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Buying & Investing in Wine

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Old certainties are under threat

The shift in global economic power towards Asia is introducing new tastes into the fine wine market but bordeaux remains dominant, says *Peggy Hollinger*

For most people, austerity has meant higher taxes, scarcer public services and eroding living standards. For investors in wine, however, the pressure on governments to show greater fiscal probity has brought new opportunities as some of the world's most intriguing wine cellars have opened up over the past year.

In January, the French city of Dijon sold off 3,500 bottles of prized burgundies – roughly half its stock – to fund municipal services.

In March, the UK government sold from its vast fine wine collection for the first time, putting 54 bottles of the best up for sale, including a 1961 Château Latour, to raise £74,000.

The French presidency put 1,200 bottles of its finest vintages on the block at the end of May. Comprising one-tenth of the Elysée palace's cellar, the auction raised close to $1m; the most expensive bottle, a 1990 Château Petrus, went for €7,625.

All three auctions raised far more than expected. These were rare opportunities in what recently has been a lacklustre investment climate.

The bidding also reflected investors' growing appetite for alternatives to the traditional bordeaux, whose prices had been driven to heady levels by spectacular harvests and a surge of interest from east Asia. Between 2009 and mid-2011, bordeaux prices surged some 80 per cent, as buyers in China and beyond fought to own the best vintages from the top châteaux. Ever since, burgundies and champagnes have drawn a growing number of old-world investors.

Since Asian interest began to slow from 2011, sufficient demand has remained for these wines to help them significantly outperform bordeaux, according to Liv-ex, the London-based exchange for investment-grade wine.

"Investing in the wine market is becoming less about bordeaux, as people thought it was becoming too expensive," says Justin Gibbs, co-founder of Liv-ex. "People are rotating their focus."

Cult wines such as California's Screaming Eagle and Italy's super Tuscans have done well, helped not just by their quality but also by their small output, which makes them more attractive to some investors. There has even been some noise about certain wines from Lebanon or Israel.

But it will be decades before these newcomers can replicate the consistency of the fine French wines, says Miles Davis, a partner of Wine Asset Managers, an investment fund.

Retaining their cachet: many see little to challenge fine French wines for some decades yet Getty

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Modern breed of bar targets young

Down-to-earth approach sets out to cater as much to the novice as the seasoned tippler, writes *Natalie Whittle*

The wine is a garnet colour, with an almighty, rich nose. It is a Ramisco 1992 from the tiny Colares region west of Lisbon, Portugal, and it has made its way into a glass in Crouch End, north London, at the Bottle Apostle, one of a new breed of wine shops and bars in the capital aimed squarely at young wine enthusiasts.

A 30ml, £2.95 taster of this punchy wine is dispensed from one of two Enomatic wine-dispensing machines at the shop and, at £49 a bottle, it is expensive enough to warrant trying before buying.

That is not the only virtue: the tasting opportunities are also a way to notch up greater knowledge of different wine styles.

Indeed, when the first Bottle Apostle opened in Hackney, east London, in 2009, its self-stated mission was to create "a wine shop [that] could cater as much to the wine novice as it does to the seasoned tippler".

Informality is essential to this new style of wine buying – the antithesis of the quiet and haughty staff of the traditional wine shop. Across London, but particularly in the east, the trend is finding favour.

Muriel Chatel opened her shop Borough Wines, also in Hackney, in 2010, after a decade selling wine at her stall in London's Borough Market.

Ms Chatel, who grew up amid viticulture in Bergerac, France, says: "I've been in the wine trade for 10 years and it has changed so much.

"People are travelling and getting interested in wine in Europe. When they come back, it used to be the case you had to go to specialised places [to learn more], but that's not where this young crowd wants to hang out; wine selection in pubs is really awful, too.'


Rolling out the barrel: Borough Wines in London takes the informal approach to attracting customers Rosie Hallam

The shop is accordingly relaxed and friendly, lined with scuffed wooden floorboards and pinned with community notices by the door. But key to its success – it was quickly followed by branches in Stoke Newington and Deal, Kent, and a restaurant-shop, L'Entrepôt, in Hackney Downs – are the stainless steel vat and refrigerated barrels that stand in the corner.

