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Bordeaux 2004 - 20 Years On

Nothing quite compares to the magic of a well-aged Bordeaux. But not all vintages are created equal and the journey to the pinnacle varies greatly, influenced by nature and winemaking decisions, making regular vintage reassessments essential. Our circle of wine enthusiasts has established a tradition of revisiting Bordeaux vintages at 10 and 20 years, courtesy of a collector in Switzerland with an enviable cellar. This year, we delved into the 2004 vintage. **We tasted 33 red wines from various appellations.** Bottles were not decanted, tasted, and scored blind.

A mediocre vintage at best

2004 is known for its challenges, with the main culprit being **heavy rains in August that diluted the large crop, followed by rains in October that led some growers to harvest some unripe Cabernet Sauvignon grapes. It's no secret that 2004 is not a particularly strong vintage, and this tasting confirmed that.** While it has produced many enjoyable wines, they generally lack the depth and elegance, the vibrant fruit core, found in superior vintages. The (few) best of this year, on the other hand, hark back to a more classic, traditional style, characterized by freshness and indeed bright fruit notes. Unfortunately, the best wine in our tasting (95pt.) is also the most expensive, a complex and as usually singular **Le Pin**, with a charming **Vieux Château Certan**, a surprising **d'Issan** and **Clos l'Eglise**, and an elegant **Lafite** sharing second place (all rated 18.25/20 (94/100)). Conversely, the less successful 2004s often suffer from a lack of fruit and underripe tannins, resulting in a rather astringent and dry experience.

Fragile Right Bank wines

As noted above, most of the top wines in the tasting were the Right Bank wines, as the Merlot grape in many cases achieved better ripeness than the later-ripening Cabernet Sauvignon-driven Left Bank wines before the October rains. At the same time, however, a significant number of Right Bank wines (31%, or 5 out of 16 wines tasted) showed strong signs of oxidation. Not only "smaller" Châteaux were affected, but also prestigious names like Petrus, L'Evangile and Figeac. This isn't an isolated issue, but rather evidence of the broader volatility associated with Right Bank wines from the 2000s. The combination of (more) delicate Merlot/Cabernet Franc blends and the era's penchant for intense ripeness, extraction, and liberal use of new oak (i.e., Parker-ized style) has often led to wines that age prematurely or become oxidized. A widely known phenomenon.

To illustrate this, I looked back at previous vintage horizontals from the much-lauded 2009 and 2010 vintages. In 2009, 6 out of 23 Right Bank wines (26%) showed signs of oxidation or were drying out. In 2010, 7 out of 24 (29%). There were many heavyweights among the affected wines, including Bellevue Mondotte and Clos-Fourtet 2009, as well as Le Dome and Beausejour Duffau-Lagarosse 2010, all of which received perfect scores from Robert Parker back in the days. Caution is advised when buying Right Bank wines from that era. Fortunately, recent vintages suggest that Bordeaux is moving away from these practices, which clearly affect the longevity of the wines, in addition to masking the terroir and vintage expressions.

A dormant phase or the beginning of the end?

I have tasted quite a few 2004s in the last five years, and it was striking that most of the wines on this day were weaker than in previous tastings. Only two wines scored higher (+1pt for Le Pin and Ausone), while eight wines (Angelus, Cheval Blanc, Margaux, Mouton Rothschild, Palmer, Petrus, Pichon Comtesse de Lalande, Trotanoy) scored lower than in previous tastings, often by two to three points. Wine scoring isn't an exact science, and many external factors can influence a wine's performance on any given day, but this still raises the question of whether the 2004s are currently in a dormant phase, or whether these are signs of an incipient decline. I wouldn't bet on the former.

Should you buy 2004s?

Given the abundance of superior vintages available, there seems little reason to seek out 2004s. For those interested in exploring 2000s off-vintages, the years 2001 and 2008 are likely to offer more rewarding finds. Personally, I would anyway heavily focus on top vintages - life is too short to drink mediocre wine.

