

INSPIRING THIRST
Vintage Selections from the Kermit Lynch Wine Brochure
Exert from Chapter 1989, page 170.

COMBAT VINTAGE CHART MENTALITY
PART III

The 1982 BORDEAUX phenomenon. Remember the consumer stampede? Buy any and all! Greatest vintage since 1961! Most of us in the wine trade agree that the single most important market factor in the wine rush for 1982s was the unbridled enthusiasm of writer Robert Parker, who is an indefatigable, talented, honest wine taster.

Six weeks ago in the *New York times*, Frank Prial put into print the rumblings and doubts of many wine buyers who have cellars stuffed with 1982 Bordeaux, and worry that the wines are not aging well, or aging too rapidly. Maybe 1982 is not all it was cracked up to be, people are saying.

But how many vintages could live up to the almost universal hype accorded those 1982s? A genie would have to pop out of each bottle to satisfy one's expectations.

The 1985 red Burgundies received a similar star treatment. And what a coincidence, they have a style *exactly* like the 1982 Bordeaux. Will they be criticized later on if they fail to taste as good as they did when they were first released?

If you follow the journalists when you buy red Burgundy, you've probably got an ulcer by now. You were supposed to avoid 1980, then suddenly you were supposed to scramble to snap up what bottles remained for sale. 1981 and 1982 (a personal favorite) were, and continue to be, ignored. 1983 went from Vintage of the Century to the garbage dump in a few short months, and who knows, maybe it will turn to gold again someday. 1984? Hold your nose! Trash. A disaster. If a wine merchant tries to sell you one, report him to the fraud detail.

But wait a second. Recently, leaving Burgundy for the Rhône, I wanted some good bottles to uncork for my Rhône producers, who are unanimously, chauvinistically, jealously critical of Burgundy. To show them how good red Burgundy can be, I took along bottles of a Pommard Boucherottes from Coste-Caumartin, 1984. 1984! Why did I take a lowly 1984 when I could have poured them a 1983 or 1985? Because the wine in the bottle was so dramatically good, that's why. By the way, I did not buy, import, or sell the 1985 Pommard Boucherottes, although it would have been a cinch to sell it amidst the 1985 vintage hysteria. It was not worthy. I did buy the 1986. It is worthy.

And I remember the 1971s and 1972s that I tasted during my initial buying trips to Burgundy. According to the press, 1971 was another Vintage of the Century, and 1972 an acidic flop. The vintage charts continue to treat 1972 as a loser. Luckily, my cellar is well stocked with 1972s; they took their time and they age beautifully, much more gracefully than the 1971s, *in my opinion*. Some 1986s remind me of 1972.

I want you to realize once and for all: Even the winemaker does not know what aging is going to do to a new vintage; Robert Parker does not know; I do not know. We all make educated (hopefully) guesses about what the future will bring, but guesses they are. And one of the pleasures of a wine cellar is the opportunity it provides for you to witness the evolution of your various selections. Living wines have ups and downs just as people do,

periods of glory and dog days, too. If wine did not remind me of real life, I would not care about it so much. Some wines start out clumsy and tight and then blossom. Some sparkle like a comet and fade. The 1982 red Burgundies seem to remain as fresh as the day they were bottled.

My experience, seventeen years in the wine trade, has taught me never to reject a vintage out of hand, and never to go overboard with enthusiasm. I cellar my favourite wines in all vintages. That is what I consider fun.

Frank Prial's article may be an opening, politely stated salvo against Parker's unrestrained enthusiasm for the 1982 vintage. He may become a target now, as other critics call into question his judgement. The fact is, there are some glorious 1982 red Bordeaux, but I would hate to drink one every night. I am glad I have some 1980, 1981, 1983, 1984, 1985 and 1986 down there, too. Which is the best vintage? I don't think there is one. It depends on YOUR palate, the cuisine you are matching, the maturity of the wine when you uncork it, and the particular domaine or château.

Another issue here is the incredible power the wine journalists have gained in the marketplace. When I come back from a buying trip with a wine that has really excited me, if it wears the wrong vintage strip I have trouble getting anybody to even try a bottle, much less cellar a case. You consumers, for the most part, are ready to let journalists decide what goes into your cellar and glass before you are ready to trust a professional wine merchant, or even your own palate. I think I understand why. You don't yet trust your own palate as much as you trust a rating or numerical score. And you might think a merchant is biased because he is selling the wine, while a journalist is not. If so, you are forgetting something important. The journalist *is* trying to sell his article, his paper, or his review. And what sells papers? Sensationalism over truth any day. Parker became an oracle following his oft-quoted zeal for the 1982 Bordeaux. *The Wine Spectator* became the talk of the wine world after their famous article calling the 1983s from Romanée-Conti trash. I call both episodes sensationalism, and I pity those who have endless 1982 Bordeaux in their cellars, as well as those who missed the stunning 1983s from Romanée-Conti. I wish I had been their importer.

Trust the great winemakers, trust the great vineyards. Your wine merchant might even be trustworthy. In the long run, that vintage strip may be the least important guide to quality on your bottle of wine.

The Kermit Lynch Vintage Chart



cut out and save

Another problem: The Bordeaux vintners enjoyed the 1982 vintage madness. The Burgundians took note of the stampede for their 1985s. All ripe, forward wines. No mystery. Big, soft, easy. So a lot of winemakers are masking the originality of their wine and the vintage in order to receive early critical approval by fashioning something that is easy and will earn high points. No mystery. Let's have every vintage taste the same! Why not have all wines taste exactly the same? Then you won't even need a score! But I'll tell you, it is already difficult enough finding wines with distinctive personalities. If you consumers follow the herd, then wines with originality, wines that taste different, wines that provide real interest, are going to become even more difficult to find.

What is the most common critique I hear about the American consumer from the French winemakers? "They are like sheep!"

I tell them that my customers are different.

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