Every month it holds a different wine, dispensed into refillable, retro glass bottles with rubber-seal stoppers (made in Italy for olive oil, rather than wine). The customer first buys the bottle for £2.50, and each subsequent refill is £5. Around 300 litres get sold every week this way at each of the branches.

Ms Chatel says the response has been "quite incredible . . . the refill really appealed to consumers, it's the most important part of our business. Most of the time, especially during the week, consumers want a pleasant, easy drinking house wine. How we do it is [to ensure] all the money is spent on wine and not on packaging."

Ms Chatel develops relationships with emerging winemakers, rather than big domaines, and buys surplus wine that still delivers on quality.

A recent Portuguese red certainly had a delicious balance unthinkable in a supermarket wine of the same price.

Corinna Pyke, Borough Wines' co-director, says: "Part of our success is that we're not a stuffy intimidating wine shop. Our staff are quite young, and they're well informed. People are asking more questions, they're interested in organic wines – the whole explosion of food and wine is reflected in the customer."

Michael and Charlotte Sager-Wilde took an even bigger bet on this curious consumer when they opened their wine bar, Sager & Wilde, earlier this year.

By locating in an affordable part of Shoreditch, in London's East End, keeping the bar menu to good cheese and charcuterie, and cutting out luxuries such as drinks napkins, they could offer some unusual, top-end wines by the glass.

Some nudge beyond the £10 mark, "higher than some Mayfair places", as Mr Sager-Wilde points out, but he is clear that the wine is worth it: "What we're pouring now is hard to get."

Last year, the couple ran a sellout pop-up bar and know that customers, even in their 20s and 30s, are prepared to pay for something special.

Sager & Wilde has 32 wines by the glass and one or two change every day. You might get a £16 glass of Silex, Didier Dagueneau, or an "incredible value" Rioja 1997 for £6.50 – or, for adventure, a Gamay from Serbia.

You can buy wine by the bottle to take away at Sager & Wilde and this is another increasingly popular feature at contemporary, wine-conscious restaurants.

Over a (pretty decent) meal at L'Entrepôt you can pick from more than half a dozen wines by the glass, and take home a bottle of the one you like best with a 10 per cent discount.

At Sweet Thursday, a bright, buzzy pizzeria-wine shop in De Beauvoir town, north London, co-owner Bethany Chellingworth runs the wine side of the business, which gives a 10 per cent discount to bottles bought after a meal.

She admits that the wine retail is "not as profitable as the restaurant, but it's a nice asset to have; all our wines are on display, and our wine tasting events are really popular".

Ms Chellingworth buys "things we enjoyed – the target was people our age and background . . . there's no New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc or Italian Pinot Grigio, we wanted to challenge people a little bit. [You have to] build up trust and rapport."

As Ms Pyke of Borough Wines says, her customers "don't feel stupid or patronised". They enjoy "a relaxed and welcoming environment", which even has about it a touch of "humour and irreverence".

City vineyards preserve history and way of life

Tucked away in centres and suburbs, producers fight sprawl of urban expansion, writes *Feargus O'Sullivan*

If you imagine the suburbs of any great city, you probably think of business parks, motorways and residential sprawl, not vineyards.

City winemaking is nonetheless surprisingly common. It can be found in areas ranging from minute patches of Gamay vines in the backstreets of Montmartre in Paris to broad acres hidden among the mansions of Bel Air in Los Angeles.

The urban wines that these sites produce are of fascinating curiosity to wine lovers, revealing not just the ability of vines to thrive in difficult circumstances but also how the trade has shifted its boundaries and clientele over the centuries.

Take Clos Montmartre. Now a pocket-sized parcel of vines making wines for charity and the local town hall, the French capital's last vineyard is a remnant of a once sizeable Paris basin industry dating back to Roman times. In medieval and early modern France, the hills north of Paris were particularly prized for their south-facing suntrap slopes. The now down-at-heel Goutte d'Or quarter near Montmartre took its name from the "golden drops" of the white wine once made there.

What killed this thriving industry was better transport. When full, heady bordeaux brought in by train became available at good prices, the thin northern tipple that arrived by cart lost some of its lustre, while faster public transit made the hillsides newly attractive for Paris workers' housing.