	2010	2009	2008	2007	2006	2005	2004	2003	2002	2001	2000
BORDEAUX: ST JULIEN/PAUILLAC/ST ESTEPHE	98T	99E	91E	86E	87E	95T	88T	95T	88T	88R	96T
BORDEAUX: MARGAUX	95T	97E	90E	86E	88E	98T	87T	88I	88T	89E	94T
BORDEAUX: GRAVES/PESSAC LEOGNAN	99T	98E	91E	87E	87E	96T	88T	88I	87T	88R	97T
BORDEAUX: POMEROL	95T	98E	96E	86I	90T	95T	88E	84E	85E	90E	95T
BORDEAUX: ST EMILION	94T	93E	92E	86I	88E	99T	88E	90I	87E	90E	96T

Source: Wine Advocate

Performance comparisons

Finally, before we get to the tasting notes, one for the number crunchers among our readers. Below are some statistics comparing the performance of several vintage horizontals we've made in our group over the past few years. To no surprise, the charming and seductive 2009 and deep and structured 2010 vintages excited our group the most. Personally, I prefer the cooler, less ripe and fresher 2010 vintage but there are masterpieces and future legends to be found in both years.

Average group score

1. 2009 93.9/100 (tasted in 2019)
2. 2010 93/100 (2020)
3. 2000 92.7/100 (2021)
4. 2012 92.1/100 (2022)
5. 2011 91.3/100 (2021)
6. 2003 91.1/100 (2023)
7. 2004 91/100 (2024)

Numbers of wines with average group score > 95/100

1. 2009 17x (47 red wines)
2. 2010 13x (61)
3. 2000 4x (48)
4. 2012 4x (33)
5. 2011 3x (30)
6. 2003 1x (29)
7. 2004 1x (33)

Numbers of wines with average group score > 97/100

1. 2010 5x
2. 2009 4x
3. 2000, 2003, 2004, 2011, 2012 0x

The tasting

The tasting took place on the 29th of January 2024.

Château Ducru-Beaucaillou 2004

This wine offers a subtle aroma of dark berries and a hint of minerality. On the palate, there are dark red and blue fruits with a mineral edge. It's straightforward and simple but still pleasant, with a slightly dry finish. Nothing to write home about. **17/20** (88/100), mainly for the pleasant bouquet.

Château Branaire-Ducru 2004

Medium expressive nose with green bell pepper notes mixed with fine red strawberries. Quite intriguing and delicate. On the palate mostly strawberries, some green herbal notes, some minerality. Not that layered. The tannins are round, but the acidity is quite high and not well integrated and towards the finish the wine is drying out. **17/20** (89/100).

Château Léoville-Barton 2004

Quite ripe dark berries, some leathery notes, some crushed rocks, and a bit of brett. Quite intriguing nose and the most classic wine one in the first series. On the palate the balance is a bit off with some drying tannins towards the finish and a surprisingly ripe and extracted style which is atypical for this winery. The nose got easily a 93-94/100 rating, overall, it is weaker. **17.25/20** (90/100).

Château Léoville Poyferré 2004

Medium expressive nose, dark berries, blue berries, ripe but not too ripe. Some fresh herbs. Quite a good nose. On the palate beautiful red berries, some blue fruit, some minerality. Medium complex, good precision. The structure is round with fine tannins, good acidity. This is quite classy and complete. Poyferré is always the most seductive and ripe wine among its Saint-Julien peers and that works well in this vintage. **17.75/20** (92/100).

Château Léoville Las Cases 2004

Wonderful red berries, strawberries, and rhubarb on the nose. The best nose of all Saint-Julien wines. Perfectly ripe and inviting. On the palate the same fine fruit notes, some green notes. Not as layered as the nose would have suggested, but with a fairly fine structure and good balance. Good but not great, missing complexity and expression on the palate for a higher rating. **17.5/20** (91/100).

Château d'Issan 2004

On the nose, expressive dark fruit, green bell pepper, bretty notes and a beautiful minerality. Quite complex bouquet, very inviting. On the palate fresh strawberries, darker red berries, some blue fruit, minerality, no bretty notes. One of the best wines of the tasting today, quite complex, open and balanced with an impeccable structural frame. I wonder we were just lucky or if all bottles are on this level. **18.25/20** (94/100).

Château Palmer 2004

Dark, elegant, leathery nose with ripe dark berries, a bit of wood and some slight bretty notes. Quite pleasing, layered on the nose. The palate, however, it is a bit weaker with ripe dark berries, earthy and brett notes but it also boasts some rather drying tannins. Overall, still good but not great. **17.5/20** (91/100).

