

Michael Broadbent's 1981 Tasting Notes Of 50 1961 Bordeaux



"Let's face it, here we are with the opportunity of a lifetime. Let's wallow in it," said Michael Broadbent, wine director of Christie's Auction House in London and guest commentator of the 1961 Bordeaux marathon in Coral Gables, Florida. Born in Yorkshire and trained as an architect, he entered the wine trade in 1952, becoming best known as an international wine auctioneer and for the pithy and sensuous notes with which he identifies each wine he tastes. Such a collection of tasting memories is presented in his new book The Great Vintage Wine Book (Alfred A. Knopf 1980).

BY J. MICHAEL BROADBENT, M.W.

THE 1961 vintage in Bordeaux — for red wines — was undoubtedly one of the two best, possibly the outright greatest since the war.

After a respectable and respectful interval of 20 years, how are these wines progressing? Is there a marked difference in the wines of different districts? Are the first growths best or are other châteaux challenging their superiority? Dr. Louis C. Skinner, Jr. (Chaîne Chargé de Missions, Miami chapter) had all these factors in mind when he first had the idea of a broad comparative tasting.

Planning in fact began nearly a year ago. Dr. Skinner sent me a list of wines he could provide from the cellar of his house in Coral Gables. Very sensibly it was arranged by district which, I suppose, gave me the idea that it would be best to arrange the tasting by district rather than by class of wine, a decision which proved one of the crucial points in the success of the event. Having made the selection, it seemed

natural to divide the tasting into three parts so as to avoid the fatigue of single marathon sessions such as the great Latour and Lafite tastings given by Dr. Marvin Overton (Chaîne Argentier, Fort Worth chapter). Incidentally, another lesson I learned at the Overton tastings was to avoid the temptation to linger over the lesser wines, leaving too little time to give the finest wines the attention they deserved.

The date was fixed for late February to coincide with my annual winter holiday in the West Indies (also, a relatively uncluttered period for most of the tasters, mainly keen amateurs, who were to receive invitations). The final details were organized on my arrival in Miami, particularly the precise to-the-minute timing not only of each session but of the service of each wine. The latter had never been done, to my knowledge, before. It took about ten minutes for me to divide each two-hour session into serving times; and, in the event, these times worked out unbelievably well, getting the tastings off to a brisk start and keeping the pace adjusted to the quality of wine served. These timings were put on the tasting sheets and I reproduce them in the notes below.

A word about our host Dr. Skinner. He is the best sort of wine buff; the keenest of wine lovers and as knowledgeable on the subject of food and good living as he is about wine, which is very considerable. A confirmed bachelor yet the most hospitable and convivial host, setting an elegant table, cooking the most excellent meals and unstintingly raiding his well-stocked air-conditioned cellar for good bottles. I have known Lou Skinner for quite a time. We met in Torquay at a wine and food gathering; later, fortuitously, we found ourselves fellow guests of the Van Zeller family at their famous Quinta do Noval up in the Douro. The following year I spent a week doing tasting-lectures for his group in the Miami area and have met there, and in London, very frequently since. So my wife and I were well familiar with the hospitality and generosity which he lavished on fellow guests this February.

With the exception of Ducru-Beaucaillou brought over by John Avery, the Trotanoy supplied by Chaîne Chevalier Lenoir Josey, Pontet-Canet by Doug Erickson, and La Mission Haut Brion (a straight swap for Margaux) from Bern Laxer in Tampa, all of the wines in the tasting had come from Lou's own cellar and virtually all had lain there, in temperature and humidity controlled conditions, since their original purchase some 15 years ago.

Two bottles of each wine were decanted into stoppered (and numbered) bottles about half an hour before the session began. At the suggestion of Alexis Bespaloff, pourers served alternate tasters so that in the event of bottle variation, one's neighbor's glass could be tasted and noted.

I feel I should point out that the following notes are my own and not a consensus opinion, though after each session, it was reassuring for all of us how evenly we rated the wines. Any strong disagreements are noted in the text.

