

The Society of Medical Friends of Wine

SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

www.medicalfriendsofwine.org

**NEWSLETTER
OCTOBER 2019**

**Dinner at the French Club
September 20, 2019
A Report on the Evening**

The Society returned for its annual dinner meeting at the French Club (Cercle de L'Union) in San Francisco on September 20.

Le Menu

Tarte Flambe, Onion Marmalade, Crème Fraiche, Lardons

Roasted Black Cod, Saffron Sauce, Sea Beans

Roasted Veal Loin, Herb Crust, Morel Mushroom Reduction

A "Petite Salade" Frisee, Apples and Fromage

Molten Chocolate Cake, Berries and Berry Coulis

For the wines, the theme of the evening was bring a bottle, share a bottle. After a delightful Champagne furnished by the Society for the reception, guests were treated to a cornucopia of wonderful French wines that brought back memories to those who brought them and fascinating tasting experiences to those with whom they were shared.



Some of the Wines of the Evening

Photo by Claire Keiser

As you can see from the photo, both Burgundy and Bordeaux were well represented. Some of the legendary bottles I had the opportunity to taste included 1964 Latour, 1982 and 1990 Pichon Lalande, 1982 Brane Cantenac, 1983 Palmer, 1985 La Lagune, 1990 Rieussec and Climens, and 2009 La Conseillante. On the Burgundy side there was 40 year old Meursault and 6 year old Meursault, as well as a vibrant Puligny Montrachet among the whites, and a Chambolle Musigny and Charmes Chambertin among the red Cotes de Nuits. What a fabulous opportunity to compare vintages and properties, debate your favorite regions, and bring joy and education to your colleagues. Thank you so much to all of you who attended and who shared special wines from your cellars.

And as always, a big thank you to our member Dr. Tom Paige for sponsoring us, to Chef Lionel Balbastre for the excellent cuisine, and to Sommelier-Gerant Marcus Garcia and his staff for such superb service. I defy any restaurant in our restaurant rich San Francisco to equal the French Club staff in their ability to accommodate so many different wines and to serve them so impeccably. Merci, Merci, Merci!



Photo by Claire Keiser



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Bordeaux Vintages—Then and Now
An Address to the Society of Medical Friends of Wine
September 20, 2019

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Several years ago, at our dinner meeting here at the French Club we invited Peter Zavialoff from the Wine House to talk to us about changes in the style of Bordeaux wine as seen from the eyes of the wine merchant. I found this to be a provocative and informative talk and thought it might be fun to do a follow-up this evening. I don't know about you, but on a daily bases I receive many e mails from respectable merchants offering me the "best vintage ever from a Bordeaux chateau" or the chance to buy a "quadruple 97-point Bordeaux gem that no serious collector should miss".

So, what's going on in Bordeaux. We know the style has changed. Peter reviewed that with us. But are the wines of today that much better than the wines of our youth. Is it real or is it hype? IF it is real, what is behind the change? Are today's vintages that different from 50 years ago, or are today's critics and merchants just that much better at getting us excited. And what better place to talk about this than at this island of France on a night when we will have the opportunity to explore and taste so many different wines from so many different vintages.

I would like to start in 1965, simply because that was when I first became fascinated by wine.

In August of 1965 I was on a small ship crossing the Atlantic destined for a junior year abroad in France. I celebrated my 20th birthday *en route*, and a few days later we arrived and disembarked at Le Havre. It was raining.

After a few glorious days in Paris we set off for the southwest of France, to the city of Pau, a 100 or so miles from our ultimate destination, Bordeaux. The rain followed us. We studied French during the week and every weekend traveled around the beautiful green countryside. We learned to carry an umbrella everywhere and got used to looking out wet bus windows at picturesque farms and vineyards being drenched by rain.

We arrived in Bordeaux in mid-October, in what normally would be the height of harvest. The rain never stopped. I became known as the kid from San Francisco in the green raincoat.