Château Margaux 2004

Medium expressive nose displaying ripe dark fruit, some herbal and earthy notes. On the palate a bit muted with some dark and red berries showing a bit, a nice earthiness underneath. The structure was ok, but the wine showed muted. This was no comparison to a bottle a few years ago (rated 18.25/20 (94/100) which showed much more open and layered. Maybe a bit of decanting would have helped here. **17.5/20** (91/100).

Château Haut-Brion 2004

One of the better bouquets today with lots of ripe strawberries, other red berries, rhubarb notes and a bit of earthiness. Inviting and very good. On the palate these fruit aromas are there too but the wine was out of balance with a not very well integrated acidity backbone and a little bit coarse tannins and a slightly drying finish. 90/100 for the superb nose, the palate was clearly in the sub-90/100 category. Judging from the other notes here, this wine can achieve higher levels, a good amount of time in a decanter would certainly have helped. **17.25/20** (90/100).

Château Ausone 2004

This confirmed the impression I had from a bottle three years ago: There is a nice fruit component, as well as some minerality and especially herbal notes but overall, the wine is not very complex, and the structural frame is a bit rough. Not a strong vintage for Ausone which can shine bright in off-vintages (the 2008 Ausone is the best off-vintage Bordeaux I've ever had). **17.5/20** (91/100).

Château Péby-Faugères 2004

Not overly expressive nose with dark ripe fruit and herbal notes. On the palate this is more expressive and layered with a broad array of fruit from dark, to blue, to red. Fine herbal notes, crushed rocks. Quite complex and intriguing. Very fresh, probably a bit harsh tannins which will have to melt a bit more but quite complete, light and airy. This is the best Péby-Faugères I've had to date. In warmer vintages it is usually too ripe and opulent for my taste, here in 2004 it worked well. **18/20** (93/100).

Château Angélu 2004

Not overly expressive nose with some dark berries, but not much more. On the palate astringent and drying. A nice dark fruit core, with minerality and some chocolate around it. Not too much depth, slightly off balance and structure. With time it gets better and rounder with a less astringent sensation but still, it's not a good wine today. I had much better bottles of this and rated it up to 18.25/20 (94/100) as it was more open and had more depth. Today: **17/20** (88/100).

Le Plus de la Fleur de Boüard 2004

Blue and black fruits on the nose, some slight coffee notes. On the palate blue fruit, herbs but not much depth. Quite astringent and slightly drying. With time more time expressive, but with slight heat and still quite a drying finish. The nose deserves a good rating, the rest doesn't. **16.5/20** (86/100).

Château Cheval Blanc 2004

Timid nose with a bit of dark berries. Same on the palate, a bit of fruit, some herbal but some green notes too. Missing complexity and the elegance you would expect from such a wine. The freshness was good but the tannin quality only ok. Without big fault but without being exceptional and consistent, at the same level as a bottle I tasted five years ago (rated 89/100). **17/20** (88/100).

La Mondotte 2004

Medium expressive nose, dark berries, herbs, earthy notes, woody notes, some leathery notes. On the palate this is one of the most complex wines of the tasting. Dark and blue fruit, even some floral hints, minerality, herbs, some slight oak tones which are not intrusive but add to the complexity. Structured and fresh and without any fault. Quite complete. I'm not the biggest fan of this winery as the wines here tend to be quite big and opulent. In this cooler vintage, however, this worked quite well (the same is true for Péby-Faugères). **18/20** (93/100).

Château Pavie 2004

Beautiful coffee, ripe red berries, dark berries, some minerality on the nose. One of the better bouquets in terms of complexity and precision. Unfortunately, there is some heat noticeable too but luckily not on the palate which displays fine dark and red fruit, some leather and minerality. The structural frame is good with fine tannins and a well-integrated acidity. Like La Mondotte or Péby-Faugères, Pavie usually produces quite big and often overwhelming wines, but not in 2004. **17.75/20** (92/100).

Château Trottevieille 2004

Oxidized. Not rated.

Château Pichon Comtesse de Lalande 2004

This needed a bit of swirling to come out of its shell. Underneath there were some fine fresh red berries, some candied strawberries, and a backbone of minerality. Fairly elegant and round wine and certainly among the better wines today, although without the complexity for a higher rating. This is a success for Pichon Comtesse which went through a quite weak phase around the millennium and before the sale to the Roederer family in 2006/2007. **17.75/20** (92/100).

