Yes, and now we have the 2023 Bordeaux Vintage Report, which we are doing quickly as we are trying to release it before June 1st. Why, you ask? Because this year the properties are releasing their prices much sooner than normal, and we expect the campaign to finish by early June instead of early July! Why, you ask? Well, there is no need for châteaux to delay their opening prices in 2024. After the much-hyped 2022 vintage that saw such high prices and some customer (and négociant and retailer) resistance, the prices for the fine 2023 vintage had to be at a level of 2019 pricing—in other words, much lower than the 2022s. Rough economic problems in the world are a factor, also.

Back to the K&L contingent that went to Bordeaux in late April—Trey Beffa, Ryan Moses, Tracey Rose, and Morgan Harris. That is right, I did not go to taste the 2023s this year! In fact, this was one of the few years that I have not tasted the new Bordeaux wines. Since my first trip to Bordeaux in April 1985, I have only missed a few years. I did not go in 1988, partly because of the sub-par 1987 vintage being tasted, but mainly because I took our family to France for a summer vacation instead.

Twenty years later, I did not go in 2008 to taste the 2007 wines because I was protesting the too-high prices for the 2006 vintage! Likewise, I did not go in 2013 (I sent Ralph alone) to taste the 2012 vintage because I was protesting the too-high prices for 2011 vintage. I do not think my protests resulted in any price reductions for the 2007 or 2012 wines, though they were a bit cheaper than their predecessors. So, I did not go this year because I was protesting the too-high prices for the 2022s! And maybe that has paid off...

As I write this on May 10, quite a few properties have released their prices. Already, First Growths Lafite-Rothschild and Mouton-Rothschild have opened their prices—at MUCH lower than their 2022 prices. Two top properties, Léoville-Las-Cases and Pontet-Canet, are out with much better prices than their 2022s, as well. Maybe they have listened to my protesting? I somehow doubt it, but I will take credit for the prices.

The campaign is going strong with big customer interest so far. I hope other properties follow suit with big reductions from their high 2022 prices—and we could have a robust futures campaign. With most Bordeaux properties producing large crops of 2023, there will be plenty of fine wines to go around—Bordeaux will be back in the limelight.

So, I will be short and sweet. I have heard from my team and several others that the vintage 2023 is good to very good—a more classical style of wine. The wine writer scores are very good for the most part.

A short recap on the weather conditions follows here followed by some comments from my very good friend Olivier Bernard from the fabulous Domaine de Chevalier property. I am thinking that this campaign will be superfast so no time for lengthy notes.
Weather Conditions
By Clyde Beffa Jr., Bordeaux Buyer

Winter
November through January saw a good amount of rainfall, which helped replenish the soils with water following the hot dry conditions of the 2022 vintage.

Spring
Mild conditions began in the second half of March, which helped kickstart bud break. Warm weather in the spring led to an early bud break. High mildew pressure from the start of the spring was one of, if not the, biggest challenge of the vintage in the vineyards. Flowering was in mid-May. A heat wave in late May helped to complete the flowering.

Summer
The rains arrived in June, and warm, humid weather continued throughout the month. This increased the risk of mildew. Steps like leaf thinning were taken earlier than usual to allow air flow among clusters and protect the vineyards from disease. Heat waves on Aug 16–24th and Sept 3–10th led to fears of sun damage and sun burning. Pontet-Canet used sunblock on the vines.

Harvest
It was an early harvest at most properties in Bordeaux. Rain showers during harvest on the 21st and 22nd of September. This was a very long harvest. At Château Pedesclaux in Pauillac, for example, harvest took 17 days. Over the past 15 years the average was 11 days.

