



SAUTERNES 2011: Cold-Shouldered But Warmhearted

by Neal Martin

Friday morning and the picture-postcard coastal town of Southwold basks in brittle winter sunshine. Peering down from the first floor window of The Swan, the town square bustles with the townsfolk going about their daily routine. Butchers chalk up the day's specials, kegs of mouth-watering Adnams ale roll and clang into cellars, wispy white-haired pensioners walk dogs down to the pebble beach, at this unseasonal time of year so barren and bewitching, North Sea waves expiring into white foam with plangent monotony. Inside The Swan, a coven of wine experts, including myself, embark upon the final two flights of 2011 Bordeaux, namely the Sauternes. We have spent two days examining some 200 red Bordeaux, all completely blind, a taxing exercise that spawned as much invective as praise. The hope is that we can conclude our annual tasting on a high, and responsibility falls upon these lucid golden wines. Could the 2011 Sauternes, ignominiously cold-shouldered during *en primeur* in virtually every year, deliver us from our indifference to the reds?

The answer is yes.

While the 2011 Sauternes might not be the sumptuous, decadent and intermittently breathtaking affairs of 2009, these proved to be surprisingly consistent now that they are in bottle. Split into two flights, usually the "lesser" growths can leave a lot to be desired. Not this time. Both flights of Sauternes 2011 were studded with what you might call "rotten delights." As one sage attendee commented, there was not really a bad wine among them.

This was not news to me. I remember how much I enjoyed these wines during *en primeur* back in March 2012. The 2011 season might have been a comedown for the reds after back-to-back successes in 2009 and 2010, but the weather played into the hands of the Sauternes.

For meteorological minutiae, readers should refer to my original barrel tasting report in April 2012. To adumbrate, 2011 saw an early budding, minor hail damage in April on the southern flank of Sauternes and then a dry early summer, so much so that not a raindrop fell at Château Climens between June 14 and July 10. That all changed in August when rainclouds opened and sporadic outbreaks of rot had to be eliminated. A couple of storms in late August/early September caused widespread botrytis, grapes reaching the *rôti* stage in Barsac around a week earlier than in the rest of Sauternes. Further rain around September 17 and 18 was all that was needed to push the *pourriture noble* forward so that unusually, most properties could "blanket harvest" the affected bunches in less piecemeal fashion, without so much painstaking back and forth passages through vines. As a consequence, by the end of September the harvest was more or less completed, with just a few *tries* through the vineyard in early October.

As I wrote in my original report, the wines tended to have high residual sugar levels that had to be counterbalanced with acidity. This meant that some properties elected to blend some of the non-botrytized grapes picked in early September to ensure pH levels were sufficiently low, including Château Yquem. Two years ago, I suggested that the best wines could come from Barsac, whose limestone soils provided better drainage and could therefore cope with the intermittent showers better than those on clay soils. So this blind tasting was a perfect opportunity to see if that was evident in the bottled wines.

Tasting Sauternes is never easy. The catnip of sweetness seduces many and consequently objectivity goes out the window. Appraising Sauternes blind requires all of your sensory faculties working overtime, divining the good from the great when all of them are tickling you under the chin so that you fall for their charms. The bottom line is that as perniciously as I could

Therein lies the problem. I am writing this report for the February issue of *The Wine Advocate* and that will be followed by my barrel report of 2014s in April (I cannot think of another wine publication that offers such dedicated coverage!) So here I am recommending readers to go out and buy 2011 Sauternes that are immediately available, when in all probability I will do likewise for the 2014s. In an ideal world, consumers would recognize that buying both is probably cheaper than a case of a Grand Cru Classé in Pauillac or Saint Julien. The reality is that even the most ardent Sauternes-lovers simply don't drink enough to warrant such profligate spending. Perhaps the day when Sauternes will be a region of dry whites that moonlight with

be, jumping on any perceived fault or weakness, it is clear that 2011 is a more consistent vintage than their 2010 counterparts. However, I would caution that there is nothing that reaches for the stars as in 2009. Few save for one or two achieved above and beyond what you would expect, so very little achieved a score over 95-points.