Bar some private garden stretches of vines, the 1,700 bottles produced annually by Clos Montmartre are all that remains of this once great trade. Sheltered from cold by a high wall ("clos" refers to a protected vineyard enclosure) its wines are pretty good, given local pollution levels.

Master of wine Tim Atkin has described them as "light, fruity and appealing, but of no great complexity".

While the Parisian stream of wine has thinned to a trickle, Viennese production is a relative torrent.

Just like Paris, the Austrian capital's wine tradition dates back as far as the Romans. Unlike its French counterpart, Vienna still has many vines – 612 hectares of them growing within its city limits. These largely cling to hillsides in the suburban Vienna woods, the low range at the far eastern end of the Alpine chain.

Some Viennese wines are actually very good. Wineries such as Wieninger produce a considerable volume of interesting whites, including deliberately old-fashioned field blends and novelties (for Austria) such as oaked Chardonnay, which are available to buy in the UK. Not necessarily stellar by Austria's generally excellent standards, these are nonetheless serious wines.


Green space: Clos Montmartre on the Rue Saint Vincent EPA

'It is quite an indulgence, for example, to own a chunk of expensive urban property and devote it to growing fruit'

While some wines have long been made within city walls, other wine regions have become urban only recently thanks to the insidious creep of metropolitan sprawl.

Vine growers living in France's Pessac area a few centuries ago would probably have thought their village becoming a suburb of the city of Bordeaux was as unlikely as men landing on the moon.

Nonetheless, houses are now edging in between its plantings of Sémillon and Sauvignon Blanc. This process is steadily transforming the home of some of Bordeaux's best whites into yet another dull suburb of plaster-covered concrete and faux-rustic shutters.

In particular, houses have now moved to abut the vineyards of Château Haut Brion, one of the five Bordeaux châteaux listed as first growths in 1855. The astronomical prices the château's reds command, however, should keep them off the estate's actual *terroir* indefinitely, with further development held in check not by lack of demand for new homes, but because the estate's international renown makes it sacred ground.

Beyond the medieval survivals and the rural vineyards swamped by sprawl, one final category of city wine producer remains: the toy vineyard. While they will probably not welcome the designation, wines made recently in London fall into this category.

These include a new enterprise called London Cru that makes wine from imported French grapes in Earl's Court, west London. Enfield's seven-acre Forty Hall vineyard in the north of the capital, meanwhile, will be producing its first organic vintage this year.

Both are intriguing projects no doubt, although they remain too small to be of great significance.

Yet while toy vineyards produce little wine, they can be unusually potent symbols of their owners' wealth.

It is quite an indulgence, for example, to own a chunk of expensive urban property and devote it to growing fruit.

Overall, however, urban winemaking remains a charming curiosity. Long may it continue, while the more serious business of life goes on elsewhere.

Old certainties are under threat

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"I don't think any professional investor would look at these," he says. "You have to have a track record and back library. You don't know whether any wine is brilliant or not for 20 or 30 years. It is a risky policy."

Peter Shakeshaft, chief executive of Vin-X, a broker, says investors should beware of anyone proposing wines from unusual places.

"If someone is going to talk about something completely different, I would go for a second or third opinion," he says.

However, no investor can escape the inevitability of bordeaux. The good news is that after prices for the big names hit historical highs in 2011, some experts suggest value may be creeping back.

Counterintuitively, perhaps, poor vintages in 2011 and 2012, and what promises to be a disappointing harvest this year, may also help drive up prices.

"A smaller supply should mean prices have a chance of pushing forward," says Mr Gibbs. This could rekindle interest in stock from other older vintages that have been overshadowed by the bordeaux bubble.

That is positive for the wine market as a whole. "Ninety-five per cent of the trade is still in bordeaux," says Mr Gibbs.

"Other regions may have caught the eyes of investors, but the market doesn't go up without bordeaux going up."

Peter Meltzer, author of *Keys to the Cellar: Strategies and Secrets of Wine Collecting*, says every investment portfolio has to be dominated by the traditional bordeaux.

"Other wines, however good they may be in the glass, don't tend to appreciate at the same rate," he says.

