

## The Guardian

### Bordeaux vintners raise their glasses to China's wine buffs

Investors from Asia willing to spend big on the region's 2009 vintage – declared by critics as the best crop they have tasted

Cheers to China ... Vintners and connoisseurs from Asia have helped break records by snapping up case after case of Bordeaux's much-hyped 2009 vintage. Photograph: David Levene

With its creamy chateaux and immaculately tended vines, the Bordeaux [wine](#) region has for centuries catered to the discerning tastes of European elites.

But this week, as leading critics declared the region's 2009 vintage the best they have ever tasted, a distinctly new clientele crashed the claret party.

From the Médoc to St-Emilion, Chinese wine merchants poured in for the first tastings of the much-hyped 2009 vintage and opened their wallets to buy record volumes. The vintage was this week dubbed by Steven Spurrier, one of Britain's leading critics, "the best Bordeaux had ever produced", while an elated Michel Bettane, France's leading critic, said: "It is the best in my lifetime."

From the baroque tasting room of Chateau Mouton Rothschild, to the grand hall of the Union des Grands Crus, Chinese delegations declared their intent to siphon off huge quantities of first growths, the very best wines.

"2008 was the highest level of interest in mainland [China](#), so given the quality level of 2009 we believe there will be even greater interest," said Don St Pierre, chief executive of ASC, one of China's biggest fine wine merchants. "There is no other wine producing region that is better known than Bordeaux to Chinese consumers."

Sam Yip, 36, a Hong Kong investor tasting at Chateau Mouton Rothschild, which along with Lafite-Rothschild has been dubbed by one merchant the "tippable of choice for your thrusting Chinese industrialist", said he was planning to spend \$250,000 (£163,000) across the 2009 vintage for his private collection.

"Everyone in China is thinking Lafite," he said. "It is seen in the same light as Louis Vuitton, Prada and Gucci."

Prices will be set in the coming two months for this vintage, but it is already clear that first growths are likely to cost at least £4,000 per 12-bottle case. Even cases of lesser wines, such as Chateau Lynch-Bages, are likely to cost at least £600.

"Money doesn't seem to be an issue," said Gabriel Wong, who sells Bordeaux across southern China. "Private companies are growing fast and property values are soaring so people have a lot of cash. This week 70 bottles of Petrus sold for £210,000 so there is no limit to the appetite for the top growths."

Her firm is planning to buy 3,000 cases — three times more than last year.

A combination of warm and sunny weather last summer and cutting-edge technology, involving in one case, a satellite in space to judge the ripeness of the vines and in another a robot that rejects substandard grapes, has allowed Bordeaux's vintners to produce wines which this week had the critics in raptures as they took their first tastes. Chinese critic Jeannie Cho Lee reported that the top wines from Haut-Brion, Margaux and Latour, were "stunning ... with amazing density". Simon Staples, tasting for Berry Brothers & Rudd, said they are "rich, powerful, sexy beasts ... with almost magical promise".

To many, the Asian interest remains baffling and even attracts a whiff of snobbishness. Some Chinese consumers are said to dilute even the most expensive clarets with lemonade. And in a wine world that prides itself on discerning the merits of each vintage, observers say their overwhelming interest is in the big brands regardless of how critics rate the quality of the year.

Top wines have become a prestigious gift among business people in China; a bottle of famous claret is now an essential part of entertaining government officials, Chinese merchants said. Among the middle classes, Bordeaux is also seen as a sophisticated and healthy alternative to Chinese wines, which can contain up to 40% alcohol.

"We have become very popular in China, mainly because they think our logo looks like a dragon boat," said Philippe Blanc, director of Chateau Beychevelle. "We haven't even had to do anything to promote it."

The Bordelais are making a huge effort too, because they recognise that the Chinese buyers could replace recession-hit Americans who are staying away. Baron Philippe de Rothschild is reported to be planning the world's first Mouton Cadet wine bar in Guangzhou.

Wine research organisation Vinexpo has predicted that by 2013 the growth in Bordeaux sales to North America will be outstripped by growth in demand from Asian drinkers, who by then are expected to be drinking 1.3 billion litres a year.

It fell to Jancis Robinson, doyenne of the British critics, to sound a note of caution.

"The Bordelais are certainly investing all hope in Hong Kong and China, but Asian buyers tend to be interested in only a handful of wines from the very top chateaux," she said. "I don't think this will be enough to sustain the whole market, which has suffered over the last two years, especially in the US, from the global economic crisis."

### **Classy claret Top wines, top prices**

The 2009 Bordeaux is already being ranked as the sixth great vintage of the last 50 years. Finding good-valued bottles from previous blockbuster years – 2005, 2000, 1982, 1961 and 1959 – is now very difficult and high demand is also set to overwhelm supplies of the '09.

The single bottle prices of these great vintages, when the fruit ripened perfectly, say it all. A 1959 bottle of Chateau Lafite Rothschild today costs £2,500, the '61 is £1,300 while the grandest, at £3,250, is the '82, according to merchant Bordeaux Index. Even the '05, which won't be ready to drink for another five years at least, costs £850 today.

There are so few great vintages partly because of the region's climate. Hailstorms wipe out swaths of the crop, too much heat "overcooks" the grapes producing too much alcohol, and rain close to harvest results in "thin" wine.

**Robert Booth**