



WINEWISE

THE CONSUMER'S WINE GUIDE

December 2013

Are Bordeaux First Growths More Fashion than Substance?



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WOLF BLASS MASTER BLEND CLASSIFICATION

In 2012 Wolf Blass Wines, in particular Chief Winemaker Chris Hatcher and George Samios, Fine Wine & Global PR Director at Treasury Wine Estates, initiated the Master Blend Classification. The idea was to benchmark Wolf Blass Black Label against the finest cabernet blends of the world.

The guidelines for the event are shown below.

WINE SELECTION CRITERIA

The criteria for the selection of wines to be tasted in the *Master Blend Classification* was very simple – select the leading cabernet-based blends from around the world based on proven reputation. With the starting point as the 2009 vintage, wines were narrowed down to the final list after much discussion on the relative merits of each. Since the Bordeaux Classification in 1855, the internationally recognised Bordeaux First Growth wines have been considered the benchmark for this wine style. Therefore, each of the Bordeaux First Growth producers was included, as were other very well regarded Bordeaux wines. Iconic wines from Italy, Australia, South Africa, Chile and the United States were also selected.

WINE PURCHASE

All wines were purchased either directly from producers or from reputable fine wine retailers in the United Kingdom, Australia, United States and Hong Kong. The line-up truly represented what wines the normal wine buyer would be drinking, rather than hand-selected bottles that had been stored at the respective wineries.

TASTING PROTOCOL

All wines were opened 60 minutes before the commencement of the tasting. Wines were double decanted into a decanter and then back into original bottle and were all poured in one flight. Tasters were asked to score each wine out of 100 points and scores were then tallied at the end of the tasting. Importantly, all wines were tasted 'blind' – participants did not know what wine producers were represented – only that the wines were cabernet-based blends from the 2009 vintage. Only after discussion, were the identities of the wines revealed. Individual scores were revealed but not whose scores they were – each person only knew their own score.

The second tasting took place in Melbourne on 25 November, 2013. I joined eight other tasters to evaluate 30 wines from the 2009 vintage. Here's my view. Bear in mind that most of the wines are under cork and therefore subject to considerable variation, but buyers get only one chance. C'est la vie.

Outstanding

2009 Château Léoville-Lascases This is a gloriously fresh and intense wine showing berry, dark cherry and tobacco characteristics. The palate is long, taut and super-fine. Cellar for decades. (\$350.00)

2009 Château Montrose I found it very difficult to split the Lascases and the Montrose. The vibrant nose offers red fruits, cassis and cinnamon. The palate is seamless, with delightfully fine tannins and a long aftertaste. Another wine to cellar. (\$350.00)

2009 Château Haut-Brion Was that a faint hint of Brett? Wolf Blass Chief Winemaker Chris Hatcher thought so, but it was marginal. That's a pleasant surprise from a château that was once notorious for that fault. Here we have a beguiling mingling of perfumed red fruits, cedar and tobacco. It's a powerful, firm wine of great length and balance. (\$1000.00)

2009 Château Lynch-Bages This wine certainly carries the Pauillac stamp. It's firm, intense and particularly long on the finish. It offers charm by way of a perfumed red fruits and cassis nose. Give it plenty of time.. (\$200.00)

Highly Recommended

2009 Viña Almaviva Many Chilean reds have a red jujube overtone, but this one doesn't. It's a perfumed dark cherry style with subtle, complex leafy notes. The ripe, satisfying palate is balanced nicely by firm tannins and the lingering finish is impressive. (\$125.00)

2009 Wolf Blass Black Label When all the scores were tallied this was the top wine, to the delight of the WB crew present. The majority of the tasters clustered their scores in the nineties. but a couple joined me in slamming the Bretty wines. This favoured sound wines like the Black Label which achieved high scores across the board. It scored well simply because it is a high quality red with rich dark fruits aromas and flavours. The oak shows but it's in check, and there's an attractive tobacco-like complexity. I have no doubt that it will be going strong in 25 years' time. (\$135.00)

