

Graves & Pessac whites 2012

Bordeaux's red wines invariably steal the limelight from the whites, but the dry styles from these prestigious appellations offer exciting value drinking. Jane Anson reports

THE LAST FEW vintages in Bordeaux have been nail-biting for the red wines. Less talked about, however, are the whites, which have enjoyed easier conditions. One reason is that whites are less sensitive to water stress than reds, and slightly cooler temperatures preserve both acidity levels and aromatic intensity. So while red wines need dry weather for three to four weeks before harvest and during picking itself to reach their full potential, you can halve that time for dry whites, so long as they are healthy and free from grey rot, as any damage to the skins will have severe effects on flavours, particularly with Sauvignon Blanc.

In 2012, things got off to a slow start, with a stubbornly cool spring and early summer, meaning uneven flowering and fruit set which affected both red and white vines. But the second half of the summer saw beautiful weather that lasted into the first three weeks of September.

This was almost the exact opposite of 2011, which saw a cool summer book-ended by a hot spring and beautiful (early) autumn: excellent for dry whites. In 2012, growers instead got the sunny and hot August days, but a dreary spring and autumn. This meant the grapes ripened later than in 2011 – the dry white wine harvest in Pessac-Léognan and the Graves lasted from 2-18 September, a full two weeks later than in 2011. The weather during harvest was sunny and dry during the day and cool at night, which helped lock in aromas, and kept the grapes in good condition. The only concern was if grapes were not picked quickly enough before sugar rose too steeply and acidity levels fell too low.

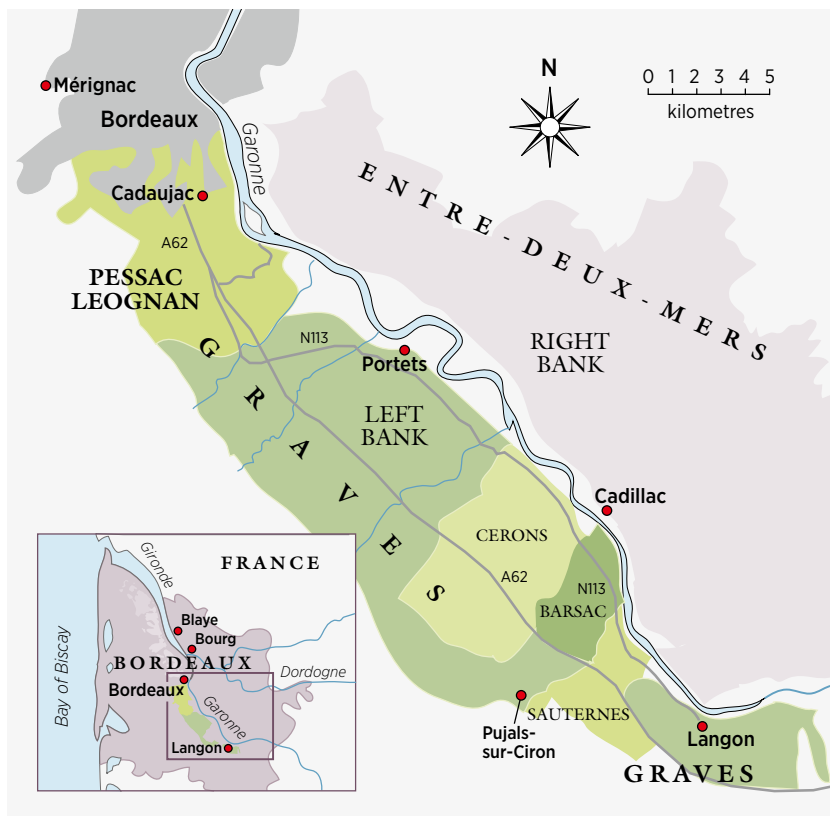
Gaining in popularity

Dry white wine in Bordeaux – which tends to be clustered around Entre-deux-Mers, Blaye-Cotes de Bordeaux and Pessac-Léognan/Graves – is experiencing a sales boom, with a 31% climb in overseas markets over the past five years, now standing at 47% export overall, compared to just under 40% for Bordeaux as a whole. The prestigious regions of Graves and Pessac Léognan have done much to contribute to this success.

