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BORDEAUX, November, 1968

VINTAGE AND MARKET REPORT

BORDEAUX

The Vintage

The statistics given below will illustrate how sensitive the quality of Bordeaux wine is to apparently slight differences in the weather pattern. We give rainfall and average temperature details for the four summer months of three recent and generally condemned vintages, the average statistic for the last 25 years and have taken 1966 as an example of a year that may be considered better than average in quality.

RAINFALL—millimetres

	<u>Average</u>	<u>1966</u>	<u>1968</u>	<u>1965</u>	<u>1963</u>
June	60.7	111.8	31.0	31.7	80.4
July	52.5	47.5	35.0	85.8	31.6
August	61.3	49.6	161.0	42.9	96.9
September	69.0	25.0	97.0	212.8	70.5
TOTAL	243.5	233.9	324.0	373.2	279.4

TEMPERATURE—degrees Centigrade

	<u>Average</u>	<u>1966</u>	<u>1968</u>	<u>1965</u>	<u>1963</u>
June	18.4	18.4	18.1	18.0	17.5
July	20.1	18.0	20.7	19.9	20.6
August	20.0	18.8	19.5	19.4	17.8
September	18.1	19.1	17.1	15.8	17.0
AVERAGE	19.1	18.6	18.8	18.3	18.2

Comparing 1966 and 1968, it will be seen that the real damage this year was done by the heavy rainfall in one month, August. It is surprising that, in spite of this heavy rainfall, the temperature that month, as in the average for the whole summer, was higher in 1968 than in 1966. Total rainfall was appreciably higher, and most important is the fact that nearly half the summer rain in 1966 fell in June, whereas in 1968 nearly half fell in August. In 1965, well over half fell in September.

Looking at the figures more closely, however, it becomes clear that the most sensitive factor in deciding the success of a vintage is the total rainfall of two months, August and September. For those who like numerical formulae, it is worth while to take the experiment a little further and to compare the total rainfall for these two months during the last eight years:

1961	36 mm
1962	56 "
1963	167 "
1964	103 "
1965	256 "
1966	74 "
1967	100 "
1968	258 "
Average last 25 years	130 "

These figures illustrate well how critical is the question of summer rainfall, and it is a little alarming how much closer the average figure is to years condemned as being poor, than to those that are successful. Except that it would be a little flattering for 1963, these figures might almost be taken as a proportional valuation of the different vintages, the lower the figure, the better the vintage.

It may still be hoped that this judgement would be hard on 1968. The wines will certainly be light and impossible to sell on export markets, but they are clean, and some vats of Cabernet Sauvignon shew signs of character. The acidity which seemed alarmingly high at picking, has come down considerably during fermentation, and the malolactic fermentation will reduce it further. Their light colour will not help, but they should prove easier to absorb than was a "rotten" year such as 1963. Though there was a good deal of rot amongst the Merlot, the other varieties were gathered in reasonably healthy condition, if unripe.

Dry white wines should be the least affected. There is no reason why they should not be reasonably good. They require a lesser degree of maturity and the Sauvignons were picked in a healthy condition. It will be difficult to find sweet wines of quality, though the Indian summer, in October, might enable a few growers, who suffered neither from rot nor panic, to produce something worthwhile.

The Market

Prices are governed more by quantity than by an exact evaluation of quality. Bordeaux produces a considerable amount of wine each year and, except in unproductive years such as 1956, 1957 and 1961, it is more than it can economically sell. Foreign buyers generally concentrate their purchases on the most successful vintages and, as has been well illustrated with 1967, do not buy in quantity two consecutive good vintages. 1966 sold well at high prices because it followed 1965. 1967, in spite of having produced good wines, have been difficult to sell even at their very reasonable prices, because it followed 1966. It is likely that had they been better than 1966, they would still have been cheaper.

Two conclusions can therefore easily be drawn from the failure of the 1968 crop. 1967, which growers have been willing to part with at reasonable prices, will become precious stock and prices will increase—as they have already begun to do. Secondly, it can be assumed that if 1969 is any good at all, their opening prices will be relatively high. Clearly, therefore, 1967's should be of interest to anybody with a friendly bank manager and expandable walls to their cellar. It will probably be a month or two before many shippers increase their prices to compensate for increased replacement cost and those importers who are in a position to invest, would be advised to do so.