It didn't take an agricultural expert or a wine connoisseur to know that all this rain could not be good for that year's vintage. Even a 20-year-old kid could figure that out.

I recently came across a great web site called the Wine Cellar Insider that has wonderful comments on Bordeaux vintages over the past 100 years or so. This is what they said about 1965:

The 1965 Bordeaux harvest officially started October 2. The growing season is known for cold weather, rain and rot. 1965 Bordeaux wine is rumored to be atrocious. Michael Broadbent called 1965 Bordeaux mean, acidic and short. And that's when the wines were young and in good shape! Robert Parker made even worse comments.

But that's not the only vintage that decade to suffer a similar fate. From the same web site, we find:

1963 Bordeaux wine was bad when it was bottled and time has only made it worse. The summer was cold and wet. Rot on the grapes was a major problem for growers.

1968 Bordeaux wine is the product of a huge harvest made from rain-soaked grapes. August set a record for one of the coldest, wettest months in history. When the pickers descended on the vineyards, they were faced with harvesting a massive crop of unripe grapes. Most, if not all 1968 Bordeaux wines are undrinkable today. And like in 1963, some chateaux declassified their entire crop.

And then there was 1969, a great year for music. Jimi Hendrix, Led Zeppelin, The Stones and The Beatles all made great records! But it was awful for 1969 Bordeaux wine.

Four vintages out of ten that decade virtually unfit for consumption.

Two vintages that decade, 1960 and 1967, produced light, early maturing, and not unpleasant wines in their youth—the kind that modest French restaurants will buy to add some Bordeaux labels to their wine lists—but not wines renowned for rewarding aging. 1964 was very uneven. It started off great. And for those chateaux that harvested before the rain, it was great. For those harvesting in the rain, it was not good.

Two vintages, 1962 and 1966 produced fine to very fine wines. Coming on the heels of 1961, the '62's were somewhat overlooked but on their own merits produced many lovely wines enjoyable for years after harvest. 1966, which happened to mark the end of my school year in Bordeaux, produced a number of fine wines that aged well.

The decade did produce one vintage of the century, if not the millennium-1961. What did it take back then to produce such a vintage?

From our same Wine Cellar Insider website source:

“1961 Bordeaux wine is one the legendary Bordeaux vintages of all time and for several good reasons. The spring frost conditions naturally reduced crops, lowered yields and concentrated the already intense flavors.

Generally speaking, the spring was mild in Bordeaux, which led to an early and even flowering. A frost struck much of Bordeaux at the end of May. Because the frost occurred late in the season, after the flowering, there was no additional birth of new berries. The crop was already low, this only reduced the yields further.

The summer was for the most part, warm, sunny and dry. The only break from the excellent summer weather occurred in July, when the summer rain fell, which proved to be exactly what the grapes needed. The remainder of July was warm, sunny and dry. August was extremely hot and dry, which was followed by a close to perfect September.

These conditions produced small, ripe, sweet, thick skinned berries with almost unseen levels of concentration of intensity and flavor. The 1961 Bordeaux harvest officially began September 22.

The small harvest produced great 1961 Bordeaux wine from top to bottom. The wines were rich and tannic, which demanded extended cellaring. 1961 Bordeaux was not fun to drink in its youth.”

So, in summary the decade produced 4 dreadful vintages, two light, early maturing ones, one very uneven one, two good vintages, and one vintage of the century. And that vintage produced outstanding wines that were hard and difficult to drink in their youth.

Can you imagine such a situation in modern times?

In the past 10 years we’ve already had four vintages of the century-2009, 2010, 2015, and 2016. In the past several decades I cannot recall a single vintage that has been totally written off. I get those e mails with one superlative description after another. I don’t get are e mails offering me a tart, thin, Bordeaux perfect for every home vinegar maker’s pot.

Something is clearly going on in Bordeaux. Is it climate change, differences in viticulture, technological advances in the winery, affluent chateaux owners willing to spare no expense, wine merchants willing to spare no hyperbole to sell their bottles, or gullible purchasers willing to believe anything? Perhaps it’s a combination of all of these things.

