

Château Margaux

A unique tasting of research projects & experimental lots

Presented by Paul Pontallier, Managing Director & Winemaker

Corkbuzz Studio, New York

January 31, 2013

This extremely unusual and intellectually stimulating event featured component lots and experimental wines from Château Margaux. This particular range of wines has only been presented outside of the property on two other occasions.

Four components of the 2012 vintage

Margaux currently produces four tiers of quality including the grand vin and Pavillon Rouge. The new “third” wine was first sold as of the 2009 vintage, and the “fourth” is sold off in bulk. This range featured four of twenty lots which will comprise the grand vin. All went into new barriques on November 15, 2012.

Merlot 2012

Moderately dense dark red purple. The nose is particularly muted though also reveals a subtle and very pure scent of dark red fruit. The attack is polished, then firms up and shows fresh, very fine acidity and firm tannic grip. This is one of two lots of Merlot which will go into the grand vin.

Cabernet Sauvignon 2012

Moderately dense black red with pronounced purple rim. The nose is largely mute, showing faintly dusty, concentrated black and red fruits with an herbal accent. In the mouth, the wine is direct and firm with an underlying polish. It closes up quickly and is defined by an elevated, dry structure. There is good persistence and notable finesse for a wine of this stage. This is one of many lots of Cab Sauv in the final wine.

Petit Verdot 2012

Nearly dense black purple red. The nose shows notable concentration and is focused and intense with dark red and black fruits. There is a penetrating aspect. The taste as well is focused and linear, with a core of flesh at the center. Rather raw tannic finale with a peppery note. Paul Pontallier says Petit Verdot succeeds at Margaux because of an ideal mix of pebbles and clay, providing just enough but not too much water to the vines.

Press Wine 2012

Dense black purple. Highly concentrated and intense nose exhibiting primary black and red fruits. Penetrating and dusty. The attack and center are noticeably fleshier than expected. The wine is chewy and has a rough, dry ending with highly elevated tannin and a bitter note. According to Pontallier, the press wine is a “concentrate of the qualities and defects.” This sample is a blend of the best press lots and is slightly different in grape mix than the complete blend: 92% Cab Sauv, 4% Merlot, 4% Cab Franc and no Petit Verdot. The press wine will make up 17% of the 2012 grand vin.

Organic & Biodynamic Trials of Cabernet Sauvignon (2011 & 2012 vintage)

These wines were tasted blind without any advance indication as to which viticultural approach was employed. As it turned out, each vintage was in the same order. These lots came from one parcel of about two hectares with 35-year old vines. This plot, according to Pontallier, is “not one of the best.” He also revealed that no residues of pesticides were found in *any* of the wines.

The overarching conclusion is that there was very close similarity in the lots. Yes, there were stylistic distinctions, but the verdict as to comparative quality was hardly self-evident. Even though I marginally preferred the “conventional” wine in each vintage, I would not want to draw larger conclusions. It could simply be that I preferred the style I have come to associate with classic Médoc wines in a primeur stage, since I have tasted many such wines. The results could also be misleading because they are based on single-variety lots of wine in the earliest phase of development. It would be more significant if these were blended, matured and finished wines. (Then the question would be how each approach

would develop in bottle!) Quite frankly, I don't see how there could be a "right" and a "wrong" answer with respect to assessing these trial lots. Hence I find myself at odds with some who have published comments unequivocally favoring – or criticizing – one approach or another based on these particular examples.

One thing is certain: these lots should be evaluated in terms of their potential for future development, not their immediate appeal.

Sample # 1 2012 – Organic

Moderately dense black red with pronounced purple rim. The aroma is surprisingly expressive, revealing nuanced, pure red and black fruits along with faint dusty, peppery notes. The palate is immediately expressive and linear in form. The wine has notable elegance and a clean, dry finish.

Sample # 2 2012 – Biodynamic

Slightly blacker than #1. More reserve and concentration in the aroma, with pure black fruits and berries. The palate is concentrated and well-structured. There is a full, fleshy center and a sense of warmth. The finish is abrupt.