As I wrote in my original report, and then in last April's vertical, 2011 Château Yquem is an excellent Sauternes however, it is not in the same class as the astonishing 2009, even if it does have the upper hand over the 2010. I confess that in previous years I managed to pick out Château Yquem blind. But amongst these 2011s I was unable to pluck it out from the others and not for that matter did anyone else. It's a very fine Sauternes. But without wishing to blaspheme, I would question whether it is the very best contribution to the vintage (even if that can always change with bottle age, which is really where Yquem excels.)

Did Barsac confirm its upper hand in 2011? Well, readers should look out for excellent contributions from the likes of Château Doisy-Daëne and Château Climens, but if I had to pick one wine it would be Château Doisy-Védrières, which achieved one of my top scores (incidentally, a view shared by the rest of the group.) Whereas often this Barsac has a richness and unctuousness that occasionally denudes Olivier Castéja's wine of elegance and precision found elsewhere, the 2011 seems to have successfully incorporated these virtues without compromising its generosity and decadence that we all know and love. Load up on this lovely wine and drink and/or squirrel away as you like.

In Sauternes: bravo to a fabulous Château Rieussec. It is infuriating to see how this wine is so often incorrectly priced upon release and purchased merely to secure allocations of Lafite-Rothschild, then ignominiously off-loaded by merchants at a lower price than the *prix de sorti*. Rieussec is too damn good to be treated in such a way. It should be sold to those that support, appreciate and buy Sauternes at the correct price, not abased as an inconvenient burden in order to secure a First Growth. Those that purchased Rieussec '11 at fire-sale prices a couple of years ago have an absolute bargain and a fantastic Sauternes on their hands, dare I say one every equal of Lafite-Rothschild. Those that followed my advice and purchased Château Rabaud-Promis will not be disappointed, nor those who snapped up the ascendant Château Rayne-Vigneau. There were a couple wines, however, that I might have expected more from. Château Suduiraut is very fine, but on this occasion did not stand out from the others, while Château de Fargues did not fire on all cylinders.

Of course, Sauternes continues to offer outstanding value, the tragedy being that this remains a Bordeaux region in danger of stagnating as it contends with a downward spiral of subdued demand, low prices and lack of investment. Remember, this report represents *la crème de la crème* of Sauternes. Drive around its empty lanes and you will see countless unfamiliar names languishing in obscurity, forlorn vineyards in urgent need of TLC, clinging on for survival and often discretely up for sale. Several have suggested that Sauternes must change to survive, perhaps through more dry white wines and, in a similar strategy outlined by Silvio Denz of Château Lafaurie-Peyraguey, whittling the sweet wine down to the most propitious parcels, essentially as a limited-production boutique cuvée. Sauternes' identity might suffer, but at least then the running of the vineyard and estates might be economically viable in the long-term. Over the last 15 years Sauternes has enjoyed an unprecedented run of benevolent vintages. What if that came to sudden end? At least that is not the case given the glowing reports coming from Sauternes about 2014.

botrytis-affected cuvées is inevitable. If that is true then it is not the impassioned, dedicated growers in Sauternes that will be to blame. It will be the indifference of consumers.

Looking down upon the town square, busying up for the day, I wonder how many of those people have experienced or can comprehend the sensory joys of Sauternes. Does it matter if none of them ever taste a Doisy-Daëne, a Coutet or Climens just once in their lives?

The answer is "no"...until the moment that they are given the chance to taste one.

All of the following wines were tasted blind at the 2011 Sauternes horizontal tasting.