THE TASTING

Session I. 11 A.M.—1 P.M.
Saturday, February 21, 1981

ST. EMILION

No.	Château/Rating	Notes
1	Pavie 11 A.M. 11/20	Medium depth of color for a '61, lively and red; what Harry Waugh would call "cheesy" on the nose and which later developed some fragrance. Medium in every way: dryness, body, style. Straightforward. Dry finish.
2	Belair 11:02 A.M. 13/20	Fine deep color, mature mahogany rim; gentle, fragrant bouquet with a touch of iron. Held well. Ripeness on entry leading to dry tannic finish. Nice weight and good balance. Attractive.

3	Clos Fournet 11:04 A.M. 5/20	Deeper, redder than Belair; touch too much volatile acidity in both bottles: slight sharpness on the nose and distinct core of tartness on palate. Just drinkable but spoiled.
4	La Gafflière 11:06 A.M. 14/20	Similar to Belair; characteristic high-toned bouquet Gafflière always seems to have slightly higher volatile acidity which adds piquancy and — to an extent — enhances flavor.) Slightly sweet—distinctly ripe grapes, chunky, very flavory, dry finish.
5	Magdelaine 11:09 A.M. 14/20 at best	Slightly variable bottles. Deepish, red, one had some persistence of beads (small bubbles) at the rim, often a distress sign. The most unusual bouquet of the group: 'broad' mature, iron and 'bracken' but opened up and developed well. One bottle slightly oxidized; the other better, softer.
6	Figeac 11:12 A.M. 16/20	Very deep, impressive color; nose dumb at first then became fragrant and spicy, full-blossomed after 30 minutes, well developed after an hour in the glass. Held well. On the palate: good bite and balance, excellent quality, length of flavor but a bit austere.
7	Cheval-Blanc 11:15 A.M. 18/20	Very deep, opaque at center; slight bottle variation (not abnormal after 20 years; not recorked). Bouquet more immediate and open than Figeac, then seemed to close up, finally developed full fragrance of ripe cabernet-franc. The second bottle was more tobacco (Graves) like. Ripe and sweet on the palate, chunky excellent flavor, ripe but drier finish and more acidity than Figeac.

After a pause of 15 minutes to review and retaste the St. Emilions:

POMEROL

8	Clos L'Eglise 11:30 A.M. 16/20	Most noticeably deep in color, indicating a sort of change of gear between St. Emilion and Pomerol. Nose sweet, forthcoming, fragrant. Developed well. Slightly sweet on entry (fully ripe grapes with their high sugar content and fractionally higher residual sugar are almost always sweeter and plumper on the palate). Fairly full-bodied, impressive but fleeting flavor.
9	L'Evangile 11:32 A.M. 17/20	Impressive depth; firm confident nose, rather more herb-like, fragrant, framboise scent; slightly sweet, fairly full, firm, lovely texture, tannin, good after taste.

- 10 **Vieux-Château Certan** Fine color; rather dumb, slightly minty. Bouquet held but did not develop; medium in every way, straightforward, a bit dull. Dubious finish.
11:34 A.M.
13/20
- 11 **Gazin** Deep firm color; deep fruity nose but developed well: rich, opulent in a rustic sort of way; dry, full-bodied, a massive unready wine with good firm finish.
11:37 A.M.
16/20
- 12 **Trotanoy** Intensely deep, magnificent; very complex, multi-faceted nose, after 50 minutes faded but fragrant; full-bodied, most distinctive flavor, fairly tough but fine texture.
11:40 A.M.
18/20
- 13 **Pétrus** Opaque; huge, opulent throughout; sweet, full-bodied, incredibly rich, velvety, warm glowing flavor yet still peppery—needs time.
11:15 A.M.
21/20!

Another 15 minutes' review period.