The reasons are simple: bordeaux is still the most liquid of investments; the best vintages have proved their value for longer-term investors; and when the time comes to realise a portfolio, buyers are easily found for well-known brands.

There is a sense, though, that the world of wine investing is changing. The decision by Robert Parker, the world-renowned critic whose judgment can make or break a vintage, to sell a substantial stake in industry bible The Wine Advocate to Singapore-based investors suggests the old certainties no longer apply.

Asian investors are becoming more knowledgeable about the market and their tastes – and money – may bring new perspectives to the fore.

"Asian buyers are beginning to ask the right questions. They are not just buying on a name," says Matthew Tipping of the fine wine team at Berry Bros & Rudd, the wine merchant.

Yet for the foreseeable future, bordeaux will dominate.

Mr Meltzer, with decades of auction watching behind him, says it is "still the status quo" that will offer the best returns.

"The others may be great to drink, but they are not as collectable."

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Bekaa valley finds its feet

Lebanese production draws on roots set deep in history, writes *Abigail Fielding-Smith*

The inspector's call: Ramzi Ghosn tests his vineyard's produce

As co-owner Ramzi Ghosn calmly inspects the vats fermenting the Cinsault and Grenache grapes that give Massaya wine its distinctive nose, you would never guess that Hizbollah militants are clashing with gunmen just half an hour down the road. Perhaps understandably, Mr Ghosn is keener to talk matters of the palate, rather than dwell on the turbulent politics of the Middle East.

"We're moving away from easy-going wine," he says. "Finesse is the name of the game."

Until recently, Lebanese wine to most people simply meant the Bekaa valley's Château Musar, whose owner Serge Hochar beat a path to international markets at the height of the country's civil war. Musar's quirky reds, as unpredictable and complex as Lebanon itself, remain the industry's best-known export.

Since the civil war ended in 1990, the number of producers has increased from a handful to nearly 40.

In spite of still-turbulent politics, ambitious post-Musar players such as the Ghosn brothers are determined to put out wines that are taken seriously, whilst staying true to the *terroir*.

With an output of only 8m bottles a year – and the cost of producing and exporting them from the Middle East – Lebanon's wine does not come not cheap. Entry level bottles retail for around £9 in the UK.

Like most producers, the majority of Massaya's vines are in the Bekaa valley, a stony, mountain-flanked 2,000 sq km plateau close to the Syrian border. Its sun-baked summers and cool evenings make it ideal for viticulture.

A short drive north from Massaya, the magnificent ruins of a Roman temple to Bacchus at Baalbek offer a hint of the deep historical roots of Lebanon's wine culture. The Phoenicians, whose Mediterranean trading empire flourished from their bases in Lebanon's coastal cities from 1550BC to 300BC, have a reasonable claim to be the first wine exporters.

As the scent of lavender wafts across the air, the view from the Massaya winery is mostly unspoilt by the trappings of subsequent eras. Vines seem to stretch all the way across the valley floor to the snowy higher reaches of the mountains.

Distributed by Thorman Hunt in the UK, the products of the 15-year old vineyard turn over more than $2m a year. It is investing in a new winery near the ski resort of Faqra.

As Mr Ghosn explains over a 2008 red from their popular silver, mid-level selection, the vineyard's relatively short history has been eventful.

At the end of the civil war, Mr Ghosn and his brother were living in Paris. Determined to help Lebanon rebuild, they started making arak, a local aniseed-flavoured spirit, at the family's holiday estate in the Bekaa valley, from which they had been forced to flee one night in 1975.

Plans evolved and the brothers became interested in developing a winery. In 1998, they signed up two French partners: the Bruniers of Châteauneuf-du-Pape and Dominique Hebrard of Bordeaux, who provided investment as well as advice on producing and marketing the wines.

Even with the support of their French partners, it took them 10 years to become profitable. The business suffered in the face of bombs raining down on the valley during the 2006 war between Hizbollah and Israel.

With tensions rising again in Lebanon because of the civil war in Syria, Mr Ghosn has had to draw up contingency plans to get their bottles to port in Beirut, the capital, if roads are cut off by demonstrations.

Set against these problems, Mr Ghosn says, are the almost perfect wine-growing conditions of the region.

