

## BORDEAUX 2017: A CURATE'S EGG OF A RIGHT BANK

25th April, 2018 by Colin Hay

While the story for at least the classed growths of the Left Bank is one in which significant frost damage is the exception rather than the rule, the opposite is true in Pomerol and, above all, St Emilion.



Here only the most hallowed *terroirs* and the luckiest were spared completely (and *terroir* in itself was not enough to protect one from the freezing conditions). As such, frost damage is a more important element of the picture of the vintage here. If anything this makes generalisation even more tricky for the Right Bank than the Left. But let us try, once again, to offer some overview before turning to Pomerol and St Emilion respectively in more detail.

What strikes one first is the sheer quality of the best wines of the vintage. No less surprising, especially when one considers the much greater impact of frost damage in the vineyards of the leading Right Bank crus, is that this is not a Left Bank vintage (as many suspected it might be when they arrived in Bordeaux for the week of the *en primeur* tastings).

It is certainly a vintage in which one needs to be very careful in selecting what to buy – and undoubtedly more selective still among the wines of the Right Bank.

But the best wines of the vintage are pretty much evenly spread between the two. That is not because the best wines were unaffected by the frost – that is only really true of the Left Bank.

The leading Right Bank wines are, typically, excellent *despite* having to contend with the frost. As such, while the top wines of the Left Bank made a lot of wine, many of the leading châteaux of the Right Bank made much less wine than in any recent vintage; and some of these properties don't make very much wine even in a high yielding vintage.

As this suggests, in 2017 there are a lot more excellent Left Bank bottles than there are of their Right Bank qualitative peers!

There are, of course, exceptions – even to this – and we will come to those presently. But before that, one final generalisation. The top two or three wines of Pomerol and St Emilion are, I think, on a qualitative par.

Some will prefer Lafleur over Cheval Blanc, some Ausone over Petrus, but I don't see a clear consensus emerging. Yet, in general, Pomerol is the more consistent appellation in 2017 – and, among all bar a handful of top crus, stronger in 2017 than its Right-Bank neighbour.

And that is, in large part, to do with the frost. In St Emilion the damage was greater and it destroyed significant parts of the vineyards of many leading crus. In Pomerol the (marginally) higher ground of the plateau itself and the assorted *terroirs* around the church were at least relatively protected. It is not by accident that this is where the leading châteaux are concentrated. It was the lower parts of the appellation, towards Libourne and the former TGV line (it has now been re-routed), which suffered the most – and, quite frankly, these have never produced the leading crus. As such, I suspect that it will be a little easier to find good affordable Pomerol in 2017 than St Emilion.

There is perhaps another factor at play here too – though this has nothing to do with the frost at all.

For me, at least, there are still too many mid-range St Emilion properties wedded to a particular style of winemaking which has now (thankfully) gone out of fashion among the leading crus (and which was perhaps always less present in Pomerol). That style is characterised by a certain vanilla-tinged oakiness and an associated tendency to over-extraction. It manifests itself in this vintage in rather soapy tannins and a notable absence of the vintage's signature – freshness.

#### Pomerol

Pomerol, as I have already suggested, is the more consistent of the two appellations – with strong wines at all (likely) price points. At the top, at Lafleur in particular, we have a potential candidate for the wine of the vintage (it would certainly be my pick). This is a genuinely great wine, expressing in the same breath the singular *terroir* of Lafleur itself and the beautiful freshness and energy of the vintage.

It is the tense but at the same time perfectly integrated character of the expression of both that marks this out for me as the wine of the vintage. As Julie Guinaudeau explained to us, the parcels of Lafleur that went into the first wine were protected from the frost by the lighting of a 1,000 or so 'bougies' (effectively candles made of pork fat rather than the more environmentally damaging paraffin) between the rows of vines on the 26 and 27 of April. Though largely successful, the production of Lafleur's second wine, Les Pensées de Lafleur, will be greatly reduced – with the parcels at the edge of the vineyard from which it is made suffering most from the frost by virtue of their marginally lower altitude.

The other wines of the Pomerol plateau are scarcely less impressive. Vieux Château Certan (VCC) and La Conseillante have made truly fantastic wines in the context of the vintage – indeed, in the context of *any* vintage. Frost was not mentioned at all at VCC and at La Conseillante, although the overall yield has dropped not insignificantly (from 39.5 to 34 hl/ha) it is the second wine that has suffered. There will be precious little Duo de Conseillante in 2017.

Both properties are, quite rightly, very proud of what they have achieved. At VCC, Alexandre Thienpont somewhat mischievously explained this to us in the following terms.

While the 2016 is something of a 'barbeque' wine (his term), in the sense that it can be enjoyed by everyone, the 2017 is, for him, the better wine – a genuinely classic wine from a genuinely classic vintage. Though I wouldn't quite dare to describe VCC 2016 as 'barbeque wine', the point, I think, is right.

Things were more difficult at Evangile. The majority of its vines also grow along the respected and relatively protected plateau of Pomerol, but the old vine Cabernet Franc does not. It suffered terribly. The result is a superb wine, undoubtedly, but a wine that is 100% Merlot.

It is, I am sure, the best wine that could be made here in 2017. But for me, at least, its *encépagement* prevents it from being a great Evangile.

That cannot be said of Eglise-Clinet, where the entire line-up of wines presented was, once again, exceptional. Eglise-Clinet itself is a remarkable wine – richer, darker and perhaps rounder at this stage than any other leading wine of the appellation, but still characterised by the remarkable freshness and precision of the vintage.

It is, at one and the same time, a wine of gravitas and flamboyance. And it would perhaps be remiss not to mention, at least in passing, the Durantous' other wines – Les Cruzelles (in Lalande de Pomerol) and Montlandrie (in Côtes de Castillon). Both attain a new level in 2017.