We mentioned the four outstanding vintages of the past decade. Let’s look at the 2013 harvest as an example of what might have been a disaster 40 years earlier, but wasn’t today. The Decanter magazine description of the vintage says a lot.

“There were plenty of challenges right from the start in this vintage – uneven and late flowering following a wet spring, often-violent hailstorms at the end of July and early August, a wet and warm September that meant an attack of rot just before harvest... you name it, the vineyards suffered it during the 2013 vintage.”

“But the real success story in 2013 is with the winemaking – there were plenty of producers who worked exceptionally well with the vintage, taking their foot off the pedal and allowing the vibrancy of the fruit to shine through wherever possible. Anyone who tried to cover up unripe fruit with too much oak, or over-extraction, suffered. The best wines have a refreshing drinkability, relatively low alcohol levels, soft fruits and plenty of interest, but by and large this is a vintage to enjoy in the early to mid-term.” Sounds like a disaster averted!

It is easy to look at climate change to explain much of everything these days. But it's not like it doesn't rain anymore in Bordeaux; it certainly does. I keep Bordeaux on my weather app on my iPhone, and when I looked this morning rain is forecast for 7 of the next 9 days there.

But global warming can accelerate ripening and the start of harvest. It is striking how often in the past a potentially fine crop was ruined by early persistent rains. If a warmer climate means harvest starts earlier in mid or late September as opposed to early October, it is possible some vintages will avoid the rain effect.

I suspect that changes in viticultural techniques play an even more significant role. One example is green harvesting—the dropping of a portion of the crop in early summer. This allows the vine to concentrate its energy on fewer grapes and assure better ripening and flavor development.

Green harvesting means a lower crop yield—an anathema for most farmers. France suffered greatly through two thirds of the twentieth century. Bordeaux chateaux owners were richer in legacy than in liquid resources, and the thought of reducing their crop would not have been a popular one. But once it became apparent that higher quality wine generated higher prices, and that salvaging vintages meant not having to declassify your production, it's easier to understand how this shift in viticulture would take hold and spread

Higher prices for wine leads to higher wealth for proprietors, and increased wealth leads to other changes—changes such as using helicopters to dry out vineyards after storms or to apply large amounts of anti-mildew treatments quickly. These activities would never have been economically feasible for the vintages of the mid twentieth century.

Technology surrounds and drives us everywhere and every day. Wine making is no exception.

Consider the optical sorter. This is a device attached to a moving belt. Destemmed grapes are placed on the belt. Pictures of ideal grapes have been taken and are in the device memory. As the grapes roll along the belt, individual berries that do not reach the ideal standards—be it due to cracking or shriveling or green color or presence of mold—can be blown aside and discarded. The resulting grapes going into the crusher are much closer to ideal and will produce a higher quality wine. The cost for such a device is in the hundreds of thousands of dollars. Owning several of these is only possible when proprietors have deep pockets.

Reverse osmosis is another tool that can be applied to wine. The wine is passed through a very fine membrane that allows the passage of only the smallest molecules; for wine this means water, alcohol, and a few components like acetic acid. The larger molecules containing flavor and color are left behind. Using reverse osmosis, alcohol can be lowered or increased by extraction or re-addition. So, if you want to lower alcohol you can extract water and alcohol, distill off the alcohol, and add water back. The resultant wine retains the richness of flavors from very ripe grapes, but at less alcohol level. Similarly, alcohol could be added back if the wine came from low sugar and unripe grapes. If your wine is tainted with a little volatile acidity, reverse osmosis can cure this.

Not all wine making technology is new. Chaptalization, or the addition of sugar to unfermented grape must, is legal in France under certain conditions and has been practiced for more than two hundred years. It alone will not salvage a vintage of unripe and moldy grapes. But if you can control mildew during the growing season, reduce crop size to enhance ripening, carefully exclude diseased or malformed berries prior to crush, and then add some sugar to the must prior to fermentation, what could have been a disastrous vintage a la 1965 becomes a marketable one like 2013.