2009 Opus One This wine was a pleasant surprise in that it avoided the typical Napa Valley problems of excessive alcohol and over-extraction. The nose reflects ripe fruit but it's fresh, and the palate is long and comparatively supple, with a lick of new oak. (\$225.00)

2009 Dominus Estate Here's another Franco-American collaboration from the Napa. It's rich and ripe, with just a hint of leaf. The opulence of the palate is a strong point, as are the fine, balanced tannins. (\$170.00)

2009 Château Latour This Pauillac château is the giant among Bordeaux reds, and in terms of power and structure it is no disappointment. It's a rich cassis style with firm tannins and layers of flavour. A touch of Brett diminishes it slightly, but this is one case where I'll say time will solve that problem. (\$2000.00)

2009 Château Léoville-Barton Another fresh wine with blackcurrant and leaf characteristics. The tannins are fine and savoury on a long palate. Splitting hairs, there's a hint of Brett, but it's not overwhelming as it is in some of the other wines. (\$140.00)

Recommended

2009 Henschke Cyril Henschke Very much in the dark cherry/raspberry zone with some obvious oak. It has good weight and length plus a lingering grip. It's a little simple right now, and a decade in bottle will do it good. (\$135.00)

2009 Château Beychevelle Fresh, ripe dark berries show out on the nose together with a hint of tobacco. This is a substantial rich wine with tannins to match. Definitely needs time. (\$120.00)

2009 Kanonkop Paul Sauer There's a faint burnt overtone to the fresh red fruits on the nose of this South African red, but the palate is impressive, offering good fruit supported by firm, fine tannins. (\$55.00)

Agreeable

2009 Eduardo Chadwick Sena There's too much of the Chilean "red lolly" character in this wine. It's fairly forward and firm, with adequate fruit. (\$170.00)

2009 Ornellaia The colour of this Bolgheri (Italy) "super star" is a little too advanced and the nose suggests more than four years age. The palate carries enough fruit but the tannins are decidedly firm. (\$175.00)

2009 Cullen Diana Madeline The colour is slightly developed and the nose is fresh enough, but it's herbaceous and comparatively light. Overall, it's a lean wine with dusty tannins. (\$110.00)

2009 Harlan Proprietary Red The nose of this Napa Valley red is advanced, reflecting over-ripe fruit and showing hints of dark chocolate. The palate follows on as expected – big and solid, with clumsy tannins. All grunt and little finesse or balance. (\$800.00)

2009 Vasse Felix Heytesbury The colour is light but bright. There are definite under-ripe notes to this wine and the tannins are hard. However the freshness of flavour is a redeeming feature. (\$80.00)

2009 Joseph Phelps Insignia A very chewy, tannic Napa wine showing the effect of raisined grapes. Flavour without freshness or finesse. (\$170.00)

2009 Château Pichon Longueville Comtesse de Lalande Quite herbal and under-ripe. The tannins tend green and hard, and the fruit intensity is only adequate. (\$240.00)

2009 Château Ducru-Beaucaillou Having tasted this wine before, I'm prepared to say that this bottle was cork-affected. The fruit, though of decent volume, was dull, and the finish was cut short. (\$375.00)

Acceptable

2009 Château Lafite-Rothschild The fruit component of this wine reflects picking in perfect condition. It's very sad that the nose and palate are spoiled by horse dung Brettanomyces which also manifests itself in a bitter finish. (\$1500.00)

2009 Château Mouton-Rothschild Not only is this wine Bretty, it shows charry oak. Bitterly disappointing. (\$1100.00)

2009 Wendouree Cabernet Malbec Very plain and dry, finishing firm. (\$85.00)

2009 Ridge Monte Bello Quite oaky, with slightly dull fruit and a volatile spike. Probably cork-affected. (\$150.00)

2009 Château Cos d'Estournel Shows dull oxidative characteristics and aldehyde. Another victim of the dreaded cork plug. (\$425.00)

2009 Solaia Jammy and oxidative, with chunky tannins. (\$250.00)

2009 Château Margaux Awful Brettanomyces and overdone toasty oak. (\$1300.00)

2009 Sassicaia Advanced, showing obvious volatility. (\$190.00)

I still regard Bordeaux as the home of the best cabernet blends in the world, but I cannot excuse basic winemaking errors. I'm particularly disappointed with the Château Margaux. There have been Bretty examples in the past (e.g. 1989) but after visiting the château in the nineties and talking to Managing Director Paul Pontallier, I left feeling confident that any Brett issues had been overcome. The excesses and pretention of Bordeaux eventually got to me and I ceased visiting grand Châteaux around the turn of the century. I find the Burgundians much more to my liking.