And what of the other wines of the appellation? Limits of space prevent any adequate account but among the many highlights, I would perhaps single out the following: La Violette, for its sublime texture (the product of the most gentle extraction through micro-vinification of berries picked individually by hand from the bunch by 60 pickers for a vineyard that is only 1.8 ha in size!); Rouget, for the elegance and precision of its winemaking (characterised by Burgundian style whole-bunch fermentation); and Beaugard, whose investment in a new winemaking facility seems to have lifted the quality of the 2017 to a previously unprecedented level.

It should perhaps also be noted that the *Union des Grands Crus* tasting for Pomerol (at Gazin) was the most homogenous in terms of quality that I can recall. There is much to admire in this appellation in 2017.

#### St Emilion

St Emilion is a more mixed story but at the very top, there is no question as to the quality of 2017. That story, however, is just a little more complex than it is in Pomerol; for down near the appellation boundary, at Cheval Blanc and Figeac, for instance, there was considerable frost damage.

Cheval Blanc lost 30% of its crop, Figeac 55%. That both managed to make their third great vintage in a row is testament to the extraordinary effort made in the vineyard in the days, weeks and months following the frost and, indeed, in the complexity of the vinification that followed.

Both wines end up with unusually high proportions of Cabernet Sauvignon in the final blend (due to the losses suffered in the lower lying part of their respective vineyards in which much of their Cabernet Franc is planted – and in which the frost was concentrated).

But that Cabernet Sauvignon was beautifully ripe and it brings an exquisite lithe tension and brightness to each wine – in the case of Cheval Blanc the fruit is almost pixilated.

Arguably this accentuates rather than diminishes the capacity of each to express its *terroir*. Both wines will be adored by those who love their St Emilion with a generous dollop of Cabernet fruit in the blend.





Three kilometres away, up the hill and just outside the fortifications of St Emilion itself on the limestone plateau we come to Canon and Clos Fourtet. Neither property (like many of their immediate neighbours) suffered any frost damage at all.

In this respect they were lucky. Had the wind that propelled the frost changed, even subtly, its direction this would not have been the case – as both Matthieu Cuvelier at Clos Fourtet and Andréane Gornand at Canon described to us. These, too, are great wines – and not just in the context of this vintage. Canon, in particular, has been on a very rich vein of form in recent vintages and its 2017 is not going to disappoint any of its new-found or more seasoned admirers.

Arguably this is part of a more generalised phenomenon, for although St Emilion 2017s are rather less homogenous than their Pomerol counterparts, each of the first growths that I tasted has made a strong wine.

That this is so is down to a combination of two things – their vineyards being typically less exposed to the frost than their neighbours and their capacity to deploy resources, when they needed them in both the vineyard and in the *chai*, to compensate for whatever nature threw at them.

It is when we start to descend the hierarchy, however, that things start to get more difficult. Here it simply becomes impossible to generalise. The distribution of frost damage was exceptionally uneven and one would need a very fine-grained map of the vineyards of the appellation to get a genuine understanding of its impact. Many chateaux, as we know, have produced no 2017. Others have produced wines marked by the signature tart acidity of second generation fruit.

Yet others have no weather-related excuse for wines that taste less of their terroir and of the vintage than perhaps they should (a now habitual failing of some of the wines of St Emilion that is on the wain, thankfully).

In sum, beyond the first growths – which for the most part continue their upward trajectory of recent years – the vintage is something of a curate's egg in St Emilion.

But there are, of course, still many highlights – not least because the appellation is such a large one. I will sign off by listing just a couple.

The first is Quinault L'Enclos, made for almost a decade now by the winemaking team at Cheval Blanc, and now with rather more Cabernet Sauvignon in the blend (22% in 2017). For me, as it has done since 2015 at least, this represents fantastic potential value for money. With its vineyards in the outskirts of Libourne itself, it was also relatively protected from the frost. The wine is pure, precise, gentle and yet wonderfully fresh and sappy. It has something of Cheval Blanc's DNA about it.

The second is La Tour St Christophe, a terraced vineyard in Saint-Christophe-des-Bardes near the limits of the appellation that has been receiving a lot of attention since its acquisition by Peter and Karen Kwok in 2012. This is another up-and-coming wine made by a very talented winemaking team in a brand new state-of-the-art winemaking facility.

It is one of a handful of properties arguably contributing to the redefinition of modernity in St Emilion – a style marked by freshness, precision and linearity. All three attributes are clearly present in the 2017.

For the view from the Left Bank, click here (<https://www.thedrinksbusiness.com/2018/04/bordeaux-2017-the-left-bank/>)

For a broader picture of the frost damage to the region in 2017, click here (<https://www.thedrinksbusiness.com/2018/04/bordeaux-2017-the-frost-report/>)

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Tommy says:

April 25, 2018 at 4:15 pm (<https://www.thedrinksbusiness.com/2018/04/bordeaux-2017-a-curates-egg-of-a-right-bank/#comment-16171>)

Thanks Colin, these have been insightful articles. The Drinks Business should be publishing more content of this caliber

Reply (<https://www.thedrinksbusiness.com/2018/04/bordeaux-2017-a-curates-egg-of-a-right-bank/?replytocom=16171#respond>)



Colin HAY says:

April 25, 2018 at 5:02 pm (<https://www.thedrinksbusiness.com/2018/04/bordeaux-2017-a-curates-egg-of-a-right-bank/#comment-16172>)

Thanks – you're too kind! And I certainly hope this won't be my last piece for The Drinks Business.

Reply (<https://www.thedrinksbusiness.com/2018/04/bordeaux-2017-a-curates-egg-of-a-right-bank/?replytocom=16172#respond>)

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