

# A VINTAGE TO VENERATE

*After tasting more than 1,300 bottles of the 2016 Bordeaux vintage, Hong Kong-based and world-renowned wine critic JAMES SUCKLING says it's one of the best of this era*

PORTRAIT **CHRISTIAAN HART**

**S**ome winemakers in Bordeaux are calling the 2016 vintage part of “the second coming of Bordeaux”. Combined with the superb 2015 vintage, they could be right.

I tasted more than 1,300 wines from 2016 a few weeks ago in Bordeaux, and spoke to at least 40 winemakers in the region. The freshness and structure of the reds and whites produced that year, as well as their purity and transparency, was impressive. They have a classicism that reminds me of the great wines of the 1980s, but much more precision and clarity.

Mathieu Chardonnier, head of the *négociant* house of CVBG, which also owns a number of top Bordeaux wine estates and sells millions of cases of Bordeaux each year, is one expert who talks of the so-called second coming.

“It takes confidence to do less to get more in your winemaking and to believe in what you do,” he says. “But that’s what many of us are doing in Bordeaux now. We made great wines in Bordeaux in 2015 and 2016. They’re some of the best ever.”

I rated eight wines with perfect scores in 2016 and 14 in 2015. I think 2015 made more truly great wines than 2016, but the latter is very close and slightly more homogeneous in quality. This means you can buy just about anything bottled in Bordeaux in the 2016 vintage, from the simplest Bordeaux to the grandest of classified growths or trophy wines from the Right Bank, and be assured you’re getting a top-quality wine.





THIS PAGE: TASTING AT CHÂTEAU PAVIE IN SAINT-ÉMILION  
OPPOSITE: GRAPES READY FOR HARVESTING



“We didn’t know that 2016 was a great year when we made it, but it is!”

– Baptiste Guinaudeau of Château Lafleur in Pomerol

We gave 149 wines 95 points or more from 2015, while 2016 had 100 wines at the same level, and 927 wines scored 90 points or more from 2016, compared to 864 from 2015. We reviewed 1,256 wines in the 2015 vintage and 1,342 in 2016.

My 100-point rated wines from the 2016 vintage include Cos d’Estournel, Haut-Brion, Lafite Rothschild, Le Pin, Léoville Las Cases, Mouton Rothschild, Pavie and Pétrus. All these properties produced evocative and emotional wines, which show a beauty and structure that reminds me of some of the best wines of my 38-year career as a wine critic. (Only Le Pin, Pavie and Pétrus garnered 100 points in both 2015 and 2016.)

“The 2016 Pétrus is exactly the same number – alcohol, pH, tannin – as 2015; so you can’t tell what a wine is just from the numbers,” says Olivier Berrouet, winemaker at Château Pétrus. “But the 2016 is different. We had more freshness in 2016. It’s a difference in Merlot. It’s another face of Pétrus. I like to compare 2016 to the 1971 and the 2015 to the 1970.”

I’ve been lucky enough to drink a number of bottles of both the 1971

and 1970 Pétrus (albeit a long time ago) and they’re superbly balanced and beautiful bottles. It’s hard to say which is better, with the 1970 showing more richness and the 1971 more energy. Most winemakers use more recent comparisons such as 2010 and 2009. About half of those I spoke to said that 2016 was like 2010 and half like 2009.

What is clear is that the 2016 bottles have about 1 percent less alcohol than the 2015s and slightly more acidity. This gives the 2016 reds a slightly less ripe and more tannic mouthfeel than the 2015s. It suggests the 2016s will age slightly better than the 2015s, but I don’t think it matters much, as both vintages have a long life ahead.

“The 2016 is a history of blood and sweat,” says Baptiste Guinaudeau, winemaker at Pomerol’s Château Lafleur. “We weren’t sure how it would be at the beginning. We came out of 2015 and the growing season started cold and wet. We had so much trouble in the vineyard and so much work. And from June to September it was so dry and hot. We honestly couldn’t understand how it came together. We didn’t know that 2016 was a great year when we made it, but it is!”

2016 is a top vintage and, I think, more of a Cabernet Sauvignon vintage. The northern Médoc made the best wines, including those in

the appellations of Saint-Estèphe, Pauillac and St Julien. However, some superb wines were also made in all the key appellations, regardless of whether they were Left or Right Bank.