A “Tropical Vintage”
Notes from Olivier Bernard, owner of Domaine de Chevalier

“To better understand the vintage profile, let’s dive into climatology. After a flowering in exceptional conditions came a ‘tropical’ period with regular rain (fourth-most rainy vintage in 25 years with 959 mm of rainfall) and high temperatures (hottest vintage on average after 2022). It was thus easy for the mildew to spread, but much less than the press claimed so. The lands close by the estuary, in sloped or well-ventilated areas, have been completely spared. The mildew mainly struck the Merlot, which, consequently, is less present in the blends. Pessac and Margaux are the two appellations that have been hurt. The other communal appellations have filled up with great yields that put a smile on winemakers’ faces!

Going back to climate influence, another point to note is the lack of sunshine throughout summer, which enabled the preservation of acidity levels and limited alcoholic degrees. Yet it’s the heatwaves of late August and early September prolonged by an Indian summer that have transformed the vintage, by ripening the grapes and concentrating the aromas.

The harvest happened sequentially and in full serenity. For some estates, this was the longest harvest they’ve ever had. Each grape variety and parcel could be picked fully ripe, in due time. Nowadays winemakers pick up the red grapes at phenolic/aromatic ripeness instead of the alcoholic one. This with the help of climate warming gives wine that can be enjoyed much younger.

The technical teams have then had all the time needed for each vat and therefore managed to have gentle extractions.”

Conclusion
Looks like there will be some great values in 2023 Bordeaux. We are selling quite a bit so far. In one week, we sold more Pontet Canet than all of last year for their 2022. Mouton in one week sold double of what was sold by us in 2022 vintage. The Bordeaux buyers needed a break in pricing, and it looks like they are getting it. Was this all because I protested and did not go to the primeurs tastings?
The 2023 futures have hit the market starting much earlier than usual, and we wanted to share a bit of information about the vintage and the campaign.

The 2023 Vintage

The year was one of the warmer on record, but not anywhere near as dry as 2022. The combination offered two distinct characteristics—a much more classic style than many other warmer vintages (complete, ripe wines with lower alcohol, more restraint) but also more variability (there are a ton of spectacular wines, but the entire vintage wasn’t as consistently great as 2022, 2019, or 2016, for example). It’s a bit of a difficult vintage to compare to others, but I would argue that’s sometimes for the better. When we look at the past three vintages, we have the cool, old-school 2021s, the ripe, easy-going-but-complex 2022s, and the more classic-but-modern 2023s. That variety should be something to celebrate, even if not everybody will pursue every vintage with the same enthusiasm.

The Market

Prices are coming down, upwards of 30% or more. We’ve already seen it for the first few releases (Pontet-Canet, Lafite, Mouton). Many would argue that this kind of correction was long overdue, as prices rose to relatively unsustainable rates in the past few years, diminishing demand in an already crowded market. The situation is also compounded by the fact that there’s less engagement from the Asian market, as well as meaningful interest rates that affect the ability of many in the supply chain to absorb as much wine as they previously have. 2023 was also a high yielding vintage, putting a lot of wine on an already stressed market. The combination has put significant downward price pressure on Bordeaux. Whether it will work is another thing altogether. My qualifying question so far has been… are these wines the best versions you’ll find at their given first-tranche prices? For many properties that have released so far, it seems to be the case, making the campaign compelling for clients to buy early.

The Campaign and How It Works

Usually, En Primeur starts in late May and lasts through June. This year, it will be mostly confined to May, making it one of the earliest campaigns on record. We saw the first few releases at the beginning of May, and new ones have been rolling in daily. All wines can be purchased by the bottle or case, and everything is available on klwines.com as it is released. En Primeur is also the best time to secure formats large and small—various formats are available on our website if you search by château. All the wines are sold on a Pre-Arrival basis and will be fulfilled in 2026, delivered direct from Bordeaux with perfect provenance.

The Key Accounts team is here at your disposal if you have questions. Stay in the loop and see releases as they hit the market by signing up for our email offers, which feature updated availability throughout the next few weeks.

2023 Bordeaux: A Lot to Prove

Bordeaux seems to be carrying such a big burden of proof with the 2023 campaign. It’s funny thinking about Bordeaux this way—no region in the world of fine wine has done more over the decades to prove their mettle, character, and quality. But as wineries refine and perfect their practice, the bar keeps going up.

