

Does Vintage Always Matter?

Knowing the best vintages is crucial in Bordeaux, but what about in the rest of the world? F&W's *Lettie Teague* shares her easy-to-remember vintage wisdom.

illustration by stina wirsén



I'VE NEVER BEEN MUCH OF A STUDENT OF HISTORY. I just can't keep a lot of dates in my head. Or even recall why they matter at all. In my defense, I like to quote Einstein, who once declared, "I never memorize anything that I can look up." He probably wasn't referring to wine (perhaps it was someone else's relativity theory?), but I think that his policy might apply. With wine, there's so much to keep track of: grapes, regions, producer names, not to mention all those vintages, too. The latter may challenge even the best memories, as there are so many more places where wine is made now. It's no longer a question of knowing what the year was like in Bordeaux and Burgundy, but also in Central Otago, Rueda and Calabria, as well. Or is it? Are there some places in the world where vintage just isn't that big of a deal?

vintage defined

VINTAGE (THE WORD IS DERIVED FROM *vin*, the French word for wine) is simply an indication that a wine was made in a particular year. More or less. The fact is, a vintage-dated wine made in either Europe or the U.S. may legally contain up to 15 percent of grapes from years other than the one on the label. And in some New World countries, that total may be as high as 25 percent. Perhaps these wines should be labeled *plupart*—the French word for most—instead?

What makes a vintage bad or good? Weather is key, not just at harvest but throughout the year. In a bad vintage, there may be excess rain, which could cause rot. There might be frost or even hail, which could destroy the vines, the canopies or the grapes themselves. (Hail happens so often in Mendoza, Argentina, that producers often cover their vineyards with nets.) Excess heat is also a problem, as it can result in wines that are too alcoholic or overripe.

In a good vintage, everything is in balance. There may be rain, but at the right time and just enough to provide sufficient moisture to the vines. There will be just enough heat at the right time. In other words, in a good year, the grapes will ripen slowly and evenly, and the vines won't be stressed. Generally speaking, there have been more good vintages than bad in most wine regions in recent years. This is thanks in part to favorable weather (global warming has been good for the colder parts of the wine world, like Germany), and also thanks to improved vineyard management—viticulural techniques that can ameliorate the effects of bad weather.

And the difference between a good and a great vintage? I guess you could say that's when the growing conditions (i.e., the weather) are not merely favorable but ideal, and everything happens as it should. In fact, winemakers sometimes like to complain that they find a great vintage boring, because it leaves them with "nothing to do."

Some regions only produce vintage wines in great years. For example, in the Douro region of Portugal, port producers submit their wines about two years after

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vintages to remember

There are quite a few places in the world where vintage matters. Here are five of those regions and a recent great vintage from each, plus bottles to look for.

BORDEAUX 2005

Château Cantemerle (\$45) There was a huge amount of hype surrounding the 2005 vintage, and the very high prices reflected that fact, but this elegant wine is an excellent buy.

BURGUNDY 2006

Colin-Morey En Remilly Saint-Aubin (\$48) The 2005 vintage was much ballyhooed, but 2006 also produced terrific whites, like this wonderfully rich, minerally wine from the talented Pierre-Yves Colin.

GERMANY 2007

Laible Durbacher Plaelrain Baden-Ortenau Riesling Spätlese Trocken (\$30) The 2007 vintage in Germany was simply

outstanding, as this peach-inflected Riesling shows, with its bright acidity and long, clean finish.

LONG ISLAND, NY 2007

Paumanok Chenin Blanc (\$28) It can be hard to get grapes consistently ripe on the North Fork of Long Island, but 2007 was an excellent vintage for the region: this dry, Loire-style Chenin Blanc is a stellar example of what this grape can do in a good year.

OREGON 2006

Elk Cove Mount Richmond Willamette Valley Pinot Noir (\$48) The 2006 vintage produced ripe and juicy Pinots, like this well-crafted single-vineyard bottling from Elk Cove.

harvest to the IVDP (Port and Douro Wines Institute) to determine whether the year should be “declared.” If the quality is found to be sufficiently high, the producers issue a vintage port, as happens about three times every 10 years. (Some of the best port vintages in recent years include 1994, 1997, 2000 and 2003.) This makes for good fellowship, as well as good marketing sense—a unanimous endorsement enhances the wines’ credibility, and declaring a vintage is more dramatic than slapping on yet another label for yet another year. Of course, some port producers do buck the system and declare vintages when others do not, and some may choose not to produce a vintage every time it’s declared.

Champagne houses are also collaborative when it comes to vintages, though their process is less communistic; there is no single meeting or group to determine a vintage, and producers can declare a year whenever they feel like it. Perhaps that’s why you’ll find off-year Champagnes more

frequently than off-year vintage port. Indeed, even though there were several bad Champagne vintages in the ’90s, every year between 1990 and 2001 was, in fact, declared by at least one Champagne house. (Great vintages during those years: 1990, 1995, 1996 and 2000.)

Of course, winemakers who produce wines in the vintages shunned by their peers might assert that they were able to make something worthy in a not-so-great year thanks to good viticulture (a rigorous selection of grapes, limited yields) or perhaps even a trick or two of technology (such as removing alcohol by means of reverse osmosis). Some winemakers have even said to me that they should be paid a lot more for bad years than good ones, given how much more work they must do. I guess that’s why some people believe that the winemaker matters more than the vintage: The winemaker has all the tools.

