Beausejour-Duffau Lagarrosse	St Emilion	Bordeaux (France)	0 Btl	n/a

FLIGHT FOUR: ST EMILION

Both of these properties are in today's market considered among Bordeaux's finest. **Pavie** was famously taken over by Gerard Perse in 1997, changing the style of wines made there significantly from the days of the Valette family that had owned it before. The Valette's had taken over in 1943 from the Bouffard family and it was Ferdinand Bouffard that had established Pavie's reputation as a top property thanks in large part to his leading the fight against phylloxera during the late 1800s. By the time the Valettes arrived, Pavie was one of the largest Grand Cru estates in St Emilion although not all of its terroir could be said to be of the highest order. One thing it did have going for it was a network of caves that were perfect for the storage and elevage of Pavie's wine. David Peppercorn talks about the difference in character between the chateau bottled '61 Pavie that he felt spent too long maturing in barrel and the London merchants '61s that spent a couple of years in the caves before being shipped and bottled. Peppercorn preferred the London bottling, which is what we will taste tonight.

Next door to Pavie and runner-up in the competition for biggest Grand Cru property is **Troplong-Mondot**, today one of the best estates in the appellation and still under the ownership of the Valette family with Christine being a visible presence since taking over in 1980. Michel Rolland has been consulting here since 1990, but during the 50s and 60s the wines were considered below par and it will be interesting to taste these neighbouring properties next to each other tonight (although T-M is chateau bottled) especially as they were run by the same owner at the time.

Vintage	Producer	Appellation	Region	Available	Price
1961	Château Troplong-Mondot	St Emilion	Bordeaux (France)	0 Btl	n/a
1961	Château Pavie	St Emilion	Bordeaux (France)	0 Btl	n/a