At the same time, the marketplace seems to expect more for less. Such is doubly the case this year, as the economics of selling fine wine don’t seem to match the rate at which the production side of the wine world has grown. Or in other words—the result of making so much good wine is that there’s too much good wine out there. What kind of reward is that?

The reality is that, like many other businesses, the pandemic hinted at an exponential growth that didn’t have enough long-term substance, and the time for reckoning has come. Prices are coming down 30% (or more) for many major 2023 releases, flattening out the curve.

Thankfully, it looks like the consumer side of the market is ready to meet Bordeaux at this kind of pricing, which brings the value and urgency back into play for one of the world’s most dynamic wine regions. We’re grateful to get this kind of pricing relief on a quality vintage, one that will be worth following for a long time to come. The 2023s speak loudly to all their component parts—it is a dry vintage (ripe), one that saw plenty of rain (mildew pressure and...
inconsistency), and a balance that provided transparency (wines with a sense of place and producer).

Where they’re at their best, you find yourself not only with a great example of the estate that will rival their top releases, but also a wine that’s very true to their terroir and style. Where they miss the mark, they are wines that still have character, but don’t quite hit the next level. That said, if they are priced right, there’s still a lot to like. And that’s one of the great (and often frustrating) things about Bordeaux—no market is as elastic, but when it’s right, there’s no region that can operate at the same level.

2023 St-Estèphe: The Most 2023-ish

If I were to pick a region that was the most 2023, I might opt for St-Estèphe. The wines have those demanding tannins that speak to the cooler reaches of Bordeaux, but provide masterful examples of the producer’s style and terroir when on point. They gravitated towards a more Cabernet-dominated blend, and while they don’t seem to be as consistent as their 2022 counterparts, they do have a character all their own.

2023 Montrose, St-Estèphe (Pre-Arrival) ($Inquire) 99-100JS 97-100WA 98DC 98JA 96-98VN With 75% Cabernet Sauvignon, it is one of the most Cab-forward editions of Montrose, which brings the varietal character along with the inherent structure. Impressive aromas with black fruit, tobacco, and dusty minerality, it shows its true character in the finely textured palate that carries a regal profile through the abundant deep fruit and tannin. There’s a density and concentration that’s very primary, but the quality is there. There’s a slightly old-school edge that mingles well with the exacting standards of modern Montrose.

2023 Tronquoy, St-Estèphe (Pre-Arrival) ($Inquire) The new wax-capped, blue-labelled Tronquoy is in full force in 2023. It’s hard to say that Montrose’s investment has all-of-the-sudden paid off, as the wine has been so good in nearly every vintage of the past decade. This follows that trend with panache, showing its Cab character on the generous aromas, following through with good fruit, dusty tannins, and a spiciness from a dollop of Petit Verdot.

2023 Calon-Ségur, St-Estèphe (Pre-Arrival) ($Inquire) 96-97JS 94-96WA Not only is there a good amount of Cabernet Sauvignon in 2023 Calon-Ségur, but 12% Cabernet Franc is a high mark for the property. It shows beautifully in the texture and expansive broadness of the wine. But this is a Calon-Ségur that will demand some time, as the pure density and concentration of their 2023 is something to behold. Rich and darkly fruited, it will be fascinating to see how this unwinds, but there’s certainly a lot going on.

2023 Cos d’Estournel, St-Estèphe (Pre-Arrival) $154.99 98-99JS 96-98VN 97JA 95-97JD 95-97TWI 95-96WA This is a wine that speaks loudly to Cos d’Estournel’s modern-era style. Bright, precise, and incredibly fresh, with low alcohol. A mélange of high- and deep-toned red fruits coats the aromas and palate, with a fine-cut texture, and a long, penetrating finish. This is a wine that is full of character and unyieldingly quenching. There’s a density to the fruit that promises a graceful evolution, but no heaviness to speak of (including the sub-13% alcohol). Very, very finessed, in a style that will be hard to resist for many.