But quite apart from the simple factor of 1967's being good quality and value for money, the crippling effect on the market of a glut has been strongly felt by the Bordelais during the last year, and, casting envious glances eastward to Burgundy, many are realising the advantages of shortage. Human nature is such that people will not buy on a falling market and are not much interested in what is readily available. Tell a child that he cannot have something and he immediately wants it, and it seems to be a trait we don't easily grow out of. There is a strong lobby of thought in Bordeaux that in order to maintain prices at an economic level and to keep the market "alive", the amount of wine available should be more severely controlled. The "label" tastings are already designed to eliminate wines not worthy of their appellation, but tasters have inevitably been broadminded in years such as 1965 and 1963 and the standard they set has not been high. Even before the real quality can be judged this year, leading personalities in districts such as Sauternes and St. Emilion have been making statements that in 1968 no wine should be marketed under those appellations. Though less severe, meetings in the various communes of the Médoc have resulted in decisions to ask for a maximum production, subject to passing the tastings, of 25-30 hectolitres to the hectare instead of the normal 40. The object of such drastic sacrifice—growers will be forced to sell their wine as mere Bordeaux Rouge at the best and often as Vin Ordinaire—is partly to control the quality of the appellation, but also to create a fruitful shortage. If a year's production of the better appellations is virtually removed from the market, prices are likely to increase sharply, and the 1969's to find a thirsty clientèle.

The market has, therefore, completely reversed its position from a year ago. Then, there was plenty of good wine available and prices were falling. Today, though there is still wine of good quality available, it will rapidly be absorbed, and prices will rise, perhaps sharply. In another year's time, a shortage of quality wine is likely to have been created, and opening prices of the next quality vintage are likely to be high.

1967

Developing well and better than we expected. They are certainly light, but not too light; have character and balance. St. Emilion is relatively more successful than the Médoc, but there is good value to be had amongst the classed growths. They are still considerably cheaper than 1966's.

There are some very fine Sauternes and generally the year is more successful for sweet wines than was 1966.

1966

In the process of being bottled. Wines with outstanding balance, excellent colour, and good character. Clean, not an enormous amount of body, but wines which will develop well in bottle. The better classed growth Médocs will need five to six years in bottle before they begin to shew their real finesse.

1965

Despised, but not always despicable. A poor year that nevertheless produced some clean, light bottles for early consumption.

1964

Very mixed, often clumsy and usually lacking in distinction. Perhaps some will find a balance with a few more years in bottle, but we doubt that they will ever have great finesse. Of the first growths, Haut Brion seems clearly the best. St. Emilion and Pomerol are generally more successful than the Médoc. Amongst other good wines of the vintage are Château l'Enclos, Pomerol, Château Pichon-Lalande, Château Léoville Las Cases, and Château Lascombes. What the vintage lacks in grace, it makes up for in body and, even if there seem to be few great wines, many are pleasant and generous.

1962

Similar in style to 1966, a thoroughly useful vintage that produced a large amount of wine with considerable character at reasonable prices. Now approaching maturity, though they will gain in finesse for no doubt another 5–6 years. Pleasing now for those who prefer their Clarets with a certain amount of youthful vigour. More successful perhaps in the Médoc than in St. Emilion, but a vintage that produced wines unusually even in quality and that can be bought with confidence. Amongst the best we have tasted recently, are Château Beychevelle, Château Palmer, Château Brane-Cantenac, Château Durfort-Vivens, Château Léoville Barton, Château Margaux and Château Pape Clément.

1961

The best wines of this great vintage continue their royal progress. Their great character, strength and balance are already evident, but it is difficult to imagine them ever diminished. They have a concentration of character, without any harshness, that is only obtained in exceptional, almost freak conditions that seem to occur once every 15 to 20 years. A small crop, they are now becoming scarce and prices are rising steadily. Many are probably disappearing into secluded corners of collectors' cellars and there they can safely remain for many years. Amongst the greatest we have tasted are the Château Margaux, Château Gruaud-Larose, Château Palmer, Château Lafite, Château Pichon-Lalande and Château Calon-Ségur.

1960

At first rejected, they were soon welcomed back as excellent "gap" fillers—light, pleasant wines for early consumption. They performed this function admirably, giving their fuller-bodied and near contemporaries time to develop. They have now fulfilled their calling, are getting tired and will soon fade away.

1959

A robust vintage, tending to clumsiness, but with some notable exceptions. Château Mouton-Rothschild and Château Léoville-Barton are certainly amongst the best. As often in exceptionally hot years, St. Emilion found conditions more ideally suited to their full, ebullient character than did the more graceful and delicate Médoc's.

1957

Remain generally hard and unsympathetic. Seasoned Claret drinkers, willing to accept a degree of harshness in the interest of purity of character, will find some rewarding bottles—perhaps more easily in St. Emilion than the Médoc, though the Château Lafite, Château Margaux and Château Palmer are all relatively amiable.

1955

Generally at their best. Thoroughly pleasant, very useful and nearly always undistinguished. They will not send anybody into raptures, but neither are they capable of giving offence. Their development has been predictable and they are the perfect "average citizen".