And yet, these winemakers are invariably the same ones who proudly declare, “My wine is made in the vineyard.” (It’s today’s second-most-popular winemaking phrase, right behind a “personal definition of *terroir*.”) This phrase particularly rankles my ex-husband, Alan, a restaurant critic and a man unafraid to use a vintage chart. “If their vineyard is flooded, how much can they really do?” he complained. “It’s the weather that affects the vineyard the most, and therefore, the vintage will always count.”

where vintage matters

ALTHOUGH I DON’T ALWAYS AGREE WITH Alan (he is my ex, after all), I think he has a good point. As long as wine is an agricultural, rather than industrial, product, the weather will always determine a vintage. Particularly in certain parts of the world, like Bordeaux.

Orley Ashenfelter, an economics professor at Princeton University, determines the value of a Bordeaux vintage based on his own complex weather theorem. Unlike wine critics, who wait until they’ve actually tasted the wines before rating the vintage, Ashenfelter’s mathematical weather model tells him whether or not a vintage will be great. And though he’s been deemed a crackpot or worse, he’s actually been right many times. In fact, he’s predicted many great Bordeaux vintages, including 1982 and 2000.

It’s not surprising that Ashenfelter began predicting vintage quality with the wines of Bordeaux (he’s since added Burgundy and the Rhône), as they are not only the world’s most sought-after wines but also wines whose flaws are most apparent when the vintage is bad. This is what Roman Weil, professor emeritus of accounting at the

Graduate School of Business at the University of Chicago, found when he led a group through a tasting of 12 different wines. The only time they could even tell one wine from another was when they were tasting good- and bad-vintage Bordeaux. Just to be sure, Weil repeated the test

“Some winemakers claim they should be paid more for a bad vintage than a good one, because they have to work harder.”

with some Frenchmen as well. They felt the same way. (Is it any wonder that the Bordelais have been turning so many of their wines into ethanol?)

My friend Scott Manlin, a Chicago collector who buys wines from all over the world, agrees that Bordeaux is a region where vintage really matters, but he also maintains that Bordeaux prices don't always reflect the vintage quality. In other words, wines from poor Bordeaux vintages, like 2004 and 2007, cost nearly almost as much as those from blockbuster years.

Bordeaux certainly has a challenging climate (it's about 30 miles from the ocean, and there can be a lot of rain), and yet there are legal limits on what its winemakers can do. For example, when famed winemaking consultant Michel Rolland put plastic sheets over his vineyards at Château Fontenil in 2000 to protect them from the rain, he was charged with violating AOC rules, and his wine was denied appellation status. But Rolland had the last word with the name of the wine: *Le Défi de Fontenil* (“The Defiance of Fontenil”).

But Scott isn't interested in the work of particular winemakers with off-vintage Bordeaux; he turns to the Burgundians instead. “Producers in Burgundy are usually smaller and have more control over their vines,” he maintained. (Or maybe more freedom with their plastic tarps?) And, as he noted, their prices tend to be a bit more reasonable in poor vintages than in Bordeaux.

And yet Burgundy's climate is just as marginal as that of Bordeaux. In fact, its precipitation rates are roughly the same (except Bordeaux gets more rain, and Burgundy gets more hail). Other major wine regions subject to weather extremes include Champagne (the northernmost wine district in France) and the Rhône. There's also Piedmont in Italy (lots of fog) and, to a lesser extent, Tuscany; plus all the chief wine regions of Germany (ditto Austria). In the U.S., Oregon has had a string of good (which is to say, sunny) vintages, but it's still a pretty unpredictable place weather-wise, as are the wine regions of New York state: Long Island's North Fork and the Finger Lakes.

Nevertheless, only the vintages of two of these regions seem to warrant much attention in wine stores. According to Nikos Antonakeas, the managing director of Morrell & Company in New York, his clients care only about the vintages of Bordeaux and Burgundy. And when the year is bad in either place, they're reluctant to buy. “We are still struggling to sell 2001 Bordeaux, even though there were some very good wines from that vintage,” Nikos noted of the little-praised year. “Everyone wants the wines of 2000 and 2005.”

What about regions where the vintages are officially declared, like port and Champagne? Did his customers pay attention to those? Not really, Nikos said. “They buy whatever vintage is in the store.” And California wines? Did they demand certain years? “Only if they're spending \$50 a bottle or more,” he replied.

where vintage doesn't matter

ALTHOUGH IT'S HOME TO MORE THAN 100 appellations, it's safe to say that California is a place where vintage matters less than most other places in the world. The weather, and hence the vintages, have been consistently good. Indeed, the only truly lousy year was a decade ago. The same is true of Australia and most of Spain, though there are regions in those countries that are, perhaps thanks to global warming, increasingly subject to drought. Southern Italian wine regions are also fairly reliable, year in, year out. Most wine regions in Chile have decent weather, as does the warm Malbec-centric region of Mendoza, Argentina, though hail can occasionally take its toll.

I'd also say that vintage doesn't matter when it comes to the grocery-store Chardonnays and Cabernets that my sister favors (all of which have years on their labels, as she points out). Since their quality is more likely to be compromised by a machine breaking down than a bout of bad weather, I'd put them in a special category all their own—one in which vintage never matters at all.

In short, if you don't want to memorize vintages, you'll need to learn a bit of geography and choose wines from places where the weather's reliable. But if you're buying from more meteorologically marginal places, you'll need to know the bad years from the good. I keep a vintage chart in my wallet—and a world map in my head. ●

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