When it comes to whether 2016 or 2015 was a better year, I can confirm that the 2016 is one of the best vintages since 2010. I would rate it ahead of 2000 and 2003, as well as every vintage in the 1990s except 1990 itself. The only modern vintages that rate better are 2005, 2009, 2010 and 2015 – the latter only by a hair.

Others may disagree, including at least half of the 40 or so vintners we spoke to. Some of this may be because the 2016 is the most recent vintage on the market. They want to sell it. But I understand the debate. Similar debates still go on regarding the 1989 and 1990, 1995 and 1996, and 2009

and 2010. Prices don’t seem to be much of a factor as wine merchants in Bordeaux say that 2015 and 2016 wines are about the same price now, even though 2015 was significantly less expensive at the beginning.

To conclude, I want to buy a number of wines in 2016 just like I did in 2015. And I recommend you do the same if you love excellent Bordeaux. These two vintages produced wines that are incomparable to other reds made in the world. And the wonderful balance, intensity and clarity of the wines are so, so Bordeaux today. **EW**

Visit [prestigeonline.com](http://prestigeonline.com) for all 10 Best of the Best Bordeaux 2016. And for a complete list of the nearly 2,500 Bordeaux from 2016 Suckling and his team have tasted, see [JamesSuckling.com](http://JamesSuckling.com)

## BEST OF THE BEST

JAMES SUCKLING DESCRIBES SOME OF HIS FAVOURITE BOTTLES OF 2016



**CHÂTEAU COS-D’ESTOURNEL SAINT-ESTÈPHE 2016**  
SCORE: 100

This is muscular yet so well defined and toned. Full-bodied with deep and dense fruit on the palate, yet powerful and rich at the same time. So much sandalwood and blackberry character. Chewy and rich at the finish. This is a warm and generous wine, but the alcohol is just over 13 percent, not that high. Love the finish. Extravagant. Magical. Try from 2025.



**CHÂTEAU LAFITE ROTHSCHILD PAUILLAC 2016**  
SCORE: 100

Incredible aromas of crushed berries, sweet tobacco and wet earth. So perfumed and gorgeous. Hot stones and cement, too. Full-bodied, dense and powerful with lots of intense tannins and a never-ending finish. Juicy and flavourful. A muscular Lafite, not seen for a long time. Class! Try after 2025.



**CHÂTEAU HAUT-BRION PESSAC-LÉOGNAN 2016**  
SCORE: 100

Stunning black fruit with plenty of forest berries in there, the whole picture cool and very delicate, also on the concentrated and highly structured palate. The tannins are very fine-grained, but decisively austere and, together with the vibrant acidity, they propel the finish out towards infinity and leave a breathtaking final impression. A blend of 56 percent Merlot, 37.5 percent Cabernet Sauvignon and 6.5 percent Cabernet Franc. Very long ageing potential, but you could try it in 2023.



**CHÂTEAU LE PIN POMEROL 2016**  
SCORE: 100

I’m spellbound by the aromas of crushed blackberries, liquorice, black tea and violets. It’s full-bodied yet so intense and linear. Powerful tannins with superb polish and focus give an amazing texture. Complex and fascinating flavours of hazelnuts and dark fruit. The balance and strength is uncanny. Perfect wine. Very direct and superb. Try after 2025.



**CHÂTEAU LÉOVILLE LAS CASES SAINT-JULIEN 2016**  
SCORE: 100

Very complex and alluringly spicy aromas that bubble in and out of the nose, together with fresh tobacco, raspberries and iodine, moving into blackcurrants, blackberries and a gently gravelly, stony edge. The palate has incredible polish that’s a foil for the intense power and concentration of this wine. The texture is flawless, building smoothly with fine-grained and focused tannins that sustain a long, fresh finish. The new 1986, which was a legend. This is probably better. A blend of 75 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, 14 percent Merlot and 11 percent Cabernet franc. Try from 2024.



**CHÂTEAU MOUTON ROTHSCHILD PAUILLAC 2016**  
SCORE: 100

Dark ruby-purple colour. Aromas of blackcurrants, black truffle, crushed stone, liquorice and hints of tar. Full-bodied, deep and vertical on the palate, drawing you in and down. The structure is very tannic and powerful, yet the tannins are folded into the wine. One of the most powerful Moutons ever for me. Try after 2027.