Sample # 3 2012 – Conventional

To the eye, extremely close to #2. Muted to the nose with a warm lift. There are subtle sweet black fruits and a dusty note. The taste is full and more enveloping from the entry of the wine into the mouth. There is a sense of generosity. The wine also possesses notable structure, but the tannins and acidity seem well integrated. Overall, the conventional lot strikes me as more complete, but the qualitative differences are subtle to say the least, and the organic version has greater aromatic expression right now – but that may not have long-term significance.

Sample # 1 2011– Organic

Nearly dense black red with purple. The nose is closed initially, then suggests concentrated, dry black fruits with subtle sweet berry accents. In the mouth, the wine is direct and closed. There is hidden flesh and concentration at the core. The finish imparts a firm edge of acidity and tannin.

Tasting Notes of Roger C. Bohmrich, MW

Sample # 2 2011 – Biodynamic

The color is that of #1 in this vintage. The nose is marginally more aromatic, with pure, subtly complex black fruit notes. The wine possesses a direct, frank attack and seems relatively more revealing. There is a firm, dry frame with less austerity.

Sample # 3 2011 – Conventional

Ever so slightly denser and blacker to the eye. Concentrated and intense aroma with a penetrating quality. This conveys more intensity and raw material. The palate as well displays evident concentration and density. There is a richer core of black fruits, and the wine possesses a powerful structure which matches the fruit and flesh. There are somewhat raw tannins at the very end. Again, while the competition is very close, the conventional lot seems slightly more complete than the others. The biodynamic wine has more immediate charm, but the conventional one promises more innate potential.

Fining Trials – fined & unfined – 2004 vintage

This flight consisted of one fined and one unfined wine. There were clear differences, assisted no doubt by the fact we were tasting finished wines which had developed over six years or so in bottle. In a sense, therefore, this was a better “test” than the one with primary lots. I came down in favor of the unfined wine.

Sample # 1 2004 – Fined

Moderately dense dark brick with garnet rim. Fragrant, open, sweet nose with small red fruits and leathery highlights, showing some evolution. The palate is open, then falls off rather quickly, with only moderate concentration. The aftertaste conveys tertiary leaf and leather notes.

Sample # 2 2004 – Unfined

Nearly dense dark red garnet with garnet rim. Warmer, richer, more vibrant aroma of dark red fruit. Less evolved than the fined lot. The palate is consistent with the nose. The wine is fatter and longer with a sweet fruit aftertaste. There is a more youthful impression overall.

Closure Trials – natural cork & screwcap – Pavillon Rouge – 2002 vintage

This pair was comprised of one wine sealed with natural cork and the other with screwcap. In both cases, perhaps, the judgment was less than enthusiastic owing to the weakness of the vintage. My preference was for the somewhat richer, fresher wine under screwcap.

Sample # 1 2002 – Natural cork

Moderately dense dark red with garnet rim. The nose is dull at first, and then reveals a low-toned aroma of small red fruits and spice. In the mouth, the wine is more expressive yet is rather small-scaled with moderate concentration. The finish exhibits subtle signs of evolution and a bitter note.

Sample # 2 2002 – Screwcap

Marginally darker than #1. A fuller, richer nose with attractive red fruit along with oak spices. The attack is soft, and the wine is rather short. There is less development and a similar bitter note. Overall, this wine seems younger and more alive.

Filtration trials – filtered & non-filtered – 1995 vintage

Once again, this was a contrasting pair: a filtered and non-filtered lot of the 1995 vintage of the *grand vin*. This pair presented a real challenge, making it difficult to pick a clear favorite. Overall, I would favor the non-filtered wine: it was rougher on the palate but seemed cleaner.

Sample # 1 1995 – Non-filtered

Nearly dense dark garnet red. The nose is solid and warm, offering slightly baked dark red fruits. On the palate, the wine is fairly full and generous, if not chunky, as well as warm and a touch rough at the end.

Sample # 2 1995 – Filtered

Very slightly darker. There is an unclean odor initially, followed by warmth and fruit compote. The taste appears (counter intuitively) fuller and richer. There is still a measure of roughness, but the finish is a touch less aggressive.