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# BORDEAUX 2017 VINTAGE REPORT



# Vintage report: Thawing low expectations

Once every few years, a vintage comes along which can only be described as heterogeneous, with wines at both ends of the quality scale produced across the patchwork of Bordeaux appellations. The cause of this heterogeneity in 2017 was the frosts that befell the region over two nights in April and whilst inevitably lower lying chateaux were hit, some badly, the stellar investment-grade estates were all blissfully unaffected, leaving us with a vintage where frost may be the headline, but the real story is the surprising quality, on both sides of the Gironde, of the wines produced. Early indications are that Bordeaux 2017 will sit somewhere between the very good 2014 and the superb 2016 vintages – not a bad riposte to Mother Nature!

On the 22 & 29 April in 2017, Bordeaux experienced some of the worst frosts since 1991, heavily damaging lower-lying vineyards. Whilst the headline is shocking, it is at this point where some context need be applied. The overwhelming majority of investment-grade sites were unharmed. Indeed certain communes on the Left Bank like Pauillac, St. Julien and St. Estephe were virtually untouched. On the right bank, the older and more prestigious estates higher on the plateau were equally unharmed. Rather than being a disaster, there was something miraculously deferential about the way the frost didn't affect the Lafites, Petruses and Mouton Rothschilds, when in reality these older sites are situated on the best sites in the region, largely protected from all that frosts might throw at it.

It was naturally the case that for every vineyard spared the frost's grip there was a vineyard harmed or, in the desperately sad case of Château Angludet, its 2017 crop killed off in entirety. So, whilst volumes are down some 40% on 2016, the news out of the investment-grade châteaux that Noble Rot deals with is that there will be many excellent wines to buy this year. There is even the suggestion that as frosts restricted yields across the board, this vintage may



ultimately come to share similarities with 1961, one of the greatest vintages of all time, which was forged in the maelstrom of devastating frosts which reduced yields by 50% across the region.

Lisa Perrotti-Brown, now chief Bordeaux critic for *The Wine Advocate*, said the following after sampling the vintage in March:

“ For a region as prolific and globally distributed as Bordeaux, a 33% to 40% loss would be a huge hole for the fine wine world to fill. However, it is extremely important for consumers to grasp the now obvious trend that is tied to this alarming figure: most (but not all) of the vineyards affected by frost were those that generally supply the lower-priced end of the market. There are a number of famous exceptions to this generalization, but context is extremely important to understanding this vintage. ”

Weather conditions in 2017 were, frost aside, good following an early bud-break. Sun was plentiful for a time until heavy rain at the end of June. There were warm temperatures during the summer. There was a dry ripening season with a little rain near the end, but this didn't affect things overall. Alcohol levels are slightly lower than average across most appellations. This will certainly be a vintage of wildly varying results across the entirety of the region but that, really, is where the critics and us at Noble Rot earn our corn - in identifying not just the best wines of the vintage, but the best potential investments, too.

There is plenty of cause for optimism here and, in our opinion, this looks like a vintage to buy, prices dependent of course. We shall report back to you more comprehensively once we have tasted all of the wines ourselves.

Dominic Brennan, April 2018



# The critical merry-go-round |

Following Robert Parker's retirement from rating Bordeaux en primeur, it was generally accepted that Neal Martin, his direct replacement at *The Wine Advocate*, would become the industry bellweather. Indeed, this was borne out by the reaction to his en primeur and in-bottle scores in the market.

Martin has now moved to *Vinous* which is run by Antonio Galloni and there are murmurs of a critical vacuum, with either Lisa Perrotti-Brown, Martin's replacement, or James Suckling villing the void. However, the majority (indeed 77% of UK merchants) or the trade, us included, will continue to look to Neal Martin as the critical canary down the mine. It is his scores which continue to set, or move, the market and so it will be his ratings we look to most keenly.

Critical confusion avoided, it is always worth, even at this early stage, getting a sense for the general opinion of the vintage from the critics out there analysing the barrell samples and the wine-makers, too:

“*For now, I will just say I've tasted some extraordinary surprises...*”

Lisa Perrotti-Brown, *The Wine Advocate*

“*The quality of 2017 is much better than most people might expect... I scored some of the wines from the great names of Bordeaux, such as the first-growths and blue-chip Right Bank wines, between 96 to 99 points... The 2017 vintage underlines that vintage variations among the top wines of Bordeaux – like most key wine regions in the world – are much less than in the past.*”

James Suckling, [Jameessuckling.com](http://Jameessuckling.com)

“*We think that 2017 is better than our 2014... It was very dry in the summer, and we had very small berries. We think that it is like 2005, 2010, 2015 or 2016. It is a great vintage for us. The density of fruit and tannins is really extraordinary. It is rare that we have a trilogy of great vintages like 2015, 2016 and 2017.*”

Baptiste Guinaudeau, *Chateau Lafleur*



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