2023 Cos d’Estournel Blanc, Bordeaux (Pre-Arrival) $158.00 97-98JS 95-97JD 95JA 95-97VN 96JA This is, by a good measure, my favorite Cos d’Estournel Blanc that I’ve ever had the fortune to taste. In some vintages it feels more linear and subtle, but there’s something gregarious and flat-out delicious about their 2023. With building texture and depth, it is one of those wines that carries the palate with one flavor after another (ripe white peach, apricot, key lime) and builds towards a mouthwatering finish. Very complex, hard to put down, and just really, really delicious. Well done.

2023 Phélan-Ségur, St-Estèphe ($Inquire) 96JS 95DC 95JA Véronique Dausse is on a roll, making some of the best wines of the estate’s storied history in the past half-decade, and some of the better values on the market today. The 2023 picks this up and runs with it, showing a freshness that doesn’t sacrifice depth or complexity. Blackberry and raspberry mingle on a textured palate with fine tannins. It will be easy to enjoy on release and will age well.

2023 St-Julien: Always Refreshing

There’s something so refreshing about getting to St-Julien during our travels in Bordeaux. The wines always have a brightness and softness that makes them approachable at a young stage, but the quality and caliber of producers also guarantees best-in-class examples of each vintage. As of now, the ceiling looks a bit lower than 2022 (no legendary-caliber Léoville-Las-Cases like last year), but there are a few that might outpace their predecessors in the long run. Add that to much more approachable prices, and St-Julien 2023s will be worth following for a long time to come.

2023 Ducru-Beaucaillou, St-Julien (Pre-Arrival) $159.99 97DC 96-97JS 95-97JD 95-97TWI 95-97VN 96JA Every once in a while, Ducru leaves me staggered by the quality and caliber of their wines En Primeur. 2023 was such a vintage, bringing their luxurious profile front and center, while making sure they keep it balanced and focused. The 2023 is built around a beautiful core of red fruit, mouthcoating with pixelated tannins. It leaves room for subtlety,
with floral notes, and fine minerality. Powerful but balanced, luxurious and bright, 2023 Ducru-Beaucaillou hits on all levels.

2023 Léoville-Las-Cases, St-Julien (Pre-Arrival) $184.99 98DC 98JA 97-98JS 95-97TWI 95-97VN 94-96WA Compared to the flamboyant 2022, this is more classically sculpted, nodding to the refinement, density, and purity that have folks often speaking of the estate in First Growth terms. Expressive and dynamic red fruit leads to a palate that balances fine tannin, sweet cherry, and plum, and a long, succulent finish that builds around a beam of acidity. It doesn't feel like a big or concentrated LLC, but a wine of layers and density that will unfold as it ages.

2023 Léoville-Poyferré, St-Julien (Pre-Arrival) $77.99 98JA 95-97JD 95-97VN 96DC This estate has been on fire, tilting towards the modern side in its approachability, but leaning classic when it comes to texture, structure, and poise. In fact, it is the seamless texture that really struck me each of the three times we tried it, where a mix of black and red fruits, cedar, and spice weave beautifully through this nuanced LP that carries through a long, mineral-tinged finish. On the darker-fruited side of St-Julien, but doesn’t miss a beat. Fans of the estate will adore it, and folks of any serious Left Bank wine will find plenty to appreciate.

2023 Branaire-Ducru, St-Julien (Pre-Arrival) ($Inquire) 95-96JS There’s no shortage of fans of Branaire in recent years—but who wouldn’t be a fan of a wine that performs at this level and still comes in at an all-too-reasonable price? The acidity and brightness that drives the red fruit keeps this mouthwateringly fresh, while the soft texture screams St-Julien in all the best ways. There’s a weightlessness that pulls everything together, finishing long with fine, dusty tannins. This impressed everyone in the room, and will once again be a go-to wine from the vintage.