GRAVES

- 14 **Domaine de Chevalier** Good depth of color; gentle, low-keyed 'dry' nose which developed fragrance; dry, medium-full, nicely made, undemonstrative, drier slightly coarse texture.
12 Noon
15/20
- 15 **Pape-Clément** Medium, mature-looking, firm, fragrant mature bouquet, refined; slightly sweet, medium body, lovely texture. An elegant wine.
12:02 P.M.
16½/20
- 16 **La Mission Haut-Brion** Very deep; massive, high-toned, concentrated bouquet; medium-dry entry though dry finish, full-bodied, Graves-tobacco flavor, gratey texture. Impressive in a hectoring sort of way.
12:05 P.M.
17½/20
- 17 **Haut-Brion** Fairly deep-colored; a lighter more elegant bouquet than La Mission; developed richly, great vinosity; slightly sweet, medium/full, elegant, flavory, lovely weight and texture.
12:10 P.M.
19/20
- 12:15 P.M. Review period—going back over the wines.
12:35 P.M. Discussion period; also an opportunity to let the bouquet of the last few wines develop.

1 P.M.

Close of session

Session II: 4 P.M.-6 P.M.

ST. JULIEN

- 18 **Lagrange** Medium deep; open but low-keyed classic claret smell, a bit raw. Little or no development noted after one-half hour or one hour; taut but flavory, tea like, but short, dry tannin and acid finish.
4 P.M.
12/20

- 19 **Branair-Ducru** Deep, maturing; a bit peppery and unknit, touch of high volatile acidity, yet developed fragrance; less dry on entry, rich but peppery, dry tannic finish.
4:02 P.M.
14/20
- 20 **Langoa-Barton** Medium depth, fine color; sweet, elegant, gently fruity nose (one bottle was oxidized); an easy, medium, gentlemanly wine, nicely made, no great length.
4:04 P.M.
15/20
- 21 **St. Pierre-Bontemps et Savaistre** One of the oft-overlooked classed growths. Deep; peppery-fragrant 'fruit bush' cabernet aroma; firm, flavory, quite a bite, nice finish.
4:07 P.M.
16/20
- 22 **Beychevelle** Medium, mature-looking; most extraordinary nose—rich, rather odd—sea-water and drains; slightly sweet, nice weight and style. I am a Beychevelle fan but found this distinctly odd. Others didn't. (Could not make up my mind!)
4:10 P.M.
??

- 23 **Gruaud-Larose** Deep, lively color; prickly-peppery fruit, good but needs more time in bottle to harmonize; slightly sweet on entry, fullish, good fruit, very dry finish.
4:13 P.M.
15/20

No. Château/Rating Notes

- 24 **Léoville-Poyferré** Medium, pretty; sweet, classic and well-developed bouquet, continued and developed fragrance in the glass; slightly sweet, medium body, perfect weight and balance. A very crisp, very flavory wine.
4:17 P.M.
17/20
- 25 **Léoville-Barton** Noticeably deep; complete, perfectly formed harmonious nose which did not develop much more in the glass; medium-dry, medium-full body, firm, well made. A four-square and most correct wine, like the owner, Ronald Barton.
4:21 P.M.
16/20

- 26 **Léoville-Las-Cases** Fine, deep, intense color; immediate and intense fragrance, classic cedar bouquet which went on to reveal great depth and style; medium-dry leading to a very dry tannic/acid finish, excellent weight, balance and flavor. Good length. A fine long-lasting wine. It is a rare experience to taste all the Léovilles together, so we all made the most of this opportunity to compare the subtle differences of style in a vintage at which all were showing at their very best.
4:25 P.M.
18/20

Dr. Lou Skinner of Coral Gables, Florida: host and contributor of most of the 1961 Bordeaux, dermatologist, Chaîne Chargé de Missions (Miami). He said his motive was strictly academic, to appraise the progress of the 1961s as they entered their third decade. "Basically I wanted to make some sort of contribution to wine knowledge, to offer something to the wine world."