Bordeaux whites from the Right Bank and Entre-deux-Mers are almost invariably early drinkers, whereas those from the Left Bank (so Graves and particularly Pessac-Léognan; the only region where the best white wines have received a cru classé ranking), should be capable of ageing and improving in complexity in bottle for five to 10 years, or longer. Because production is small, prices have risen for classified whites over the past few years, but they are rarely seen as investment wines in the way that white Burgundy is, with a few exceptions (La Mission Haut-Brion Blanc and its sister Haut-Brion Blanc, and perhaps a few other sure-value picks such as Domaine de Chevalier).

White Bordeaux is an exciting area where much research into varietal aromas and the importance of effective viticulture and vinification techniques has been done at the Institute of Oenology. The results have been widely disseminated through the vineyards, meaning that as a category Graves and Pessac-Léognan should offer good value for money, and real drinking pleasure.

Jane Anson is the Bordeaux correspondent for Decanter and Decanter.com and author of Bordeaux Legends



Graves & Pessac-Léognan whites: know your vintages

2013 Complicated for both reds and whites. Whites seem to have enjoyed greater success than the reds, as they were picked under dry conditions.

2012 Dry whites were almost all picked before the September rains started. Aromatic, although the August heat meant grapes had to be picked before the acidity dropped too low.

2011 An early harvest, with many Sauvignon Blanc grapes coming in at the end of August, meaning some very good whites – again better than the reds this

year. Those who didn't pick before the rains were less successful.

2010 Excellent conditions for both reds and whites, although whites were marginally less successful than the reds as alcohol levels were high, dampening some varietal characteristics. Two schools: early pickers to keep acidity or late pickers for rich, powerful whites.

2009 Excellent vintage for reds, with good results for whites. Again two styles are evident: fresh and aromatic if picked early, or rich and powerful if picked late.

Graves & Pessac-Léognan: the facts

- Graves region: 50km from north to south, 43 communes, producing 30% white wine.
- White grapes: Sauvignon Blanc, Sauvignon Gris, Semillon and Muscadelle
- AC Graves whites cover 752ha, compared to 268ha of white vines in Pessac Léognan.

- There are 10 classified estates for white wine in Pessac-Léognan, covering 120ha for their white vines. Confusingly, you will see them labelled Cru Classés de Graves, because the 1953 ranking pre-dates the 1987 creation of AC Pessac Léognan. ➤

The results

The crus classés and Pessac-Léognans fared best, with the Graves AC entries more inconsistent, but all the wines came under scrutiny by our panel for their oak use. Christelle Guibert reports

THE WHITES FROM Bordeaux's Graves and Pessac-Léognan region are some of the world's most underrated wines, and when looking at the stats – 97% of the wines recommended – the bottles submitted certainly put in a good performance, despite no Outstanding ratings. 'The balance of these wines is fantastic!' raved Steven Spurrier, 'Yet they seem to be misunderstood because they are so understated.'

Stephen Brook found some good Graves wines, but felt the Pessacs were a notch up in quality. 'They had good concentration and were more consistent and persistent,' he said. So it wasn't surprising that 15 of the 16 Highly Recommendeds were from this superior zone (confusingly, wines labelled as Graves Cru Classé are from Pessac).

Andy Howard MW felt the best examples 'are an absolute contender to white Burgundy' and that, like Brook, there was a distinct difference between the wines from Graves and Pessac. Howard explained: 'The Graves AC is a pretty big area and consequently the wines were very inconsistent. Some were 100% Sauvignon Blanc, some were heavily Semillon, some were lean and others very oaky. I'm not sure how consumers find their way through that?'

Brook agreed that there were 'a few boring Graves' that,

'They have fantastic balance but are misunderstood because they are so understated' Steven Spurrier

while enjoyable, were simple and fairly short term. 'Those that were Semillon-dominant were fruity and aromatic but a bit short and lacked clarity and zest. I preferred those based on Sauvignon which had more acidity, freshness and vigour.'

Compared to the other white wines from Bordeaux, Brook felt there wasn't much difference between Graves and Entre-deux-Mers: 'You have more Semillon in the Graves and more Sauvignon with Entre-deux-Mers, but in terms of general quality and concentration, there's not a lot between them – you can sometimes get an Entre-deux-Mers that is cheaper and better than a Graves.' Spurrier disagreed, saying that Graves AC whites had more character. 'Entre-deux-Mers whites can only sell on their fruit – they have no terroir. White Graves is definitely more gravelly. It's a style of wine I like a lot and I always approach it as a sort of aperitif because it's generally fresh and sappy.'