2023 Léoville-Barton, St-Julien (Pre-Arrival) $77.99 97JA 96-97JS 94-96WA 94-96TWI More in the classic, subtle, and nuanced vein that folks often expect from Léoville-Barton, especially when compared to the flashy (but delicious) examples of 2019 and 2022. The violet and peony aromas almost invoke Margaux, as does the deeper fruit on the nose. But on the palate is all Barton, with a great roundness, density, structure, and core of red fruit that seems to be a signature at the estate. There’s a subtle depth here. While there’s structure to spare, the tannins are also refined and balanced.

2023 Palmer, Margaux (Pre-Arrival) ($Inquire) 98DC 97-98JS 97JA 96-97WA 95-97VN Another showstopper, of course. This is the wine that wine lovers love to love. All of the classic Palmer signatures are there, with great florals and bright berries. Big flavor with bold black plum and blackberry; the fine texture and mineral depth create a suave, stylish profile that’s hard to resist. An elevated Margaux with power and depth, all balanced with precision.

2023 La Mission Haut-Brion, Pessac-Léognan (Pre-Arrival) $244.99 96-100JD 97-98JS 96-98TWI 97DC 96JA Sometimes the Clarence Dillon stable of wines aren’t as obvious to me En Primeur as others, but this one struck all the right chords. A slight medicinal red cherry and herbal tea nose leads to a palate of impeccable texture and density, with great lightweight purity. Deep blueberry coulis leads to a long, extracted finish that’s lined with a mélange of black and red fruits, minerality, and fine tannins. Regal and superb.

2023 Haut-Bailly, Pessac-Léognan (Pre-Arrival) ($Inquire) 97-98JS 96-98VN I was a bit hesitant when the property started drawing comparisons to the tremendous 2016, a wine I’d very recently tasted and a vintage that few were using in comparison to the 2023s. But in tasting it, I could see the parallels immediately—textured fine tannins; deep, layered dark red fruits; building acid that pulls it together. There’s density that pairs beautifully with fruit, acid, tannins, and even a slight saline note on the finish. A triumph from Véronique Sanders. One to closely follow for the years to come.

2023 La Gaffelière, St-Émilion (Pre-Arrival) $59.99 96-98TWI 94-97JD 94-96VN One of the best wines in our first tasting, it continued to win the day every time we tasted it, which was at least four times during the week. With red plum, tobacco, and slightly floral aromas, the wine leads to a brilliantly textured palate that is endlessly mouthwatering. Its long finish delivers one nuance after another, with layers of red fruit. Refined yet explosive, it is a wine that I was glad to taste again and again; it never disappointed. One of the brightest spots of the Right Bank and once again a go-to wine of the vintage for its all-too-reasonable price point.

2023 Canon, St-Émilion (Pre-Arrival) ($Inquire) 99-100JS 98-100TWI 98DC 96-98WA 94-96VN What can I say? I am a bit predisposed to enjoying Canon, considering the undeniable caliber for the past decade. Every vintage seems like the culmination of their 20-year effort to reinvent the property, replant the vineyards, and renovate the winemaking... and then they take it to the next level. No surprise, 2023 is another brilliant chapter, combining an electric level of red fruit with a super-precise, seamless texture. Aromatic, refined, and delivering one nuance after another. It is a joy to taste and will be a joy to drink in the years to come.

2023 Brane-Cantenac, Margaux (Pre-Arrival) $61.99 95-97JD 96DC 96JA 95-96JS 94-96TWI 94-96VN Beautiful, expressive aromatics and astonishing purity; everything is in the right place. A thread of black fruit weaves deftly through a textured and fruit-driven, intense palate then to fine, pixelated tannins and a mineral touch on the long finish. Complex, impressive; it is another smashing success from a property that seems like it can do no wrong and is quickly becoming an upper-echelon Margaux. This will rival the region’s top releases in any vintage of the past half decade.

My (Other) Top Picks of 2023

This is a vintage where favorites will be found all over the place, and perhaps not everyone will be quick to agree with my personal picks (something that makes these wines dynamic and exciting to explore!).