"We have sunshine," he says, gesturing at the light dappling through the leaves. "You can be lazy in Lebanon and produce good, decent wine."

Investment

What to buy

In terms of financial investment, Château Musar (left) is the one to lay down. Since Michael Broadbent named it the "find of the fair" at Bristol Wine Fair in 1979, Serge Hochar's bold, original wines have captured the public imagination.

This year Bonhams sold cases of Chateau Musar 1985 and 1986 for nearly £500 and, according to Bloomberg, its 1959 vintage sells for nearly $1,800 a bottle.

Mr Hochar's personal favourites from more recent years include 1991 and 1988. These wines are "not classical", he says, but have "something distinctive" about them. "I hate perfection," he confesses.

Wine writer Michael Karam says while no one else is producing wines likely to increase in value, the best of the major wineries will be "fabulous" to drink in 10-15 years. Tips include a case of the Comte de M from Château Kefraya, the Gold Reserve from Massaya or the El from Ixir.

Regulator fails to enthuse

UK body to curb fraud is short on recruits, says *Lucy Warwick-Ching*

A series of high-profile fraud cases involving wine investment in the UK has led to the launch of a new self-regulatory body. Not everyone is convinced of its merits.

Established to promote transparency among member firms and to stamp out fraudulent activity, the Wine Investment Association (WIA) was launched in February.

It followed revelations that a growing number of fraudsters were setting up offices in the City of London to cold-call potential investors.

Wine investment companies have been invited to sign up to a new code of conduct and to agree to tougher controls, as well as a stringent complaints procedure. Mazars, the accountancy and audit firm, is working with the WIA to carry out compliance audits of member firms. Members that sign up to the code will be entitled to display an industry kitemark.

"After 30 years of inaction it was essential that regulation was introduced into what is a sector of growing importance," says Hugo Rose, WIA chairman.

"For the first time the industry has a body to establish a code of practice, regulate operators, expose rogue traders and ultimately increase investor confidence in wine as an asset class."

The introduction of the code coincided with a crackdown by the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA), the City watchdog, on the promotion of unregulated investment funds – including investment in wine – to the public.

The FCA has banned financial advisers from recommending risky, unusual or complex funds to "ordinary" (less wealthy or less sophisticated) investors.

The introduction of the WIA has been broadly welcomed by the financial services industry.

"Wine is a very small, illiquid and unregulated market," says Yogi Dewan, chief executive and founding partner of Hassium Asset Management, a wealth manager.

"Sadly, as prices have increased, so has the inclination for forgeries," he adds.

"As wine merchants spring up, so does the number of funds, scams and investment schemes that piggyback on uninformed investor interest."

He cautions: "It is a start but, as an investor, it is hard to see it really making a difference."

Geordie Clarke, editor of digital wine magazine By The Bottle, says to be effective the WIA needs overwhelming industry support.

"Unfortunately, it has been unable to stir up a reasonable amount of interest in the market," he says. "So far the WIA has just two full member firms and two more are pending subject to successful audits."

Others warn that because the WIA is a "self-regulatory body", this gives little reassurance for investors.

"It falls a long way short of regulation by the FCA, which would mean investors could fall back on the financial services compensation scheme if necessary," says Patrick Connolly, a certified financial planner at Chase de Vere, the financial advisers.

Investors lap up Montalcino

Overseas owners of vineyards reap rewards, writes *Rachel Sanderson*

On a balmy midsummer evening this year, the Tuscan wine town of Montalcino, famous for its Brunello red wine, held a fundraiser for the local school. Under the slogan "Brunello for Montalcino", the event was as striking for the international nature of the gathering as for its setting in a 14th-century hilltop fortress surrounded by vineyards.

Among the several hundred guests dining on Fiorentina Tuscan steaks and Brunello red there were local producers and also US bankers and lawyers, board-level executives and European and Chinese business owners, many of whom were not tourists but residents.

At a time of deep recession in Italy, Montalcino is a place where the fabled draws of the *bel paese* – wine, landscape and quality of life – are proving a pull for foreign investors. Moreover, given a jump in international demand over the past five years for Brunello and its younger sister wine, Rosso di Montalcino, they can also get a return on their investment.