The scores

67 wines tasted

0

Outstanding

16

Highly recommended

49

Recommended

2

Fair

0

Poor

0

Faulty

The tasters' verdicts

Stephen Brook



Brook has been a contributing editor to Decanter since 1996 and is Regional co-Chair for Bordeaux at the Decanter World Wine Awards. An awarded author of more than 30 books, his works include Complete Bordeaux, the definitive study of the region and in its second edition. Brook also fully revised the last two editions of Hugh Johnson's Wine Companion.

Brook's verdict

'When the Pessac-Léognan appellation was

created in 1987, it essentially detached the northern part of the Graves from the southern. This caused outrage in the southern Graves, but time has justified the move, and this tasting again confirmed it. There are some very good whites in AC Graves, but the most concentrated, complex, structured wines almost invariably come from Pessac-Léognan. Only the best terroirs in the Graves allow wines to be oak-aged, and in general southern Graves whites should be enjoyed for their youthful freshness. Not so Pessac-Léognan, the best of which do develop more complexity with age.

'If the Graves is about immediate pleasure, then for me its Sauvignon-based wines offered more satisfaction. In 2012 acidity was an essential component of the wines, and Sauvignon generates more than Semillon. Sauvignon rules in much of Pessac-Léognan, and the best wines showed how exhilarating they can be, especially with some judicious oak-ageing.

'There were some excellent crus classés, as one would expect, but it was interesting to note how many non-classed growths rivalled them in quality and complexity. With the prices of premier cru white Burgundy rising, lovers of complex whites could do worse than explore the recommendations here.'

Andy Howard MW



Howard has more than 30 years' experience as a buyer at Marks & Spencer. Within the wine category he oversaw Bordeaux among other areas. He lives in London but also has a house in Gaillac, where he made wine for six vintages. Howard has recently retired from M&S to focus on consultancy through his business Vinetrades.

Howard's verdict

'As in 2007, 2012 was not a great year for red wines from this region, but dry whites

enjoyed good press at the time of the *en primeur* campaign a year ago. As a result, I had high hopes for this tasting of 2012 Bordeaux.

'The tasting supported the creation of the Pessac-Léognan AC and Graves Cru Classé system as there was a lot of inconsistency in style and quality from the much larger Graves AC to the south. Despite this there were some excellent wines hailing from here which should provide a lot of the style of their more illustrious northern counterparts and very good value for money.

'The area around the villages of Pessac and Léognan undoubtedly saw a step up in quality and consistency but left me expecting more complexity. It may be that some of the wines are rather young at the moment, although a number seemed to lack the concentration and structure to age for more than two or three years. Although, sadly, four of the 10 crus classés were not submitted, the six that were provided some benchmark examples, with lovely oak integration to match the vibrant acidity and powerful aromas.

'When it is good, white Bordeaux provides a great alternative to Burgundy, particularly in price, and there were many Highly Recommended wines that displayed these qualities.'

Brook was pleasantly surprised by the oak use in the AC Graves samples. 'The oaked Sauvignons were slightly more interesting than the oaked Semillons, which is interesting – because of their high acidity, it's a bit trickier to oak Sauvignon.' Conversely, he found quite a few over-oaked Sauvignons among the Pessacs: 'Some wines had distinct oaky aromas which I didn't like at all.'

Spurrier was less enthused by the oak on the basic Graves whites. 'It certainly added something to the wine but it wasn't anything that was really necessary.' He added: 'I'm not about to say that all châteaux in Graves should stop using oak in their whites, but there's a freshness and a 'Graves-ness' about these wines that I appreciate which does not need oak.' As for Pessac, less is again more according to Spurrier. 'If I had a white wine vineyard in Pessac, I wouldn't ferment in oak. The quality of the fruit is so good that it's almost better preserved as fresh fruit and perhaps spending a few months in oak after that.'

Our judges felt this tasting has something for everyone and every budget, from straightforward aperitif wines to more food-friendly styles. As Howard noted: 'Consumers need to look at our average scores, decide on the style they want and pick a producer. White Bordeaux is still a much-underrated style. When it's done well it can be really fantastic – and it ages well too, with the best cellaring well for a decade or more.'