At this early stage, these are the wines (not mentioned above) that really caught my attention in 2023.
2023: Back to Bordeaux
By Trey Beffa, Bordeaux Specialist

We heard this phrase at several properties, used in some capacity or another to describe the 2023 vintage. Another version was “back to terroir.” Last year, the 2022 vintage was excellent in terms of overall quality. It was a vintage where you had to search for a bad wine. It was a very hot, dry year and that sun influence is apparent when tasting the wines—so much so, that down the road it may be easy to pick out wines from 2022 vintage in blind tastings. However, it may be more difficult to pick out the commune of those wines. The ripe fruit of the vintage dominates the 2022, while the terroir characteristics take a bit of a backseat.

This is not the case with the 2023 vintage. The differences between each estate’s wines are more evident, along with the differences in communes. Before we even left on our trip to taste this year, the early comments on the vintage were that the wines showed less evenly across the board and that quality was more variable. This is true but doesn’t tell the whole story. It was not because properties made mistakes in the cellars or the vineyards. The quality of winemaking and vineyard management have never been higher throughout the region. The vintage just allowed differences in terroir and microclimates to show through to the wines.

There was always a big debate around the 2009 and 2010 vintages right after they were released. Many writers and consumers preferred the 2009s over the 2010s. However, pretty much every Bordeaux property owner, winemaker, or négociant preferred the 2010 vintage. (Granted they will generally prefer the vintage they have the most in cellars!) However I believe the same will hold true for the 2023 vintage when compared to the 2022 vintage down the road. Most people in Bordeaux we talked to tended to prefer the 2023 vintage due to its more restrained fruit and “classic” nature. Still, the 2023 vintage is quite modern, and I would hesitate to use the word “classic” alone in describing the wines.

In general, the wines are polished, fresh, and pure. They show integrated, fine tannins—long gone are the days of dry wood tannins, underripe fruit, and green acidic streaks in the middle of Bordeaux’s wines in “off” vintages. Winemaking and vineyard management practices have come too far to see another 1984 vintage. These improved skills, in combination with increasingly warmer temperatures, may mean that never see another “bad” vintage. Only “useful” vintages!

Pauillac

2023 Pédesclaux, Pauillac ($Inquire) Starts off with an aromatic nose showing toasty, darker-hued and chewy red fruits. Spicy edges make way to ripe fruit tannins. Lots of finesse and balance. This will be a good value if priced right—we’ll have to wait and see! Blend: 70% Cabernet Sauvignon, 20% Merlot, 10% Cabernet Franc. 65% new oak. 13.3% ABV.

2023 Pichon-Baron, Pauillac (Pre-Arrival) ($Inquire) 97DC 95-97WA 94-96VN This wine shows a tightly wound core of dark fruits, hints of cedar, spicy edges, and cola. It is broad and rich with a layered, velvety texture and finish, yet still well balanced. Tannins are fresh and juicy. Blend: 80% Cabernet Sauvignon, 20% Merlot. 13.2% ABV. 70% new oak barrels.

2023 Pichon-Lalande, Pauillac (Pre-Arrival) ($Inquire) 98-99JS 97-99WA 98DC Very soft and silky upon entry. Lots of sweet fruit in its core. Velvety tannins and texture. The finish is long and mouthwatering. Could drink this now! Blend: 80% Cabernet Sauvignon, 17% Merlot, 3% Cabernet Franc.

2023 Pontet-Canet, Pauillac (Pre-Arrival) $89.99 98-100JA 97-99TWI 97-98JS 96-98WA 97DC 94-97VN Pontet-Canet’s theme this year is “the gamble paid off.” The gamble was they waited to pick the Cabernet after the rains that came in late September. They harvested the Cabernet in ideal conditions from September 28th–Oct 10th. Their 2023 wine is very rich and juicy in the mouth but shows much more restraint than recent vintages. Lovely balance, freshness, and velvety fruit in the mouth. Very focused and balanced. Blend: 52% Cabernet Sauvignon, 39% Merlot, 6% Cabernet Franc, 3% Petit Verdot. 50% new oak, 35% concrete amphoras, 15% one-year-old barrels. Biodynamic.
2023 Echo de Lynch-Bages, Pauillac (Pre-Arrival) $34.99 Very aromatic and pretty aromas, slightly herbal but pleasant. A clean, nice freshness. A good value. Blend: 71% Cabernet Sauvignon, 22% Merlot, 4% Cabernet Franc, 3% Petit Verdot.

