

## British wine buffs rediscover taste for claret

By John Lichfield

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Britain is rediscovering its 800 years old taste for Bordeaux wines. After a collapse in sales to the UK five years ago, exports of medium and higher quality red Bordeaux, or claret, are booming – defying the economic crisis which haunts other parts of the French wine industry.

Sales of Médoc and Haut Médoc appellation wines – long a British favourite – have more than doubled in quantity in the 12 months to the end of June. Sales of the higher price "village" appellation wines from the same areas have increased by 28 per cent. Overall exports of Bordeaux to Britain, red and white, have increased by 13 per cent in volume in the year to July and by 52 per cent by value – despite a sharp fall in overall wine exports from France to the UK.

What explains the sudden shift in British tastes? Are UK wine-lovers abandoning their flirtation with "New World" and Spanish and Italian wines and returning to their first love, Bordeaux (a taste established when south-west France was English-ruled in the Middle Ages)? Yes and no. The boom reflects a wider recovery in the fortunes of even the cheapest forms of Bordeaux, which were in deep crisis until a year ago. But exports of medium and higher quality red Bordeaux to Britain, and the US, have exploded in the last year largely because of the near-mythical reputation achieved by 2005 claret, regarded as one of the finest years in living memory.

The cheaper forms of red Bordeaux – and all white Bordeaux – have not benefited to the same extent. They have suffered, like many other French wines, from the collapse of sterling and the dollar against the euro. Total exports of cheap and middle-range French wines have tumbled by 15 per cent this year. It is noticeable, however, that other growing regions – such as Languedoc and Côtes du Rhône – have suffered far more than Bordeaux or Burgundy.

"The figures are very encouraging," said Jean-Philippe Code, chief economist of the CIVB, the main trade body for Bordeaux wines. "Britain is one of our most important markets."

Sales of middle-range Bordeaux wines – those which retail in Britain at between £6 and £10 a bottle, and especially those from the Medoc – were "quite exceptional", up 118 per cent. While cheaper Bordeaux did far less well, partly because of the high value of the euro, the highest-quality Médoc, which carries individual village names and sells at £10 to £25 a bottle, also jumped 28 per cent.

M. Code says the boom can be explained in large part by the "2005 effect". That year's Bordeaux vintage, both red and white, but especially the red, is regarded as the finest for many decades. Though it can be kept, middle-range 2005 Bordeaux is now drinkable and has been appearing – and rapidly disappearing – in wine shops and supermarkets in the UK in the past 12 months. The 2006 Bordeaux vintage is also thought to be very good, but 2007 is considered mediocre.

"It is clear that the French, or some of the French, are beginning to get their act together," said Richard Halstead, operations director for the British marketing company, Wine Intelligence.

"The British love affair with French wine has never really ended. There is a large, educated public in Britain for



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*Sales of claret have soared largely because of the exceptional quality of the 2005 harvest*

French wines at a good price, especially wines that will keep and prove to be a good investment."

And what of the 2008 Bordeaux vintage? It has been a very mixed summer. The vendange (grape picking) for white wines began last week. The vendange for red wines is due to start in early October – two weeks behind the average start date of recent years but back to what was "normal" 20 years ago.

"All is in the lap of the gods," said André de la Bretesche, director of the association of producers of generic Bordeaux and Bordeaux Superieur.

"The next two weeks are crucial. If we continue to have fine weather, the 2008 red vintage could be marvellous."

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