Entry criteria: producers and UK importers were invited to submit their Graves AC, Pessac-Léognan AC and Graves crus classés white wines from 2012

The crus classés of châteaux Haut-Brion, La Mission Haut-Brion, La Tour-Martillac and Domaine de Chevalier did not submit samples

Highly Recommended

17–18.25pts (90–94pts)



Château Couhins-Lurton, Graves Cru Classé

Decanter average score: 17.75/20pts (92/100pts)

Individual judges' scores: Stephen Brook 18
Andy Howard MW 17.75 Steven Spurrier 17.5

£31.49 Bibendum

Elegant nose of white flowers, ripe apricot and a hint of jasmine. Good ripeness on the palate, which has a spicy edge. Fine, piercing acidity supports and cuts the ripe fruit and gives excellent length. **Drink** 2014–2025 **Alcohol** 13.5%



Château Carbonnieux, Graves CC

17.5 (91) SB 18.25 AH 16.75 SS 17.5

£18 Berry Bros & Rudd, Millésima, Top Selection

Ripe lime and pear nose with discreet oak and hints of iris. Concentrated and balanced, with considerable complexity and admirable length. **Drink** 2015–2025 **Alc** 13.5%



Château Malartic-Lagravière, Graves CC

17.5 (91) SB 16.5 AH 17.25 SS 18.5

£18.50–£24 Albany Vintners, Nebuchadnezzar

Wines, Top Selection
Muted apple and lime nose. A beautifully poised wine with excellent concentration and layers of fruit that combine with high-quality oak, giving a long, lingering finish. **Drink** 2015–2020 **Alc** 13.5%



Château Bouscail, Graves CC

17.25 (90+) SB 17 AH 17.5 SS 17

£25.70 Fine & Rare

Lovely ripe fruit flavours combine with toasty, fine-quality oak. Quite rich with great concentration and a long, lingering aftertaste, which emphasises the quality. **Drink** 2015–2025 **Alc** 13.5% ➤

Steven Spurrier



Spurrier is Decanter's consultant editor and Chairman of the Decanter World Wine Awards and Decanter Asia Wine Awards. He has written several wine books and created the Christie's Wine Course with then senior wine director Michael Broadbent. He is president of the Circle of Wine Writers, founder of The Wine Society of India and makes Bride Valley Brut from his vines in Dorset.

Spurrier's verdict

'White Graves, including the Crus Classés de Graves since 1987 under the appellation of Pessac-Léognan, is one of my favourite styles of wine.

'While Bordeaux Blanc and Entre-deux-Mers are fresh, fruity and good for everyday, the southern Graves have more character and lots of charm, while the grander wines to the north have more precision, depth of fruit and complexity. It's a region that does well in difficult vintages, as the grapes can be picked early and a bit of greenness can be refreshing. Indeed, the freshness that I like so much can be lacking in warm vintages like 2009, which is why I particularly like the style of these 2012s.

'The southern Graves, in my view, do not need much (if any) oak, as this dominates the fruit and also ups the price. The crus classés are both vinified and aged in oak, but not in an exaggerated manner, and the extra structure allied to natural fruit acidity will keep them improving for a decade or more. Although I have given quite a narrow drinking window on the 2012s, the Graves wines will do well over the next couple of years, with another three or four for the Pessac-Léognans. However, they are also very good young – and unbeatable with local Archachon oysters.'

Recommended 15–16.75pts (83–89pts)