André Esteves, owner of the Brazilian investment bank BTG Pactual, is the latest international arrival to the Montalcino estate scene. He bought the Argiano estate with friends this year for an estimated €50m. A working vineyard since the 1500s, it has 48ha of vines and produces 110,000 bottles a year of Brunello di Montalcino.

Mr Esteves joins Richard Parsons, former chief executive of media group Time Warner, and the family of Swiss pharmaceuticals baron Ernesto Bertarelli, who have acquired winemaking estates in the Montalcino area. Louis Camilleri, chairman of Philip Morris International, the tobacco group, is another recent arrival.

Giorgio Gabelli, who is managing Mr Esteves' investment in Montalcino, says Argiano made €3m in revenues in 2012. Most of this came from wine, while some 20 per cent came from its hospitality business. It has a cellar that dates from 1580, one of the oldest in the area.

"What Mr Esteves bought was a brand of great prestige and a piece of history of Brunello," Mr Gabelli says. "He is a great lover of wine. Brunello is renowned the world over. It is like a billionaire buying a 120m yacht, except Mr Esteves bought a wine estate."

Fabrizio Bindocci, president of the consortium of Brunello di Montalcino producers and managing director of the Il Poggione winery, says foreign interest in Montalcino has risen in the past few years, not just because it is beautiful but also because the wines are proving to have a significant return on investment.

Production of Montalcino wines in 2012 exceeded 14.1m bottles, of which 9.2m were Brunello di Montalcino. Revenues were €167m, up 2.5 per cent compared with 2011. The region has seen sharp growth in direct sales as the number of tourists to the region rises. In 2012, direct sales were worth 18 per cent of total revenues. Revenues from wine tourism rose 8 per cent from the year before.

Mr Bindocci is hopeful of another jump in sales this year. Fresh from the harvest of this year's grapes, the *vendemmia* of 2013 may be on a par with Brunello's great year of 1979, he says, thanks to the effect of a cool spring and an exceptionally warm September.

Recent arrivals say another attraction for outside investors is the openness of the traditional wine-producing community. Mark Barnett, founder of London restaurant Mao Tai, has a villa in the hills surrounding Montalcino where he and his wife spend several days each month. He says that compared with "Chiantishire", there is an easy flow of learning about winemaking, from the long-time residents to the newcomers.

"People are very well travelled, very open and willing to share their passion for wine. That makes a difference," he says.

Francesco Ripaccioli, owner of the Canalicchio di Sopra winery, agrees. "The new investors would not have been able to find the success they have without the back-up from the traditional producers," he says. He notes that the relationship can also be mutually beneficial.

Until five years ago, the winemaking region of Montalcino had never produced more than 10m bottles a year but it has seen a surge in exports, particularly to the US. Exports now account for 65 per cent of revenues. More than a quarter of overall sales go to the US, while southeast Asia, eastern Europe and Brazil are growing markets.

The area has become quite international in character. The Italian-American Mariani family, one of the biggest Italian wine distributors in the US, were among the first newcomers. They bought their Castello Banfi estate in the early 1980s and cleared brushland to create 1,000ha of vineyards.

Massimo Ferragamo, one of the heirs to the Salvatore Ferragamo shoemaker-to-the-stars dynasty, bought his Montalcino estate, Castiglion del Bosco, a decade ago. It has 70ha of vineyards, all licensed to produce Brunello. It also has a golf course, hiking trails and luxury accommodation in the main estate house or in villas on the estate grounds.

Mr Ferragamo spends most of his time in the US as chairman of the shoemaker's operations there but was driven to invest in Montalcino by an ambition "to make a great wine", says Simone Pallesi, chief executive of Castiglion del Bosco.

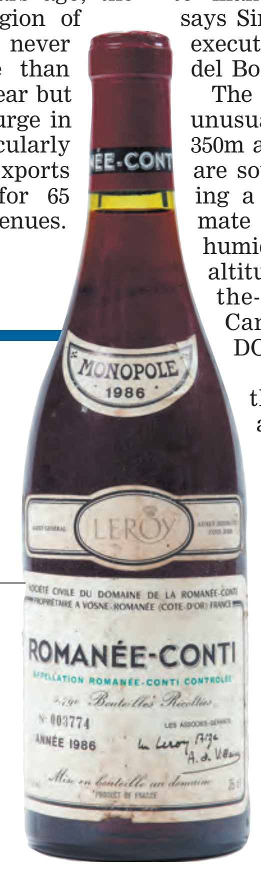
The estate's vineyards unusually are located 350m above sea level and are south-facing, producing a hot, dry microclimate but with limited humidity because of the altitude. Their top-of-the-range red is Campo del Drago DOCG.