Note: The prices are average American prices in the interest of consistency.

Lester Jesberg

The Group Order of Preference

Wine	Average	Wine	Age
Wolf Blass Black Label	94	Joseph Phelps Insignia	90
Chateau Beychevelle	93	Chateau Haut Brion	90
Chateau Lynch-Bages	93	Ornellaia	90
Chateau Montrose	92	Vasse Felix Heytesbury	90
Chateau Latour	92	Dominus Estate (Christian Moueix)	90
Opus One	92	Chateau Pichon Longueville - Comtesse De Lalande	90
Vina Almaviva	92	Chateau Lafite Rothschild	90
Chateau Leoville-Las Cases	92	Chateau Mouton Rothschild	90
Chateau Leoville Barton	91	Kanonkop Paul Sauer	89
Eduardo Chadwick Sena	91	Cullen Diana Madeline	88
Antinori Solaia	91	Chateau Ducru-Beaucaillou	88
Harlan Proprietary Red	91	Chateau Margaux	86
Chateau Cos d'Estournel	91	Wendouree	86
Ridge Monte Bello	91	Mount Mary Reflexion	85
Henschke Cyril Henschke	91	Sassicaia	84

Note: I didn't review the Mount Mary Reflexion because it is the second-level wine, and not the Quintet.

MÉDOC REALITY CHECK

We all know that people can be profoundly influenced by wine labels and reputations. That's why "blind" tasting is so important.. However, although this was a true "blind" tasting, all participants were aware that a selection of the world's most famous wines was in front of them. In the case of some tasters that led to an unwillingness to be critical. I take the view that every "blind" tasting is like a wine show, meaning it's what's in the glass that counts and the piece of paper stuck on the bottle is irrelevant. Therefore in this tasting I down-pointed wines with obvious faults just as I would at any wine show. I don't believe that expensive wines with illustrious reputations deserve special treatment. It's a matter of respect rather than reverence.

Chief among the wine faults was Brettanomyces or "Brett". I gathered from some of my fellow tasters that Brett should be accepted as part of the Bordeaux style. I don't think so. I find wines that stink of horse stalls, cow bails or medicine cabinets terribly unattractive. The argument that this character fades and simply becomes part of a wine's complexity over time is invalid. I have 30 year old grand cru classé Bordeaux reds in my cellar that still show obvious Brett.

How do the Brett apologists deal with wines like Château Léoville-Lascases that, as far as I can tell, is Brett-free? “Just another Bordeaux style,” they chorus. Skilled winemaker intervention, I say.

Bordeaux first growths are prestige fashion accessories. The fact that they are wines seems secondary. Very wealthy people purchase them to show off, just as they flaunt Rolex, Versace and Louis Vuitton products. Obviously the proprietors of the five “firsts” are delighted, especially the Rothschild family who own Château Lafite-Rothschild which churns out about 20,000 cases of first growth wine a year. I’m sure they’re happy, having merchants from all over the world queuing up to pay the \$700 a bottle opening price. Let me do the maths for you. Multiply 240,000 by 700 and we have \$16,800,000. There’s plenty of spare change to keep some influential journalists on-side.

I first embraced Bordeaux wines in the middle seventies and, Edmund Penning-Rowsell’s “Wines of Bordeaux” at my side, tasted my way through most of the classified growths. I noticed a character that I disliked and noted that it always appeared in the wines of Châteaux Talbot, Gruaud-Larose and Beychevelle. On my first visit to Bordeaux in 1981 I tasted at all three estates and discussed the wines with the cellar masters. On questioning them I was told “It is ze terroir monsieur”. Being young and naïve I assumed it related to the vineyard and was just something that didn’t appeal to me. It took at least another decade before the truth started to sink in.