Wine	Score	SB	AH	SS	Tasting note	Alc	Drink	Price	Stockists
Vieux Château Gaubert, Graves	15.75 (85+)	15.75	16	15.75	Smoky, struck-match aromas are joined on the palate by notes of mango and pear. An inviting wine – rich, suave and assertive with a lingering finish.	13%	2014-2018	£16	Bennetts
Château de Malle, M de Malle, Graves	15.5 (85)	14.5	16.25	15.5	Bundles of juicy lemon and lime on the nose. Rounded and weighty with refreshing acidity and ripe fruit. Should develop well over a year or two.	13%	2014-2016	N/A UK	www.chateau-de-malle.fr
Château de Rouillac, Pessac-Léognan	15.5 (85)	14	16.25	16	The nose discreetly shows off the use of oak and displays hints of lime. A stylish and lean wine with zippy acidity, it's elegant and has good length.	13%	2015-2019	N/A UK	www.chateauderouillac.com
Château Doms, Graves	15.5 (85)	15.5	16.5	14.5	Aromas of apple compote and melon softly delight the nose. Lush and rounded, showing good complexity on the palate – it will develop.	12.5%	2014-2016	N/A UK	www.chateau-doms.fr
Château Haut Lagrange, Pessac-Léognan	15.5 (85)	15.5	15.5	15.75	Bright citrus fruits and white flowers give a fresh, attack on the nose. The palate has a kick of vibrant acidity and good crisp fruit. Early drinking.	12%	2014-2017	£21	Vine Trail
Château Lagrange, Cuvée Prestige, Graves	15.5 (85)	15	15.75	16	Aromas of melon and summer fruits, as well as strong evidence of the oak. Fleshy stone fruits come through on the palate with a zesty acidity.	12%	2014-2016	N/A UK	www.chateaulagrange-graves.com
Château Langlet, Graves	15.5 (85)	15	15.5	16	Bounds of citrus aromas fill the nose – grapefruit, lemon, lime and a touch of apple too. The palate is fresh with a sleek texture. A well-made wine.	12.5%	2014-2017	£14.25	Berry Bros & Rudd, Top Selection
Château La Rose Sarron, Graves	15.5 (85)	15	15.75	16	Some grassy hints on the nose which marry nicely with the notes of peach and honeydew melon. Fresh and juicy on the palate – ready for drinking.	13%	2014	N/A UK	www.la-rose-sarron.com
Château Trébiac, Graves	15.5 (85)	15	15.75	15.5	Fragrant white flowers on the nose alongside a touch of melon. A broad palate with good depth and nice concentration.	12.5%	2014-2016	£10	Maison Sichel
Château de Cérons, Graves	15.25 (84)	15	15.25	15.75	Aromas of white flowers and a squeeze of lime. Supple and fruity with fleshy summer fruit flavours and a hint of lemon rind on the finish.	12.5%	2014-2016	£15.50	Field Morris & Verdin
Château des Places, Graves	15.25 (84)	15.75	15	15	Subdued nose: clean and fresh but lacking character. Palate is similar – lacks some concentration and is rather lacklustre. Probably picked with high yields.	12.5%	2014-2016	N/A UK	www.vignobles-reynaud.fr
Château Chanteloiseau, Graves	15 (83)	16	15	14	Lively apple fruit punches out from the nose with a hint of mandarin. The palate demonstrates precision and finesse with a tangy acidity.	12%	2014-2017	£10	Borough Wines
Clos Marsalette, Pessac-Léognan	15 (83)	15.5	15.75	14	Luscious apple compote aromas with a touch of honey. A rich, plump and concentrated palate showing ripe, sweet fruit with evolving notes of quince.	12.5%	2014-2017	£17-£20 (2011)	Corkr, Fine & Rare
Domaine de la Chouette, Graves	15 (83)	15.75	14.5	15	Lemony aromas with notes of sweet fruit. Rich and firm in style with good concentration and the acidity balances it well.	13%	2014-2018	N/A UK	www.domainedelachouette.fr

Fair 13-14.75pts (76-82pts)

- Château Chante L'Oiseau, Graves 14.75 (82)
- Château Moutin, Graves 14.75 (82)

For full UK stockist details, see pXXX

Expert summary: Jane Anson

No Outstanding wines, and sadly not all of the crus classés on show, but still a good set of results with Pessac-Léognan taking the lion's share of the highest marks



Jane Anson is the Bordeaux correspondent for *Decanter* and *Decanter.com* and author of *Bordeaux Legends*

ALTHOUGH THIS WAS overall a successful tasting, with 16 Highly Recommended wines, and just two seen as Fair, it is slightly disappointing that none were rated Outstanding.

The results seem to confirm the general, opposing, rule about red and white Bordeaux vintages: of the past three challenging years, 2012 is widely seen as being the most successful for the reds, so perhaps the whites didn't quite creep up to the heights they achieved in 2011 and 2013.

Despite this, there are some excellent wines here, with Pessac-Léognan expectedly showing a stronger set of results than the larger, less well-funded region of Graves. André Lurton (who lobbied for the creation of Pessac-Léognan back in the 1980s) should be particularly pleased with these results, as both his Couhins-Lurton and La Louvière made it into the Highly Recommended category, with his Cruzeau and Rochemorin not too far behind. His is a name to trust in white Bordeaux, even at lower price levels in AC Bordeaux and Entre-deux-Mers.