Château Lafite-Rothschild 2004

This was one of the best wines today, certainly in terms of completeness and elegance (which is what you would expect from a Lafite). The nose was a bit muted and only with time opened up slightly. The palate was good from the go with fine red berries, fresh blue fruit, minerality, some leathery and bretty notes. Quite round and complete with ripe, fine tannins and a light and airy texture exuding elegance like no other wine in this vintage. **18.25+/20** (94+/100).

Château Mouton-Rothschild 2004

Like the Lafite, this needed a bit of swirling to reveal everything. Round and seductive, with the Mouton coffee/toast which gave it away, herbs, ripe dark berries, some blue fruit, some bretty notes. A structural frame without fault with ripe, fine tannins, a good acidity backbone and a fairly light texture. Probably not the complexity for a higher rating, but certainly among the best wines of the vintage. **18/20** (93/100).

Château Latour 2004

The most backward and muted of the three Pauillac first growths. A very shy bouquet, not much expression. On the palate it's better with dark fruit and lots of minerality at the core. The tannin quality is high, the acidity well-integrated, the texture airy and the wine overall has a very good balance and shows a level of finesse, not many 2004s showed today. Although the Latour is still in a dormant phase, it was still quite enjoyable with a bit of air. **17.75+/20** (92+/100).

Clos L'Eglise 2004

Expressive and quite intense from start to finish, this wine showed lots of blue and red fruit at the core, with layers of herbs and minerality around it. Some earthy notes too as well as some oak notes. The substance here was higher than with most other wines. Fine tannins, good freshness and only a bit of heat towards the finish, diminishing the experience. With time in the glass, the oak became a bit more prominent, and others found it too oaky, but this heavy use of oak provided the substance the vintage didn't provide without the wine being marked by dry wood tannins. **18.25/20** (94/100).

Pétrus 2004

Oxidized. Not rated.

Château l'Evangile 2004

Oxidized. Not rated.

Vieux Château Certan 2004

Wonderful ripe dark and red berries are dominating the nose, with an intriguing minerality providing freshness. Very inviting bouquet. On the palate very elegant, so round and a touch seductive, something I wouldn't say about any other wine we tasted. Ripe dark berries, blue fruit and ripe red berries, some minerality. Not perfectly precise but still on a good level. With air the wine improved further with the fruit become brighter and more precise. From start to finish a well-balanced, very enjoyable wine and easily one of the best wines today. **18.25/20** (94/100).

Château Trotanoy 2004

Another winner from Pomerol. This showed layered with red and riper dark fruit and just hints of blueberries, complemented by minerality, herbs, some brett notes. Fine, elegant structure and good balance. This was one of the most complete wines in the tasting, however missing the depth to go higher. **18/20** (93/100).

Château Le Pin 2004

I was fortunate to taste this for the second time in two years and it again delivered what it promised. The most complex wine in the tasting with a broad array of fruit in all colors and shapes, minerality and herbal accents and a well-proportioned but noticeable oak influence with coffee and toasty aromas. Especially all the fresh blue fruit was to die for. All aromas are delivered in high definition and the structural frame is impeccable with fine tannins, high freshness and fine texture, resulting in a balanced and highly elegant wine. This is a great wine. What Le Pin delivers in almost all vintages with its blue fruit is quite unique on the Right Bank. **18.5-18.75/20** (95-96/100).

Château Figeac 2004

Oxidized. Not rated.

Château Monbousquet 2004

Oxidized. Not rated.

Château Cos d'Estournel 2004

This had quite a bit of substance and a lot of ripe dark fruit but also a lot of wood that hampered the experience. Overall, still good as the structure and feel were on a good level, but they tried it too hard in 2004. **17.5/20** (91/100).

Château Montrose 2004

Muted on the nose and palate at first, the wine opened up nicely on the palate with a bit of air. Lots of fresh red berries took the centre stage, framed by minerality, herbal and earthy notes. Good structural frame. I guess with the right amount of air, this could be even better. **17.75/20** (92/100).

Château Batailley 2004

I did not enjoy this bottle which had not enough fruit and was quite astringent. The bouquet had a pleasant fruit/minerality interplay and deserves some credit but on the palate there was not much. **16.25/20** (85/100).

Château Lynch-Moussas 2004

One of the weakest wines of the tasting, this felt quite astringent and without much expression. 83/100 is rather generous (for a bit of a fruity bouquet) but take that with a grain of salt as the wine came in late in the tasting. **15.75/20** (83/100).

Author: **Andy Schnyder**
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Editor: **Christian Raubach, WSET3, FWS**