There are many people in the world of wine who started with Penning-Rowsell and have stayed there. They have become accustomed to the odour and flavour of Brettanomyces and accept it. Maybe it’s like living downwind from the tannery. That’s their choice.

I love wine and still find fascination and excitement in it. We are now 13 years into the 21st century and the world continues to change rapidly. I try to change with it and, although I respect the tradition of wine, the thrill for me lies in the present and future. Winemaking must keep pace with a changing world, and winemakers who truly understand the concept of “terroir” won’t allow Brettanomyces to blur it.

Lester Jesberg

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CHRISTMAS DRINKS



Firstly apologies for my tardiness in sending the 100 Pinots article. It's taken longer than expected to compile and Adrienne and I have just celebrated our 40th wedding anniversary which involved many good bottles and took much of the last week. The pinot article will be ready in a couple of days.

This time of year friends often drop by and it's handy to have a good supply of reasonably-priced, good quality wines on hand. Here are a few that fit the bill.

WHITE

It's almost impossible to beat the **2012 Wolf Blass Gold Label Chardonnay**. It's fresh, intense, complex and beautifully textured, and is an unbelievable \$17.99 at Jim's Cellars. Around \$22.00 at the big chains, and you'd be happy paying \$30.00 for it. <http://www.jimscellars.com.au/product/view-product/wolf-blass-gold-label-chardonnay?id=f45a1717899ceb90556acda27a784e0c&key=6FPb1W&ssid=064ac92ca2a39250091a1d349b902664>

Summer is riesling weather, and we want them to be young and full of life. Such a wine is the **2013 Wirra Wirra The Lost Watch Adelaide Hills Riesling**. Break out the prawns and twist the screwcap. It's \$18.99 by the half dozen from Cracka, but is easy to find at \$20.00 per bottle.

https://www.crackawines.com.au/Wirra_Wirra_Vineyards/2013_Wirra_Wirra_The_Lost_Watch_Adelaide_Hills_Riesling/Sales

The **2013 Chalkboard Semillon** is a Vintage Cellars exclusivity made by Tyrrell's. In terms of quality for price it's **the** oyster wine for Christmas. The vibrancy and raciness make it ideal for the delectable molluscs. (\$11.99 or two for \$18.00)

<https://www.vintagecellars.com.au/White%20Wine?facets=region%3dHunter>

SPARKLING

If you want cheap fizz there's an ocean of it around and I'll leave the choice to you. In terms of Aussie bubbly, it's hard to go past the **NV Centennial Sparkling Pinot Noir Chardonnay**. (\$27.99)

<http://www.centennial.net.au>

The champagne choice is easy. Buy any wine under the **Charles Heidsieck or Piper Heidsieck** brands and you'll be very happy indeed. Piper is readily available for around \$35.00. Charles is twice that (at least) but is worth every cent.

RED

Big reds and hot weather don't mix, so a wine like the **2012 Yalumba Bush Vine Grenache** is the sort of drink you need when the temperature rises. It's fresh, varietal and not too heavy on the tannin. \$17.99 at Nick's; easy to find at \$19.00-\$20.00.
<http://www.nicks.com.au/2012-valumba-old-bush-vine-grenache>

If you're strongly budget-minded drop into **Aldi** and pick up some **Côtes-du-Rhône Villages Cuvée Reserve**. It's only \$8.99 a bottle, and is very fresh and well made. What's more, it's sealed with screwcap.

Want something bigger? In that case we go to the Adelaide Hills for the **2012 Wicks Estate Shiraz**. (\$16.99 from Dan Murphy's) It's supple and absolutely delicious. What more could you want?
http://danmurphys.com.au/product/DM_915056/wicks-estate-shiraz

We'll send the Pinot Noir report before Christmas, but we'll then wait until mid January before emailing the next bulletin. After that they'll come thick and fast leading up to the 2014 Winewise Championship.