27 **Ducru-Beaucaillou** Opaque; gentlemanly, low-keyed nose; sweetness of ripe grapes, medium-full, excellent flavor, meatier than the Léovilles, good length and aftertaste.
4:30 P.M.
18/20

MARGAUX

28 **Cantemerle** Very attractive medium color with lovely graduation; delicate, fragrant bouquet which developed beautifully; sweet (as red wines go), medium-light style; as always, great delicacy and charm. The sort of refined filly which makes many Californian cabernets look like cart horses.
4:45 P.M.
18/20

29 **Rausan-Ségla** A contrast: very deep, intense color; bouquet sweet, a bit stewed. Cabernet style but a bit contrived; slightly sweet, loose-knit.
4:49 P.M.
14/20

30 **Giscours** Medium color, pretty and well-developed; a delicate, fragrant bouquet but a touch of rawness on nose and palate as if there were a lot of new vines; medium.
4:53 P.M.
14½/20

31 **Malescot-St. Exupéry** Very deep; sweet, attractive but less black-curranty than I expected; dry, a bit austere but very flavory; somehow specious.
4:57 P.M.
15½/20

32 **Brane-Cantenac** Medium, "warm" mature-looking; low-keyed cress-like nose which developed well; sweet, medium-full, flavory, nice texture, the most ready but one of the weakest of the many second growths in the tasting.
5:01 P.M.
15½/20

33 **Palmer** Deep, intense color; rich, almost Pétrus like in its opulence—ripe, mulberries, great depth; sweet, full—full of everything: fruit, body, extract. Rich and concentrated. Has soared right out of its class in this vintage.
5:05 P.M.
21/20!

34 **Margaux** Deep; rather difficult to follow the Palmer — altogether less rich and plump; a lean wine, quite sweet, fullish, firm and flavory. The hallmark of Margaux is its bouquet which was fragrant and developed well. Good future.
5:10 P.M.
20/20

5:20 P.M. Review period
5:40 P.M. Discussion
6 P.M. Close of session

Session III: Sunday, February 22, 1981
11 A.M.—1 P.M.



SAINT-ESTEPHE

35 **Phélan-Ségur** Deep colored; good rich, "cheesy" and rather medicinal smell of that part of the Médoc which really is so close to the sea; dry, open style, cedary and fragrant. The only bourgeois Médoc in the tasting and showing well.
11 A.M.
14/20

36 **Lafon-Rochet** Fine deep color, maturing; similar iron/medicinal character on the nose, fragrant; dry, full, firm and flavory. A bit charmless.
11:04 A.M.
15½/20

37 **Calon-Ségur** Medium—indeed one of the palest of the otherwise deeply impressive '61s; nose peppery and unknit but some fragrance; medium-dry, softer on the palate than Phélan-Ségur and Lafon-Rochet, medium body, easy. A nice wine but not impressive.
11:07 A.M.
13½/20

38 **Cos d'Estournel** Deep, fine color; crisp, fruity cabernet nose; ripe, good fruit flavor balance and charm.
11:10 A.M.
17/20

39 **Montrose** Good color but not as deep; quite different from Cos: peppery, scented yet severe; very dry, tannic, finish. Needs, as Montrose always does, plenty of time.
11:13 A.M.
15/20

PAUILLAC

40 **Lynch-Bages** Deep, firm, fine rich color, maturing; intense gingery cabernet-sauvignon aroma — after 45 minutes an almost
11:23 A.M.
16/20