D'ARCHE	2011 SAUTERNES	WHITE	90
<p>The Château d'Arche 2011 does not quite match my expectations from barrel, though it remains a commendable contribution to the vintage. It has a waxy bouquet with dried peach and dried mango intermingling with spice and orange blossom scents. The palate is well balanced with crisp acidity and a decent level of botrytis.</p>		<p>However, the second half appears to wind down in terms of complexity and compared to its peers, it feels rather one-dimensional and missing a sense of personality. Not a bad Sauternes however, there is better out there. Anticipated maturity: 2015-2036.</p>	
BROUSTET	2011 BARSAC	WHITE	89
<p>The Château Broustet 2011 puts in a good show for the vintage. It has a very pure and lifted bouquet with light honey, orange peel, lanolin and yellow flowers that gain intensity with time. The palate is medium-bodied with a fine line of acidity, viscous in texture, very pure</p>		<p>and elegant with an almost nonchalant finish that feels long, even if it does not quite possess the complexity of its peers. Enjoy this in the short to medium-term. Anticipated maturity: 2015-2032.</p>	
CLIMENS	2011 BARSAC	WHITE	94+
CYPRES DE CLIMENS	2011 BARSAC	WHITE	91
<p>The Château Climens 2011 has one of the most potent aromatics of the flight with expressive honey, fig, barley sugar and grilled almond nose that is reminiscent of Château Doisy-Védrières. The palate is very well balanced with fine acidity, layers of honey fruit tinged with white chocolate and quince. It fans out toward the unctuous finish that feels long, persistent and satisfying. Climens often takes a few years to show its true class and this will be no different. Anticipated maturity: 2023-2050.</p>		<p>The Cypres de Climens 2011, the second wine from Château Climens, is a huge success for Bérénice Lurton and her team. It has a rich bouquet with scents of brioche, honeycomb and marzipan that is well-defined and powerful. The palate is well balanced right from the start, the keen line of acidity cutting through the viscous fruit with a caressing pineapple and lemon curd finish that is very seductive. What a beautiful Sauternes and of course, tasted blind. I had no idea this was a second label! Anticipated maturity: 2015-2028.</p>	
CLOS HAUT PEYRAGUEY	2011 SAUTERNES	WHITE	89?
<p>The Château Clos Haut Peyraguey 2011 was the one slight disappointment. Like the superior Rabaud-Promis it sports a Germanic bouquet, hints of kerosene infusing the honeyed fruit, perhaps with time erring towards an Alsatian Vendange Tardive. The palate is medium-bodied with a viscous entry and finally returning to what you might call a typical Sauternes. It is certainly well balanced,</p>		<p>even if the oak still needs a year or two to be fully subsumed. Yet there is a sense of conservatism, refusing to offer more complexity or depth on the finish that prefers to play it safe. Commercially savvy Sauternes? Most certainly, but not one that sets the pulse racing. I would like to revisit this with another couple of years in bottle. Anticipated maturity: 2016-2035.</p>	
COUTET	2011 BARSAC	WHITE	93