In January expect some interesting and controversial articles.

Did you know that 27 Tumbarumba chardonnays were produced in 2012? We provide tasting notes on every one of them.

The new releases keep coming and we'll be tasting dozens of them over the Christmas period.

In the meantime, have a merry Christmas and a happy new year, and please stay safe.

Lester Jesberg and the Winewise crew.

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The Low-Down On Funk

This is an exciting time for Aussie wine. Winemakers are sometimes throwing away the rulebook in the search for Australia's new wine identity. There is a movement towards creating wines of elegance that express their regionality, with winemakers taking their cues from Europe. Our most adventurous vignerons are prepared to get down to their funky selves and make wines that not only excite, but challenge the status quo and jump head-first into truly edgy territory.

These winemakers practice the art of minimal intervention, with some stretching to the recycled fashion of 'natural wine'. Minimal interventionists are about letting the vineyard do the talking and then allowing the wine to run its course through fermentation and maturation without too much interference. They all allow indigenous yeasts to do their thing, and are not afraid of a little sulphide influence or letting their wines go right up the reductive edge to add layers of intrigue and funk. The results are wines that are unconventional and exciting.

However, the acceptance of these wines poses a conundrum not only with consumers, but also people within the wine industry itself. Some descriptors for these funky characters are 'struck match', 'savouriness', 'stalky' and 'earthiness'. Terms like savouriness and earthiness have also been used to describe the most evil of microbial taints, *Brettanomyces* (Brett), but the difference is that Brett tends to produce a drying, metallic and short palate, whereas wines with the right amount of good funk still have fruit weight, balance and length.



Accepting these characteristics as part of Australian wine brings in a whole new challenge. It could be argued that most Australian wine has become formulaic and devoid of personality, but the fact remains that most consumers and wine professionals alike expect our wines to be squeaky clean, fresh and above all fruity. Therefore the use of 'artefact' as winemakers call it, can chuck a curve ball to most wine consumers.

So, what is artefact? In simple terms, it is something non-grape that is 'added' to the wine. Oak is probably the most common form of artefact, along with cultured yeasts. Both can add aromatics to a wine, and also change mouthfeel and texture.

The 'natural' forms of artefact are wild yeasts, solids (the broken-down skins and pulp of the grapes) and whole-bunches in the ferments.

These can add to the aromatics and texture of the wine, and can also be pushed too far. That applies especially to whole-bunch fermentation. When this happens, the wine can taste green or have an unpleasant, coarse mouthfeel, particularly if there is insufficient supporting fruit weight.

Some varieties cope better with artefact than others, and produce wines of various styles and complexity. Chardonnay is a good example of a variety that handles manipulation. If we think about the expressions of chardonnay from Burgundy we begin to see its diversity. They range from steely, linear wines through to the more worked style of chardonnay we all know and many still love. In between, you will find every variation you could ever imagine and this is where it gets thrilling. On the other hand, this is not an exercise in seeing how French we can make our wines taste. It's a bit like doing a cover version of a song. We can take the basic premise, but do it in our own style.

Shiraz and pinot noir also cope well, particularly with whole-bunch fermentation. If done appropriately, whole bunches can add structure, perfume and complexity to wines. But it can turn quite ugly if the use of bunches and stems is not adjusted according to the vintage. For example, 2011 saw many green and coarse wines due to a lack of fruit concentration. In that instance, it could be argued that winemakers would have been better off destemming all fruit.

When it comes to a question of how much funk is too much, many winemakers believe it oversteps the line when the wines are overworked with oak or solids, or sulphides mask and/or strip the fruit. Some believe funk is terroir-driven in the first place, for example by natural yeasts. The simplest explanation seems to be that funk has gone too far when the fruit ceases to be the focus of the wine - when varietal definition and regionality are "artifactual" into submission.

At present the Australian wine industry is feeling a little insecure and uncertain, so perhaps a return to centre is required. Maybe we will rediscover our regionality and open our minds to where our funky wine styles can take us. Perhaps that holds the key to the new Australian wine identity we are seeking.

Deb Pearce