Mr Pallesi says the increasing attraction of Montalcino to international visitors provides "huge potential for all of us at Montalcino".

"People don't just come to drink Brunello any more," he adds. "More and more they want to experience the reason why Brunello is what it is and the connection with the *terroir* and the end result."

Tasting notes

Premium for scarcity



Bordeaux may dominate the wine investment market but Wine Searcher figures published this summer showed the priciest come from Burgundy, followed by Germany's Mosel. The prices – bottles of Burgundy's Domaine de la Romanée-Conti have sold for over £34,000 – reflect not just quality, but scarcity value from small estate sizes.

The classics in their prime

Jancis Robinson
Vintages fit to drink now

One of the pleasures of being on the London tasting circuit is feedback from FT readers over the spittoon. I have recently been reminded it is some time since I wrote about which vintages of classic wines are best to drink now.

Given that red bordeaux occupies such a high proportion of FT readers' cellar space, I will begin by considering vintages for this investment favourite. Let us pass lightly over the overpriced 2012s and 2011s to alight on 2010s. These are looking better and better, but even the lesser examples are so stuffed full of everything, including tannins, that it would be a shame to open them now. Some of the lesser 2009s with their voluptuous fruit, on the other hand, are already a pleasure to drink.

The 2008s tend not to be as charming and will probably benefit from prolonged ageing just as much as the 1998s and 1988s have. I know it is not logical to assume the weather follows the Gregorian calendar, but there is a similarity between the three most recent vintages ending in 8 and those ending in 7. Speaking of which, 2007 offers some of the best drinking for those who cannot afford to pay for prolonged ageing. This was another vintage that was overpriced initially, but at least these relatively light, fruity wines have matured rapidly.

If I were still choosing wines for an airline, I would make a beeline for 2007s. Not so the 2006s and especially 2005s, which still warrant keeping for many a year, for different reasons. The 2005s are a bit like the 2010s (bless them for respecting my divisible-by-five-years-tends-to-be-superior rule); they are very concentrated and most are slumbering in a quiet lockdown phase. The 2006s are much less concentrated, but the best still need time for the fruit to shine through the structure.

Only when we go back to 2004 do we reach a vintage that a classically trained claret drinker might consider drinkable. I have always liked these rather fresh, rigorous wines and am beginning to appreciate their direct appeal. The 2004 bordeaux vintage has been rather obscured by the massive reputations of the vintages either side of it, which is a pity.

I was not as enthusiastic as some about the 2003s produced in that heatwave year. Many reached their sugar levels by desiccation rather than phenolic ripening and the result is wines without a really interesting, complex mid-palate capable of evolving to the subtle nirvana of red bordeaux perfection. Only a few of the finest wines, mainly from Pauillac and Saint-Estèphe, will attain nirvana. Some are plagued by burnt or raisined flavours, and I suggest most are enjoyed now.

The reputations of 2002 and 2001, once regarded as a pair of lesser equals, continue to diverge with the years. The 2002s seem lighter and leaner, whereas some of the most rewarding wines to drink now are the 2001s. Although the 2000 vintage was the one that initially drew the attention, and can be delicious today, there are some properties, especially on the right bank, where the 2001 is more elegant and satisfying.

'Some of the lesser 2009 red bordeaux, with their voluptuous fruit, are already a pleasure to drink'

The 1999s are more, shall we say, serviceable, but the wine of the last two "8" vintages – 1998 and the initially very tough 1988 – is at last ready to drink. The 1997s are generally on the way down, along with such wines from the 1991-94 period as remain, while 1996, 1995 and 1986 can provide fully mature drinking now. The 1990s, 1989s and 1982s are still great at the top level, but many a lesser wine is fading.