<p>The Château Coutet 2011 has a distinctive but attractive bouquet: clear honey, rosewater, peach and just a touch of barley sugar that pins it down to Barsac. The palate is medium-bodied and viscous in texture. There is more harmony here than the nose, nicely understated with quince and barley sugar, dovetailing into an elegant finish. I would prefer just a touch more weight and persistence but</p>		<p>otherwise this is a fine Sauternes even if it does not quite meet my expectations from barrel, primarily since it is just missing Coutet's usual razor-sharp acidity that imparts such electricity into its finest vintages. Nevertheless, this will provide much pleasure over the next two or three decades. Anticipated maturity: 2017-2045.</p>	
DOISY DAENE	2011 BARSAC	WHITE	95
<p>The Château Doisy-Daëne 2011 builds upon its outstanding performance from barrel. It has a powerful bouquet with seductive scents of wild honey, yellow flowers and orange blossom that are well defined, perhaps a little more extravagant than Denis Dubourdieu's</p>		<p>wines of yore. The palate is mellifluous on the entry with well-judged acidity, sensual and harmonious, poised on the entry and then fanning out gloriously with Clementine and honeyed notes that shimmer. This is an irresistible Barsac. Anticipated maturity: 2015-2045.</p>	
DOISY-VEDRINES	2011 BARSAC	WHITE	95
<p>The Château Doisy-Védrières 2011 has a very fragrant, almost floral bouquet with pure honey, quince and yellow flower scents that soar from the glass and embrace you like your favorite aunt. The palate is medium-bodied with a viscous texture and superb acidity that really set this</p>		<p>Sauternes alight: real tension and a sense of energy here. It just "flows" toward a vibrant, honeyed finish that has only just begun to "motor." This surpasses its showing from barrel and constitutes a magnificent effort from Olivier Castéja and his team. Anticipated maturity: 2015-2045.</p>	
FILHOT	2011 SAUTERNES	WHITE	88
<p>The Château Filhot 2011 is a commendable effort from a property that frustratingly tends to underperform. There is a strong petrol aroma on the nose of this Sauternes, detracting from its <i>typicité</i> even though there is fine delineation. The palate is crisp and fresh with an</p>		<p>energetic entry, a keen line of acidity and a very pure, almost Auslese-like finish that has a long, spicy finish that is just missing a little harmony and purity, and dried out slightly with time in the glass. Anticipated maturity: 2015-2030.</p>	
GUIRAUD	2011 SAUTERNES	WHITE	92
<p>After Yquem and Doisy-Védrières, the Château Guiraud 2011 seems a little muted on the nose, but that is not fair because it is well defined and very focused, gradually unfurling to reveal scents of honey, orange blossom and quince. The palate is well balanced with a fine line of acidity. This is a more understated Sauternes, harmonious and</p>		<p>nonchalant in style, but don't be fooled because there is great tension, delineation and poise on the finish, the fruit seamlessly bound with the new oak. This appears to have gained elegance and complexity in bottle, ergo my higher score. Anticipated maturity: 2016-2040.</p>	
LAMOTHE-GUIGNARD	2011 SAUTERNES	WHITE	88
<p>The 2011 Domaine de l'Alliance is missing some presence on the nose compared to its peers: light undergrowth scents permeating the honeyed fruit, yet it never quite gets out of second gear. The palate is medium-bodied with orange peel and mandarin on the entry. There is</p>		<p>a good level of botrytis here although it tapers slightly during the second half and does not quite deliver the density of others. Yes, it is a conservative Domaine de l'Alliance and yet it is redeemed by its purity and restrained elegance. Anticipated maturity: 2015-2030.</p>	