It's also reassuring to see that all of the Graves crus classés tasted made it into the top tier of results, though it seems a shame that more were not presented, with only six of the 10 classified white properties on display. Perhaps we would have seen an Outstanding from one of the missing four? Classified whites from this region are increasingly able

to stand up against the best whites in France, so it's great to see them doing so consistently well here.

Price-wise, from the top wines, Château Couhins and Château Olivier (for me, a white that rarely fails to deliver) offer some of the best value, while Château Brown proves yet again that it deserves to be considered among the classified names, if the rankings were ever reassessed. Château Cantelys is also excellent value for money, especially when compared to its cru classé stablemate Smith Haut Lafitte which was not submitted.

In the basic AC Graves category, it's worth pointing out Château Pont de Brion, a little-known family-run estate in the southern half of the Graves, near Langon, and the only one of its peers to receive a Highly Recommended. Not surprising, perhaps, when you consider the leaps made in white winemaking over the past decade, but it is striking that it was the northern part of Graves (ie, Pessac-Léognan) that scored all the highs in 2012 according to our experts. **D**

'Graves crus classés are increasingly able to stand up against the best whites in France'

My top three Stephen Brook

■ **Château de France, Pessac-Léognan** For some years Arnaud Thomassin has been making excellent wines, red and white, at this well-located Léognan property. The white sees a fair amount of oak, but it's judiciously handled and never dominates the fruit. It's also a wine that offers excellent value. **17.5/20 (91/100) Drink** 2015-2022

■ **Château Couhins-Lurton, Graves CC** The indefatigable André Lurton probably saved this estate from extinction in the 1960s, as it was in danger of being grubbed up. He has been making first-rate pure Sauvignon wines here ever since. The wonderfully elegant 2012 is no exception. **18 (93) Drink** 2014-2025

■ **Château Brown, Pessac-Léognan** Since 2005, négociant Jean-Christophe Mau has put a huge effort into improving quality at this formerly obscure Léognan estate. It's a wine that usually offers immediate pleasure rather than ageing potential, but is none the worse for that. **17.5 (91) Drink** 2015-2022

My top three Andy Howard MW

■ **Clos Floridene, Graves** An excellent example of why Denis Dubordieu is in such high demand as a consultant, this vibrant Graves is close to Barsac yet here they produce a lovely dry white wine with grassy flavours and aromatics, subtle oak and lively acidity. **17.5/20 (91/100) Drink** 2015-2020

■ **Château Magneau Julien, Graves** Another fine, elegant wine showing that the best wines are not exclusively Graves Cru Classé or Pessac-Léognan. Vibrant and aromatic, this Sauvignon-dominant wine had depth, richness and length, and has the potential to develop well for several years. **17.5 (91) Drink** 2014-2018

■ **Château La Louvière, Pessac-Léognan** A famous name that continues to deliver the goods in the modern age. Of particular note are the subtle but noticeable oak characters, very typical of fine white Bordeaux, which combine beautifully with riper tropical fruits and zesty acidity. A complex, characterful wine. **17.5 (91) Drink** 2015-2022

My top three Steven Spurrier

■ **Château Brondelle, Graves** This Bordeaux white blend had more complexity than most (though not as much as Denis Dubordieu's Clos Floridene, to which I gave 16.75) and struck the perfect balance of white summer fruits and a hint of oak to bring texture and complexity. Great value too: buy a case and drink over three years. **16.5/20 (88/100) Drink** 2014-2017

■ **Château Ferran, Pessac-Léognan** This historic estate whose vines adjoin those of Latour-Martillac has impressed me in recent years with its florality, precision and lifted elegance that shows well young but can age beautifully. The 2012 is a very well-made blend to rival the Graves Crus Classes. **17.5 (91) Drink** 2014-2018

■ **Château Malartic-Lagravière, Graves CC** Belgian Alfred-Alexandre Bonnie and his family have invested with passion since their purchase of Malartic-Lagravière in 1997, and this shows in their wines. This Sauvignon-dominant white is always among the very best in Bordeaux, with great poise and class. **18.5 (95) Drink** 2015-2020

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NB: the tasters' top wines are not necessarily their top-scoring, rather those which, on learning the wines' identity, they feel are the most notable given their provenance, price or other factors