



Two enological titans rate the 2009 Bordeaux wines

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to compare the ratings of 237 2009 Bordeaux wines by Jancis Robinson (JR) and Robert Parker (RP). Results indicate that the level of agreement was 81.77% as compared to an expected agreement of 80.92%. This produced a chance-corrected agreement level of only 4%. Though statistically significant at a level of 0.02, the practical or clinical usefulness of such a result was essentially nil. Further analyses shed light on the phenomenon in that: there was complete agreement on only 27% of the wines; and on the 73% or 172 wines upon which there was a disagreement, RP scored all of them higher than did JR or: 7 wines as GOOD that JR scored as FAIR; 22 wines as Excellent that JR rated as Fair; and 143 wines as Excellent that JR rated as Good. Finally, the authors provide preliminary evidence that expert wine tasters appear to fall into two distinct sub-groupings, here designated as A and B. While the tasters within each group agree substantially with one another; the tasters in Group A disagree substantially with the tasters in Group B. The implications for future enological research are discussed. © 2014 UniCeSV, University of Florence. Production and hosting by Elsevier B.V. Open access under [CC BY-NC-ND license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

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1. Introduction, background and aims

Recently, Jancis Robinson (JR) and Robert Parker (RP) rated the 2004 Bordeaux vintage wines (Cicchetti and Cicchetti, 2013). This vintage was a problematic one sandwiched between the two more highly acclaimed Bordeaux vintage years of 2003 and 2005. When corrected for chance, the agreement level was only 12%. Though statistically significant, this result is devoid of any practical or clinical usefulness. By this, we mean that the result occurred beyond chance expectation, but that it does not reach the minimal level of practical usefulness, or a chance-corrected level of agreement of at least 0.40 (Cicchetti and

Sparrow, 1981). It underscores the fact that given a large enough number of cases, almost any level of agreement will be statistically significant, while not being of any practical value.

To make this point more explicit, one of the French Chardonnay wines in the heralded 1976 Paris wine tasting was the Clos des Mouches, with a chance-corrected agreement level, among the 11 judges, of 0.10 or 10%, a result that did not even approach statistical significance; nor was it of any practical significance. With 15 raters this same level of 0.10 shows a higher level of statistical significance (a so-called trend in the right direction); while increasing the number of wine judges to 20 now produces a result that becomes statistically significant at a probability level of 0.03, while still being of little practical or clinical significance at the low chance-corrected level of 0.10. This has been referred to as the “big *N* phenomenon” (Cicchetti, 2007).

1.1. Wine critics comment on Bordeaux 2009

The authors ask, somewhat whimsically, is the 2009 Bordeaux Vintage perhaps flirting with schizophrenia? This

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question is posed with due restraint while pouring over books, blogs and pod-casts, with experienced wine tasters commenting, as follows.

Robert Parker (2010) states that the 2009 vintage, “may turn out to be the finest vintage I have tasted in 32 years of covering Bordeaux.” Fine, but the title of his article is “Robert Parker's 2009 Ratings Out: Beware of Bordeaux Frauds.” How does one make sense of this proclamation?

Steven Spurrier (2010) of *Decanter Magazine* and co-host of the famous 1976 French and American Bordeaux taste-off, begins with the laudatory statement that the 2009 wines “are great”, while ending with the contradictory call “for a restraint in pricing”.

Jean-Charles Cazes (2010) (Lynch-Bages, Les Ormes de Pez) is quoted by James Suckling, *Wine Spectator*, as saying “The wines are rich and powerful, yet smooth and refined at the same time, and the acidity is good.” Well which are they- rich/powerful or smooth/refined? And good acidity? Again, a mixed message to the enologic community.

Will Lyons (2010), in his *Wall Street Journal*, decries that in the case of the Left Bank wine makers, “...perhaps the best wines they have ever made.” This is certainly a most powerful statement. And finally, Eric Arnold, Contributor to *Forbes* magazine, says in his 2010 blog “2009 Bordeaux is great? Pass.”