No.	Château/Rating	Notes	
		gingery confection, allspice; ripe, leading to piquant dry finish, rather more acidity than tannin. Very flavorful.	
41	Batailley 11:26 A.M. 15/20	Deep color but noticeably weak/watery meniscus; characteristic Batailley open fruity nose which broadened out and held in glass; medium-dry, easy, open style, flavory, firm enough but lacking conviction.	
42	Haut-Batailley 11:29 A.M. 17/20	Interesting to see the other part of the vineyard: same class, different ownership, different style; very fine deep color; intense cabernet aroma, fragrant, elegant — some of the farmyard richness which reminded me of Beychevelle — developed well; medium (neither dry nor sweet), medium-full body, crisp iron/Pauillac cabernet flavor, silky, good aftertaste.	
43	Mouton Baron-Philippe (Magnum) 11:32 A.M. 15½/20	Intense, opaque; delicate yet spicy fruitiness of cabernet—after 45 minutes it reminded me of the smoking room of a club the following morning; despite color, medium body and light style, delicate, with unassertive dry finish.	
44	Grand-Puy-Lacoste 11:35 A.M. 18/20	Deep, “broad”, maturing; the natural piquant fragranciness of Lacoste tempered with the softness and fruit of the ’61 vintage; again, on the palate, not the usual crisp style—soft, broad middle-weight. Attractive.	12:25 P.M. 12:40 P.M. 1 P.M. 1:20 P.M.
45	Pontet-Canet 11:38 A.M. 16/20	Bottled by the proprietors (Cruse) in their Bordeaux cellars. Deep impressive color; the nose rich yet low-keyed; to the taste, soft, rich, open and fleshy. Good but not as impressive as on previous occasions.	Review Discussion Overall tasting summary Close
46	Pichon-Longueville-Baron 11:42 A.M.	Deep, crisp, impressive color; both bottles high-toned, cheesy, and in my opinion “pricked” (volatile acidity verging on recognizably vinegary); flavory; vanilla and fruit but spoiled by tinny end acidity.	
47	Mouton-Rothschild 11:55 A.M. 19/20	Opaque; as anticipated — a pronounced, gingery cabernet-sauvignon nose developing great richness and depth; also rich on the palate, yet crisp, intensely fruity, with dry finish.	
48	Latour 12:05 P.M. 19½/20	Opaque yet lively and very bright; slightly high-toned and minty cabernet aroma, excellent after 45 minutes; medium-dry on entry, full-bodied, a rich chewy wine with lots of tannin	49 Lafite 12:15 P.M. 19/20
			and acidity and great length. An outstanding bottle for the future. Immediately I picked this up I knew I should have placed it earlier (it was as if I had put Cantemerle after Palmer). Lafite is a more feminine, delicate and less assertive wine than Latour—or Pétrus. To begin with, the color was medium and maturing; the first bottle had a gentle, iron-tinged cheesy/cedar bouquet which opened up with a beautiful fragrance. The second bottle had a broader, more open ivy-leaf (slightly decayed) fragrant but aging bouquet; on the palate both were slightly sweet, of medium body, soft and essentially delicate. The length was there but I can quite see why Lafite is constantly losing out in comparative tastings. It has not got Latour’s massive masculinity, Mouton’s bravura performance, Haut-Brion’s textured elegance, or the opulence and flesh of Pétrus. It is understated, delicate, unobvious — but it would help if some of its facets were strengthened. Reticence in a fiercely competitive world is something of a handicap.
			And so ended the ’61 marathon. The pace, which seemed brisk at first, got everyone concentrating on the business at hand, and the three sessions flashed by without undue strain or fatigue.
			This was a true meeting of like-minded amateurs, in the old-fashioned French sense; no one paid to attend and no one was paid for attending. Only in America, it seems, can a tasting with this breadth of scope and style be organized; only in America would highly efficient acolytes be pourers of such calibre — they included a commissioner of Dade County, the president of a Miami-based bank, a leading doctor and one of the most able young wine merchants in the whole of Florida: all old friends and the keenest of wine buffs. But above all, we thanked the man who had the idea, provided almost all the wine and indeed gave the whole tasting: Lou Skinner.
			Chaîne members participating in Dr. Skinner’s Bacchic high court were: Chevalier Larry Fleisher (Puerto Rico), Chevalier Lenoir Josey III (Houston), Chevalier Harby Kreeger (New Orleans), Vice Chancelier/Argentier Marvin C. Overton III (Forth Worth), Chevalier Joel Stewart (Houston), Maître de Table Hans Eichmann, and Vice Conseiller Gastronomique José Garrigo (Florida).