

The US reaction by Panos Kakaviatos

THERE WAS MUCH talk of the 'return' of US buyers to *en primeur* this year. Bordeaux negociants say they saw more American merchants. 'Of the top 15 importers, we saw three quarters of them this year,' said Philippe Tapie of HMS Negociants, 'but only half of them last year.' Tapie is banking on a strengthening US economy, and feels that Americans missed the boat last year. 'They were surprised with the '09s, after being worried about the price increases. They don't want to miss out on 2010.'

Some merchants agree. Jeff Zacharia of Zachys Fine Wine in New York, said his 2009s sold 'much better than expected' and is looking forward to 2010. 'While normally I would come into with some trepidation, I am not this year,' he said. 'The US economy is picking up, people are feeling better about themselves and their situation; so if the prices come out a little lower or around the same as the 2009s, I think there will be good interest in the 2010s.'

How big an 'if' is that? The market for 2010 Bordeaux can be described as one with 'offsets' said Shaun Bishop of JJ Buckley in California. On the one hand, you have a healthier US economy, but on the other hand, there was more market buzz for the 2009 vintage – and a better exchange rate. 'You cannot ignore the fact that the dollar is down 16% from last year,' Bishop said. 'Most of the Bordelais are not paying attention to the exchange rate... They are looking at the global demand for their wines as brands.' Buckley also disputed the notion that more Americans visited Bordeaux this year, suggesting that such talk is negotiant hype.

For David Sokolin of Sokolin Wine in New York, 'the common thread I see [in 2010] is intensity, power and alcohol. This is not like 2009, which was fruit-forward and super accessible. So the question is, will we have to wait 10 to 20 years to drink these wines? Because it will not take that long for 2009,' he said, adding that 'much of the vintage does not stack up to '09.'

Mark Wessels of Washington DC importer MacArthur Beverages was equally struck by the wines' immense structure. 'The good ones have the fruit and acidity to match the alcohol – in some ways they are like the 2005s,' he said. 'No wonder I was advised to bring two toothbrushes!'

Price fears

Pricing will be tricky, they both said, especially given a weaker US dollar. Sokolin predicts a price hike. 'It feels like they [the Bordelais] are trying to get a 10% to 20% price increase,' he said. But with the euro up almost 10% over last year, a 30% price increase is possible: 'You can absorb that for \$20–\$30 bottles, but when you

get to a \$300 bottle becoming \$400, it might be a different story, especially if the vintage isn't perceived to be as good as 2009, which I ultimately don't think it will be,' said Sokolin.

'I'm very nervous about pricing,' said Wessels. 'Our clients are in no mood to pay higher prices this year.' Both importers said they would buy less if 2010 Bordeaux was released at the same price or higher than in 2009. Sokolin also said higher prices for 2010 would encourage purchasing of older vintages.

Although the Union des Grands Crus de Bordeaux reported about as many visitors to the 2010 *en primeur* week as last year – close to 6,000 – some sensed less media buzz. The vintage 'lacks the excitement' of 2009, said longtime Bordeaux-based seller Bill Blatch. 'I've not heard that much from the US. This time last year, we were into our fourth month of people phoning us, yelling and screaming to get certain wines. This year it has not happened.'

'The wines are so big, I get the impression that people are a little bit lost,' he explained. 'They'd been told before coming that 2010 is a great vintage, yet somehow the '09s are still dominating conversation.'

'The question is, will we have to wait 10 to 20 years to drink these wines? Because the 2009s will not take that long' - David Sokolin

Real potential seems to exist within the low- to mid-range wines. Blatch organised a tasting for New York-based buyer Chris Adams of Sherry Lehmann, who predicted success for entry-level Bordeaux. Tasting wines that would retail for between \$10–\$16 (£6–£10), Adams welcomed 'two fine vintages in a row', that would help develop entry-level brands. Sales of such wines flourish 'in the down economy' and Adams predicts 'consumers staying at the lower price points, even as the economy improves'.

He noted, though, that 2010 was 'quite different' in style, if not in quality, compared to 2009. 'While I like some wines a great deal, it's hard to say I like them more [than 2009] because it feels like I am comparing two different things,' he explained. 'These are classic, in the most positive sense of the word, Bordeaux wines that Bordeaux lovers will certainly enthuse over putting into their cellars.'

Panos Kakaviatos is a freelance wine writer and publisher of www.connectionstowine.com

SPURRIER'S CHOICE

5 for his own cellar

- Ch Langoa-Barton (3CC) St-Julien
- Ch Pouget (4CC) Margaux, *right*
- Pauillac de Ch Latour
- Ch Fourcas-Borie, Listrac
- Ch Branon, Pessac-Léognan



than the 2009, Hard to imagine a better Ducru. 2020–50

Ch Léoville-Barton (2CC) 18.5

Understated first, then classic Léoville depth, firm texture and length comes through. 2020–40.

Ch Léoville-Poyferre (2CC) 18.5

Richer and more tannic than the Barton – very good ripeness for long ageing. 2020–40

4 STARS

Ch Gruaud-Larose (2CC) 18 Big, typically smoky-spicy Gruaud.

Back on top form. 2018–30

Ch Langoa-Barton (3CC) 18 Ripe, supple, lifted fruit. Harmony and length of a great Langoa. 2018–35

Ch St-Pierre (4CC) 18 Probably the best ever from this rather discreet estate. 2020–35

Ch Beychevelle (4CC) 17.5

Beautifully concentrated cassis fruit, lovely aromatics. 2018–30

Ch Branaire-Ducru (4CC) 17.5

Another great wine – a château on top of its form. 2018–30

Ch Gloria 17.5 Already fragrant.

Fresh and long. Has the quality of a cru classe. 2017–28

Ch Lagrange (3CC) 17 Elegant, less robust than many, but very good texture and depth. 2018–30

Ch Talbot (4CC) 17 Rich, very ripe fruit, smooth, even succulent. An open style in this vintage. 2016–26

Clos de Marquis (2L) 17 Cassis/violet nose. Has precision and elegance of a cru classé. 2017–30

La Croix de Beaucaillou (2L) 17

Deep fruit, lightly spicy, silky length, perfect balance. 2015–25