

Battle of the Bordeaux blockbusters: a muddled heavyweight and a tour de force

Jacques Dupont *Le Guide des Vins de Bordeaux*

Grasset, €39

Jean-Marc Quarin *Guide Quarin des Vins de Bordeaux*

Solar, €39

REVIEWED BY
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I have had much pleasure and instruction from these two new Bordeaux guides. They are not books to “read,” any more than you read a dictionary; they are, by and large, reference books, *pour être picoré*, as Jacques Dupont puts it—literally “pecked at,” dipped into. They are substantial volumes—1,950 pages in the case of *Le Guide* (with great emphasis on “Le”), 800 for the *Guide Quarin*—and currently only available in French. Each has one simple appellation map, and while both have an alphabetical château contents list (and Quarin an AOC index), neither has a proper index as such—a common shortcoming in many French reference books.

Le Guide des Vins de Bordeaux

Dupont’s tome weighs in at 4lb 12oz (2.2kg). It is conventionally organized in the Bordeaux book fashion: an introduction covering classifications, brief historical background, Bordeaux in figures, the grape varieties and soils, a 40-word technical glossary, vintages 2000 to 2009 in some detail (weather, winemaking, commercial context), and vintages 1945 to 1999 as thumbnail summaries. Then the properties: in alphabetical order within the

communes (each with half to one and a half pages of introduction), Left Bank, then Right Bank, divided into the various hierarchies within the communes: crus classés, crubourgeois, crus artisans in the Médoc, for example.

When I was asked to review this book, I was in Bordeaux for the 2011 en primeur tastings. I hadn’t heard of it and went to have a look in Bordeaux’s best bookshop, Mollat. Just glancing at the first two pages I thought “I’m going to enjoy this!” Here’s a flavor:

Ce livre n’est pas objectif [...] J’aime les vins élégants, harmonieux [...] Je n’aime pas les vins monstrueux qui sentent la vanille et le shampooing bon marché [...]. (“This book is not objective. I like wines that are elegant, harmonious [...] I don’t like strapping wines that reek of vanilla and cheap shampoo.”)

Ce livre n’est pas initiatique. Vous n’y trouverez pas les fameux chapitres “apprendre à déguster [...]” (“This book is not educational. You won’t find those famous chapters ‘How to Taste [...]’”)

In the discursive pages of the text, Dupont is a joy to read, with a lovely turn of phrase, sometimes very funny, a wine-writing breath of fresh air:

On scoring: *Commes vous, je savais qu’en rentrant à la maison avec un 12/20 j’avais sauvé les meubles, mais qu’il n’y avait pas vraiment matière à pavoiser. Alors que l’obtention d’un 18 ouvrirait des possibilités nouvelles dans le relationnel avec les parents, surtout à la veille des fêtes de Noël. Cela me semble clair, simple à comprendre.* (“Like you, I knew that, in going home with 12 out of 20, I had escaped a catastrophe but that there wasn’t much to write home about. Whereas an 18 opened up new horizons in my relationship with my parents, especially just before Christmas. This seems clear to me, simple to understand.”)

On St-Emilion, Dupont writes of *la ténébreuse affaire du classement* (“the murky business of the

classification”) and, of its soils: *Ici, rien n’est évident [...] Si on veut passer par l’entrée des artistes de la géologie et de la pédologie, prévoir un litre de café et deux ou trois Guronsan [...] Pour résumer, St-Emilion est rangé comme mon bureau: quand on sait, on trouve, sinon s’abstenir.* (“Here, nothing is clear [...] If you want to use the stage-door entrance to geology and pedology, make sure you have a liter of coffee and a few Alka Seltzer to hand [...] To sum up, St-Emilion is organized like my office: If you know where something is, you’ll find it; otherwise, forget it.”)

And so on. Dupont, then, is very good company, a thoroughly engaging wine companion. But... as a guide to the wines of Bordeaux (*the* guide, no less), his book leaves much to be desired. It lacks consistency, completeness, ease of use, a clear viewpoint, and any sense of regular engagement with these wines from a personal drinking point of view. And all of this matters.