CHATEAU DE MALLE	2011 SAUTERNES	WHITE	92
Of all the 2011 Sauternes tasted blind, the Château de Malle 2011 is the most taciturn on the nose, the aromatics refusing to come out and play. The palate is well balanced with crisp acidity, tensile in the mouth with vibrant citrus fruit neatly counterbalancing the rich, honeyed		texture. This is linear and focused, taut in the mouth, a Sauternes determined to be in there for the long-haul and not give too much away in its youth. Cellar this and you will be rewarded. Anticipated maturity: 2023-2042.	
MYRAT	2011 SAUTERNES	WHITE	92
Blessed with a refulgent golden color, the Château de Myrat 2011 has a more complex bouquet than its peers with clear honey, mandarin and light petrol notes, the delineation just lost a little in the haze of alcohol, yet still attractive. The palate is medium-bodied with		pineapple and peach on the entry, well-judged acidity and a generous, viscous second half that demonstrates plenty of botrytized fruit in the vineyard. This is a bold Sauternes that goes out of its way to please. Anticipated maturity: 2015-2036.	
NAIRAC	2011 BARSAC	WHITE	90
Refulgent in color, the nose on the Château Nairac 2011 offers straightforward dried honey and quince notes, but it seems to lack a little energy compared to the bottle served at the property last year. The palate is viscous on the entry with a fine line of acidity, touches of honeycomb and		peach infusing the honeyed fruit, the viscous finish compensating for the lack of aromatic charm. Fortunately, with time in the glass, this Nairac does appear to coalesce and gain weight, yet the nose never meliorates sufficiently to match the palate. Anticipated maturity: 2015-2035.	
RAYNE-VIGNEAU	2011 SAUTERNES	WHITE	94
The Château Rayne-Vigneau 2011 has a more resinous bouquet than the 2011 Rieussec: hints of lanolin and smoked walnut infusing the honeyed fruit and lending complexity and personality. The palate is fresh on the entry with crisp acidity. There is fine tension here,		neatly counterbalancing the strong botrytized fruit and it fans out wonderfully on the finish. It needs more bottle age to develop personality, but from this foundation it is set to become a Sauternes from the top drawer. Anticipated maturity: 2019-2045.	
RIEUSSEC	2011 SAUTERNES	WHITE	95
The Château Rieussec 2011 transcends its somewhat "middling" performance from barrel and delivers a knockout wine in bottle. For sure, it demonstrates a lot of vanilla from the new oak on the nose, complemented by almond, French <i>patisserie</i> and touches of white peach. The <i>élevage</i> is more expressive than the <i>terroir</i> at the moment, although there is clearly a lot of fruit underneath. The palate		is very well balanced, with thickly textured honeyed fruits that lacquer the inside of the mouth and stay there. This is extremely well balanced but very young and primal, yet the crescendo of flavors is very impressive. Tasted blind, I hazarded a guess that this might be Yquem '11. Enough said. Anticipated maturity: 2017-2045.	
SIGALAS RABAUD	2011 SAUTERNES	WHITE	91
The Château Sigalas-Rabaud 2011 has a Semillon-driven bouquet with honey, beeswax, honeysuckle and white peach scents all focused and gaining in intensity in the glass. The palate is viscous on the entry, the honeyed fruits neatly offset by the acidity. It does not		quite build upon its initial promise however, opting to play it safe on the finish. It is undoubtedly an attractive Sauternes but I suspect that affording it several year's cellaring will pay dividends. Anticipated maturity: 2015-2036.	
DE SUDUIRAUT	2011 SAUTERNES	WHITE	93
The Château Suduiraut 2011 has a muffled nose at first: dried honey and quince, wet wool and marzipan scents that gradually open up with aeration. Coming back after 10 minutes there is a heartwarming gingerbread note. The palate is viscous on the entry and full of tension.		There is a keen line of acidity here, quite linear at first, but it fans out nicely toward the finish and offers notes of honey, mandarin and even a touch of rhubarb! This is a class act, a Sauternes that does not need to shout about its inherent qualities. Anticipated maturity: 2015-2045.	
LA TOUR BLANCHE	2011 SAUTERNES	WHITE	92
The Château La Tour Blanche 2011 has a more reticent bouquet compared to its peers: traces of wild honey, Clementine, hints of petrol and tree sap coming through reluctantly with aeration but never attaining what you might call "full power," possibly due to hail damage during the growing season. The palate is medium-bodied, a little		understated like the nose, with well-judged acidity and a tightly wound finish adorned with dried honey, mandarin and a touch of barley-sugar. The aftertaste is quite long, suggesting that it will contentedly repay 4-5 more years in the cellar. Anticipated maturity: 2017-2045.	
CHATEAU D'YQUEM	2011 SAUTERNES	WHITE	94
The Château Yquem 2011 has a complex bouquet, one that is very well defined with hints of petrol infusing the rich honeyed fruit, later melted wax and fresh peach coming through. The palate is well balanced with a strong viscous entry. There is plenty of residual sugar here and I would have preferred a little more acidic bite to		offset that rich, decadent finish (this is despite their correct policy of blending non-botrytized berries in order to increase acidity.) Powerful, burly even, I would give this several years in the cellar to allow this Yquem to mellow and enter its stride. Anticipated maturity: 2020-2060.	