1953

Some of the most vaunted of this much praised vintage are shewing signs of age—they are, after all, now fifteen years old. Château Lafite and Château Palmer are two examples of this, and both should now be drunk and enjoyed. They will not get better and are likely to tire rapidly. Others have more stamina, but their grace and delicate charm, which are at present so pleasing, will probably soon start to fade.

1952

Surprisingly disappointing. They have always been rather mute—big, solid and giving an impression of being well-balanced late developers. Suddenly, as they have begun to blossom, some we have seen appear hollow. Both the Lafite and Haut Brion tasted recently have disappointed in this way and collectors who have been confidently sitting on a stock, would be advised to “look to them” and check that others are not behaving similarly.

BURGUNDY

The Market

For a brief, tantalising, period early this summer, the ever-firm market for Burgundy shewed signs of a wobble. Because there is a permanent shortage of the most popular appellations of the Côte d'Or, the market is less sensitive than that of Bordeaux; poor vintages are absorbed almost as easily as good, and, instead of fluctuation, a steady increase in prices has been the main characteristic of the market for many years. As in Bordeaux, the recently scarce phenomenon of having two consecutive vintages of quality was certainly mainly responsible for the modest tendency prices shewed of easing, but it was also due to a fear that the new T.V.A. (added value tax), which increased the cost of wine to the French consumer by 15% would have a serious effect on home sales of these already expensive wines. In fact, the market proved to be only temporarily winded and as prospects for 1968 diminished, the risk of shortage quickly reflatated prices, so that 1967's are today at much the same level as those of 1966's a year ago.

Prices seem unlikely to shew any serious signs of weakening until consumer reaction slows up sales on the export market, and at present, there is no sign of this happening. The American market seems insatiable and, even if sales in Britain are likely to be severely hit the day Appellation Contrôlée is observed there, sales to Britain, with appellation—which is what matters as far as prices are concerned—can only increase, and thereby make the shortage more acute.

If the generic wines of the Côte d'Or seem overpriced, it is nevertheless possible, for only a slightly higher price, to find fine individual wines at relatively reasonable cost. For example, although the cost of a Nuits St. Georges is about three times the price of a Margaux, the products of the best vineyards of Nuits St. Georges are available at prices only 25% higher than the generic wine, whereas the cost of a classed growth Margaux is more than double that of a district Margaux, and Château Margaux is some three times as much again. Magnificent wines from such vineyards as Clos de Vougeot, Corton and Bonnes Mares are available at prices very considerably below those of first growth Médoc's, and the most Chauvinistic Médocain would find it difficult not to admit them as worthy rivals.

1968

Perhaps even less successful in Burgundy than in Bordeaux. They will no doubt be needed, and will no doubt be absorbed at prices not very much below those of 1967. They will be bought for their Appellation rather than for their quality or value.

1967

Lighter than many Northern markets would like, they nevertheless have considerable character and, in view of the failure of 1968, will undoubtedly be useful. Those vineyards that overproduced are light in colour, but the best are elegant, stylish wines with balance.

1966

Complete, with some of the richness that is generally associated with the name Burgundy. Relatively even in quality, they will probably form the backbone of most lists from 1969, and in the higher échelons will produce some great bottles.

1964

Already approaching their best—a hot year that produced better wines in Burgundy than in Bordeaux, but which have to be carefully chosen. Low fixed acidity has made them vulnerable, and delicate in constitution.

SOUTH BURGUNDY

Weather conditions are less of a factor in producing pleasant wines for early consumption than wines that aspire to the subtle qualities of greatness.

In Beaujolais, 1968, without producing anything memorable, has produced light wines the best of which will certainly be useful. 1967 and 1966 are fuller and the commune wines of such areas as Brouilly, Morgon, Juliéna, Fleurie, etc. ought to make many friends from consumers who find Burgundy prices getting too high, or who wish to explore the higher échelons of this most seductive area. There must be a great future for these wines, which are not as widely appreciated outside France as they deserve.

Happily, dry white wines do not require the same degree of maturity or concentration of sugar in the grape as do red wines. After the disastrously small crop in 1967, resulting from the frosts and hail storms, the market is in need of Mâcon and Pouilly and it seems reasonable to hope that 1968 will provide wines of sufficient quality to fulfil that need.

CHABLIS

Like South Burgundy, Chablis was severely hit by frost and hail in 1967, and there has consequently been a severe shortage during recent months. An unripe year such as 1968 will at least provide the famous "green tinge" to the colour of these wines and they will quickly be bought by shippers running desperately short of stock. Their character of light, very dry wines gives fulfilment easier than most areas in years such as 1968 and there is no reason why the quality should not be satisfactory. The problem in Chablis is, in fact, not of making wines of quality, but of making wine at all.

SICHEL & CO.