Each entry has the vineyard size, owner, contact name, address, phone number, and website; but the grape mix in the vineyard—an important aspect for a guide, one would think—appears to be what the French call *facultatif*—optional. Sometimes it is given, often not; sometimes it is partly stated, at the start of an entry, at other times at the end: There is no consistency whatever. There is little consistency to the introductions either. Some are extensive, fascinating, full of quotation and detail from personal contact; others are almost nonexistent. Gombaude Guillot is “introduced” exclusively by a lengthy quotation from Claire Laval, the owner. But what is Dupont’s view? Almost all the properties have a standard set of en primeur notes on the decade of vintages from 2000 to 2009, many with extensively quoted commentary from the proprietors, managers, winemakers, but little by way of comment from the author, the notional guide! Some then



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St-Emilion, a commune where nothing is clear, says Jacques Dupont—“just like my office: if you know where something is, you’ll find it; otherwise, forget it”

have “archive” notes, but most don’t. Poujeaux has an archive vertical from 1921 to 1999 (dated December 2009), Lafite has an archive vertical from 1970 to 1990 (dated June 1993). Latour has no archive notes; neither does Margaux (and why is it situated, alphabetically, between Cantenac Brown and Dauzac?). And since there are no page headings and some entries are ten pages or more, it is not easy to find your way around.

No context at all is given to what are clearly some quite magnificent vertical tastings. There is no overview, no attempt to summarize what they say about a wine’s character, its style, its journey across the decades, its current state and stature—to offer a properly considered view of a privileged occasion. Much better to have devoted less space

to quoting the producers on their own products in the primeur notes and given it, instead, to considered summaries of what Dupont himself thought these splendid tastings revealed about a wine. It’s an astonishing set of missed opportunities for a wine commentator—much like the book as a whole.

I don’t get any feeling that the author drinks claret regularly or that he thinks about it to any great degree if he does. It certainly doesn’t come across in the text. I have little sense of quality, style, or scope from the mostly perfunctory notes, or of a wine’s performance within a category. No suggested drinking window is given for any of the en primeur wines. My sense of his criteria is hazy, and I feel uncertain about his judgment when, to give a few examples, he recommends 2002 Ducru (17.5), a mean wine that he appears not to have tasted since en primeur; when 2004 is his most highly rated recent Vieux Château Certan (19); when Figeac is “the best” 1982 (what has he been, or not been, tasting or drinking from 1982?). I’m just not sure where I am with him as a wine critic. This is partly a consequence of choosing to cover nearly 650 properties. But

the sensible option would have been not to attempt this. A more disciplined, more thorough approach, and a stricter editor for half the number of wines, would likely have made for a far more helpful guide. Sad, since there is much to enjoy in this muddled heavyweight.

Different beast

Quarin’s effort stands in complete contrast to Dupont’s guide, for here are discipline, precision, method, and consistency. Considered thought, strong and clear views, a constant engagement with the wines across the years, at tastings or at table with friends—these are what Jean-Marc Quarin is all about. His is a book that has been very carefully thought out and produced.

If there is a Cartesian rigor to Quarin’s thought process, Cartesian doubt doesn’t trouble him for a moment! His book is a tour de force of information, opinion, and clarity; a work of scholarship, scope, sensitivity, and innovation; a major contribution to the literature of Bordeaux—a triumph, no less

Quarin trained initially as a teacher, and he is clearly a very good one. Thus, unlike Dupont’s book, this one is deliberately educational, and you will indeed find precisely “one of those famous chapters on ‘How to taste!’”. He states his aims clearly in his preface. First, he wants to answer the questions he is regularly asked: “What is quality in the wine? How do you recognize it when tasting, how do you convey it when writing about or discussing wine?” The first 20 pages, *La méthode Quarin*, are his response to these questions. They are an object lesson in analysis, in the vocabulary of perception, description, and quality assessment. Whether you are convinced or agree or not, it is impossible not to recognize here a clear

thinker, a great teacher. He questions the emphasis on the “nose” when assessing quality (a French issue? Not one I recognize from Anglo-Saxon literature), and his emphasis is squarely on tactile impressions, the characteristics and performance of a wine on the palate.