That helps explain the paucity of bad vintages. How about the preponderance of excellent ones?

These same efforts, in good growing seasons, can lead to grapes with well above historic levels of maturity and ripeness, leading to bold, rich, ripe and high alcohol wines so much in favor today. And thus, it's probably not that surprising that every vintage of the century seems to be followed shortly by yet another even better one.

Lastly let us not forget the economic and psychologic factors that help drive and sustain all of these changes. Back in the mid 1960's when the wonderful 1961's were coming to market, who was buying them? Not that many people. France had not yet fully recovered from two world wars and a global depression. The English, historically a huge market for Bordeaux, also had limited resources. Many of the wines sold to England, including first growths, were actually purchased in barrel by English merchants and bottled in their cellars in England, reducing the revenue to the original producers. America was still a whiskey and beer drinking country; the number of people appreciating fine wine was relatively small. There were no Chinese or Japanese markets.

Thus, the prices of even the best wines of Bordeaux carried a rather small premium over less acclaimed bottles, and their growers did not get rich. With a smaller pool of potential buyers, wine merchants had to be careful about how much they hyped their wines. Very good vintages like 1962 were overshadowed by preceding great years like 1959 and 1961, and thus overlooked so as not to strain credibility by marketing of "yet another great year".

Fast forward to 2019. Who are the buyers of Bordeaux wine today? Well much of the world for that matter. The French themselves, the English, and other western European countries are now fully recovered economically. The Americans have become a huge market for wine, including Bordeaux. Add to that a burgeoning Asian market driven by abundant capital in search of prestige labels.

I used to wonder if the acclaimed Chinese market was real or just an excuse to justify price rises. During my last trip to Bordeaux I received an answer. While in the small and beautiful town of St. Emilion at the tasting room of Chateau Valandraud, one of the rising stars of modern style wine production, the tasting room host was a young Chinese woman and the first customers to come in after us were several very

well-dressed Chinese women. They spent a significant amount of time chatting away with the host in Chinese and left with a number of bottles.

Today many more people and many more dollars or euros or renminbi are chasing fine wine, and like any commodity, demand drives price. And higher prices drive higher profits, and higher profits allows the industry to invest more in technology and equipment and all the other accoutrements to wine making that we have been talking about.

But let's also not forget about the role of our eager wine merchant. How can he or she keep up with all these changes? What can he or she recommend to you? How can he or she know which wine or which vintage is truly the best ever from a given property?

When I posed this dilemma to a friend in the business, he replied. 'The answer is quite simple. There really is no need to worry or stew about it. The best wine from the best vintage is the one I have available to sell you today! "

So, no more truly bad vintages. No shortage of truly great vintages. More people than ever enjoying wine. A win/win situation for all. I suppose. Unless you are an obsessive-compulsive collector who now has to worry about not missing out on a vintage of the century every other year instead of once a decade. Or unless paying hundreds of dollars for a second or third growth or thousands for a first growth is not something you relish.

Ladies and gentlemen, members and guests—enjoy tonight's wonderful food. Compare the wines and vintages. Some of you have brought older wines. Some new ones. See what you think about the differences in style and in quality. Reminisce about what you paid for the wine "back then" and rejoice that you are not having to pay today's prices for wine you are drinking here tonight. And above all, thank you all for being willing to share your wines and your thoughts with your friends and your colleagues. That is what our organization is all about.

A votre sante!

Homage to Fromage

Sunday, November 10, 2019

Mark Your Calendars

Year after year one of the Society's most popular and successful events is our Cheese and Wine Seminar led by Janet Fletcher. This year Janet will take us to the land that invented the cheese course, and treat and educate us with a combination of classic cheeses and some new *avant garde* products not yet familiar to many French people. And of course, each cheese will be accompanied by a French wine. You will not want to miss this experience.

This year we will be at a new venue in Mill Valley. Look for details and sign up information to arrive in your inboxes shortly.