As for red burgundy, there is more wine-by-wine variation in ageing rate and potential than with red bordeaux. But if we take a typical Côte de Nuits premier cru red, which is generally a year or two slower to develop than a Côte de Beaune, I suggest 2010 and 2009 are stored away for a few years, along with the best 2005s. Some 2002s may be emerging from the shell into which so much red burgundy retreats after a few years in bottle.

Of vintages to drink now, 2007 would be my choice. These wines charm, even if they rarely have the stuffing for prolonged ageing. The 2008s, which were obdurate in extreme youth, are starting to show the great *terroir* definition of which they are capable.

The 2006s, 1999s and especially 1996s and 1995s are the vintages to pick now at exalted appellation levels, although many will repay further patience. Avoid most 2004s and drink most 2003s now while the fruit lasts.

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Maghreb fortunes rise

North Africa rediscovers wine heritage, writes *Borzou Daragahi*

Until about 60 years ago, Algeria exported more wine than any other country – even France. Its history of winemaking dates back to the first millennium BC, when Phoenician and Carthaginian traders shipped barrels of wine across the Mediterranean.

So it was with some excitement that the young medical student Ramzi Bendella first tried the *produit* of his own country a decade ago. But, as he recalls, "it was very bad wine". Algeria's 1990s civil war had crushed an industry that had been propped up by the French during its colonisation of the north African country.

Peace has been good for Algeria's wines and the industry has improved dramatically, amid what some might call a renaissance of wines of francophone north Africa, including Tunisia and Morocco.

"The glass, the corks – all of that has improved," says Victoria Meghdir, vice-president of Meghdir & Sons, a wine importer in the US state of New Jersey. "But it is just a matter of getting the mainstream population to appreciate it. A very small percentage of the population knows or has experienced these wines."

While the sunlight, moisture and temperature in wine-producing areas of the Maghreb region are ideal, north Africa's social climate is harsher. The Islamic faith of most of the population forbids alcohol.

"The quality has improved since companies such as [French drinks group] Castel invested and Bordeaux *vignerons* gave of their expertise," says Douglas Wregg, sales and marketing director at Les Caves de Pyrène, a UK-based wine importer. "But the winemaking has lagged behind probably because there isn't a critical local market."

Algeria produces around 500,000 hectolitres of wine a year, Morocco about 400,000 and Tunisia 300,000. (By comparison, north Africa produced upwards of 25m hectolitres annually 60 years ago.)

Algerian wine-growing regions are centred in the country's agriculturally rich northwest, near the second city of Oran. They include Sidi Bel Abbès, Mascara, Mostaganem and Tlemcen.

Rich pickings: a vineyard in Had Brachoua, Morocco
Getty

Algerian wines are distinctive for their low acidity, high percentages of alcohol and very little oak ageing. They are rich in colour, dominated by Clairette and Ugni Blanc grape varieties. Visitors to Algeria adore the Cuvée Monica produced by the vineyard owned by the actor Gérard Depardieu. It has a slightly earthy, smoky flavour with hints of cherry.

Tunisian winemaking is concentrated among some 20 vineyards on the Cap Bon peninsula to the east of Tunis, the capital.

Many in north Africa's wine industry say sales have grown. "There is an increase of 5 per cent compared with last year," says Samir Dardouri, chief of marketing at Les Vignerons de Carthage, a collective of Tunisian wine growers revitalised about a decade ago by German investment. Around 70 per cent of its production is exported, primarily to France but also as far afield as Brazil and China.

Popular Tunisian wines include Selian, produced by Domaine Neferis, the spicier Carignan Calatrasi and a dry blanc premier cru. Château Mornag is a fragrant and smooth blend of Carignan, Syrah and Merlot grapes.

The biggest impediments to expanding and improving the wine industries of north Africa are political and cultural. Mr Bendella, now a urologist in Oran, still hides his consumption of wine from his parents.

Tasting notes

Pioneer spirit

New World wines may lag behind the Old World's in prestige but are not necessarily that new. Frederick the Great of Prussia, right, drank South African wines from Constantia in the 1770s, while the oldest Syrah vines are not in their native France but Australia's Barossa Valley. Bordeaux, by contrast, was not fully colonised by the Cabernet Sauvignon that forms the bulk of its great wines until the 19th century.