So what is all the fuss about? If this is such a great vintage or as some bloggers have pronounced, “The Vintage of the Century,” why not have astronomical pricing? Look at the ‘05’s- well that's the rub. It seems that some collectors like Eric Arnold bought into the 2005 hype and paid handsomely for them. He says, “I bought into the hype early on, and am the proud owner of a mini-fridge full of 2005 wines that are worth less than I paid for them.” Mr. Arnold says that he won't get fooled again. He'll be purchasing the ‘08’s, because to him, they are, “the best deal in town.” One can understand his frustration. Already in this century the 2000s, 03's, and '05's have earned critical acclaim and near perfect scoring from the wine critics. How can the 2009 vintage really be any better? But when Christian Moueix of Petrus' fame is quoted as stating about the 2009 vintage, “I'm usually very critical, but it's maybe my best vintage in my 40 years of experience,” it's hard not to get caught up in the hype.

1.2. The 2009 Bordeaux vintage: weather and the quality of wine

Bordeaux grapes in the beginning of 2009 faced a cold winter with average temperatures below those experienced in 2008. This forced the vineyards into dormancy and the ability to prune on time. Nature took its course. The cold snap continued into March and budding did not take place until early April. Everything thus far followed textbook viticulture.

However, as the experience of vineyard managers reminds us, a great early season does not necessarily make a great wine in the fall. As projected, Merlot had bud break earlier than Cabernet. This pattern would follow throughout the vintage, which of course is normal.

In May, a hailstorm broke in the Right Bank hurling hail the size of small snowballs. It was devastating to structures, autos and vineyards. It hit above and to the North of St. Emilion, where vines suffered mass devastation. Actually, if one looks at a map of Bordeaux, part of the “upper” region like Pomerol is to the west of St. Emilion, not north. Thus the authors want to emphasize that the storm hit due north, not to the west. It is a critical geographical issue. June and July saw pleasant days that helped in the ripening of fruit. August was warmer and the sugar content grew. Soon September and October came, bringing more of the same warm weather. Grapes hung with ample sugars, but the purple hues had not overtaken the green fruit color. Would vineyards have over-ripe fruit without the coloring matching the sugar levels? Vineyard managers could be seen tasting grapes in the vineyards to watch in trepidation, should sugar levels become too high before the grapes matured.

Early October saw vineyard hands picking Merlot that had high sugar levels, although later the must would prove to have good acid and tannic levels. The crop seemed in balance, and later picking of Cabernet would also hold true. Overall, the best of the vintage seemed to have the hoped for consistency that wineries embrace. The first growths had wines with such power and intensity that it led some to deem them as perhaps the best wines that they had ever made.

But there is a caveat. Will these wines age well over time, or will they falter? Even *Decanter Magazine* cautions that these wines may age poorly. Is it true, or a mea culpa for the 2005 vintage? Ah that vintage – the one where Chateau and Estate Wines, one of the premier marketing companies and a wing of Diagio, was found to be dumping a large portion of the ‘05's on the open market. Is that a harbinger of things to come for the '09? Thus the hand wringing and consternation on the part of the wine critics.

In the words of Chris Kissack (2009), Ph.D., the Wine Doctor, “there is more to a great vintage than a few great wines. The 2009 vintage is a story of inconsistency.” To Mr. Kissack there are just too many weird, extracted and overly alcoholic wines in this vintage. His overall evaluation goes as follows: “Let me state this clearly: 2009 – talking specifically of the red wines from Bordeaux – is *not* a great vintage.”

One logical conclusion that can be drawn from this and the aforementioned array of differing evaluations by some of the leading wine authorities is that the 2009 Bordeaux may be a great Bordeaux vintage – but then again...

While this section has dealt with the weather and its effect upon the quality of wine, it is important, in the context of this enological narrative to compare this phenomenon with the extent to which the ratings of wine critics affect the quality of wine, as raised by one of the reviewers.

1.3. How do wine critics' ratings correlate with the quality of wine?

A number of critically important papers have addressed this issue. These results are summarized and masterfully integrated in a recent article by Karl Storchmann (2012) who cites Ashenfelter's

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