He lays out his method and his criteria with logic, clarity, and detail: *La corpulence* (body, presence in the mouth); *la souplesse ou la flexibilité de la consistance* (suppleness of consistency); *de la glisse et du toucher de bouche* (tactile smoothness); *de la texture du vin, de son serrage et de son grain* (tannic texture and “grain”); *de l’importance de la vivacité* (the “vital” contribution of acidity); *longueur en bouche* (length of flavor). This, in turn, is the basis for discussing Bordeaux as a blend, the characteristics of the different grape varieties, the role played by soil and subsoil, how and why the varieties interact, how this enables one to distinguish Left Bank from Right Bank (*deux familles de goût*, “two different taste families”), and the influence of vintage on style and quality.

All this is not only an impressive exposition of a tasting method; it is, just as importantly, the foundation on which the majority of the book, the “guide,” is based. It explains how he tastes and judges Bordeaux’s wines.

He then provides an illuminating analysis of the Bordeaux fine-wine market, the background to its pricing peculiarities, and how these are largely to the detriment of the consumer and (surprise) to the long-term benefit of the proprietors. Finally, he uses a particularly sharp scalpel to lay bare the scandal of bottle variation due to the variability of cork quality (permeability rather than TCA), what this means in (largely unrecoverable) costs to the owners of very expensive bottles, and how one might begin to address the problem. Oh, and there is a bee buzzing in his bonnet about double decanting, *cet aller-retour mortel* (“this lethal to and fro”). So much for the first 50 pages.

Practical innovations

For the château reference section, the vast bulk of the book, Quarin also announces exactly what he wants to do: *Enfin, je souhaite que chacun puisse avoir d’un simple coup d’oeil la vision globale du travail d’une propriété*. (“I want everyone to be able to see, at a glance, the overview of a property’s performance.”) And that is precisely what he does. He includes a huge amount of information in a half-page graphic form: 17 vintages (1994–2010), scored out of both 100 and 20 (based on the mean score of numerous tastings), suggested start and finish drinking dates, average retail price in June 2011, and an inclined dotted line showing the quality “progression” of the property over the period. Another really practical innovation is that Quarin escapes the shackles of commune listing. All the wines are simply listed in alphabetical order, which makes them so much easier to locate. *Génial!* as the French would say. Inspired. Like so many very good ideas, these seem simple—obvious, even—in retrospect.

In addition, there are all the factual details you could wish for: address, phone, fax, email, and website; vineyard size, planted grape mix, average vine age, planting density per hectare (some fascinating figures here), soil(s), and classification where applicable.

This mass of tabular information is then supplemented with a critical introduction to each property, a clear description of the wine’s style, its performance within its category, anything he feels useful relating to viticulture, vinification, interpretation, and so on. And finally, there are the tasting notes for each wine represented on the table—a summary of his tasting experiences of them. Where he hasn’t retasted since en primeur, he says so; where he has, he remarks on the consistency or otherwise of the wine’s performance in bottle, how it is drinking currently, whether you should savor, drink up, or sell and buy something else! Each entry covers 1.5–2.5 pages, and there is nothing haphazard about the coverage. The guide section is set out with precision, completeness, and consistency. Each of 329 châteaux has all this information. And if it doesn’t, he explains why.

Quarin has two special awards that give the personal nod to a property: *Les outsiders* are wines that punch above their weight—*un cru dont le goût est supérieur à ce que l’étiquette laisse paraître*, where the taste is better than the label suggests. And then there are his *coups de coeur*, personal favorites. Not surprisingly, many outsiders are also *coups de coeur*.

If there is a Cartesian rigor to Quarin’s thought process—and, indeed, to the structure of this book—Cartesian doubt doesn’t trouble him for a moment! There is an absolute certainty in the reliability of his scores that allows him to indicate a property’s annual progression over this period to a hundredth of a point, to give an “average” score over the 17 years, and on the basis of this, to allocate to each wine an ordinal place in his classification of 329. I couldn’t begin to replicate such certainties, but they will appeal to many.

This is a tour de force of information, opinion, and clarity; a work of scholarship, scope, sensitivity, and innovation; a major contribution to the literature of Bordeaux—a triumph, no less.