2023 Haut-Batailley, Pauillac (Pre-Arrival) $49.99 93-96VN 94-95JS Pretty, elegant, and sweet upfront; some tannin and power in the back. Classic Bordeaux style. Blend: 75% Cabernet Sauvignon, 20% Merlot, 5% Cabernet Franc.

2023 Lynch-Bages, Pauillac (Pre-Arrival) $99.99 97-98JS 95-97JD 94-97VN 96JA Classic Lynch-Bages aromas of lead pencil and graphite. Fleshy mouthfeel. Quite juicy and sweet in the middle, tannins are integrated and fresh. Long finish. One of my favorites from the Médoc! Blend: 71% Cabernet Sauvignon, 24% Merlot, 3% Cabernet Franc, 2% Petit Verdot.

2023 D’Armailhac, Pauillac (Pre-Arrival) $47.00 93-95TWI 94JA 93-94JS Spicy red fruits, bright high-toned, medium bodied, maybe a bit disjointed early, still pretty and fresh. Blend: 55% Cabernet Franc, 35% Merlot, 8% Cabernet Franc, 2% Petit Verdot.

2023 Clerc Milon, Pauillac (Pre-Arrival) $74.00 96JA 95-96JS Floral nose, chewy dark fruits, broad and dense on the palate, firm tannic backbone. Blend: 53.5% Cabernet Sauvignon, 35% Merlot, 8% Cabernet Franc, 2% Petit Verdot, 1.5% Carmenere.

Pessac-Léognan / Graves

2023 Malartic-Lagravière, Pessac-Léognan (Pre-Arrival) $37.99 95-96JS 95JA Toasty aromas, hints of coffee and chocolate are followed by an open-knit, elegant wine with lots of finesse and elegance. Hints of minerals and earthy tones linger in the back. Very approachable. Blend: 55% Cabernet Sauvignon, 40% Merlot, 3% Petit Verdot, 2% Cabernet Franc. 90-92 points.

2023 Domaine de Chevalier Rouge, Pessac-Léognan (Pre-Arrival) $62.99 97-98JS 94-96JD 94-96WA 94-96TWI 94-96VN 95DC 95JA Round and rich, with layered fruit. Velvety texture. Classic and elegant. This is a medium-bodied wine that is approachable early on. Lovely purity of fruit and elegance. Blend: 63% Cabernet Sauvignon, 30% Merlot, 5% Petit Verdot, 2% Cabernet Franc. 91-93 points.

2023 Smith Haut Lafitte Rouge, Pessac-Léognan (Pre-Arrival) ($Inquire) 98-99JS 97DC 96JA Opulent and rich fruit with a firm tannic backbone. Still shows lots of finesse and balance. This is a big wine with lots of stuffing. Should be one of the cellar picks from the vintage. The 2023 has the highest blend of Cabernet they have ever had. Blend: 70% Cabernet Sauvignon, 23% Merlot, 6% Cabernet Franc, 1% Petit Verdot.

Online auctions are LIVE at KLWines.com
2023 Pape Clément, Pessac-Léognan (Pre-Arrival) $79.99 97-98JS 95-97JD 95-97VN Perfumy, toasty nose. Lush mouthfeel and texture, a sweet core of fruit. Spicy with hints of graphite and cedar. Modern style with a lift and fresh finish. Blend: 50% Merlot, 45% Cabernet Sauvignon, 3% Cabernet Franc, 2% Petit Verdot.

2023 Haut-Bailly, Pessac-Léognan (Pre-Arrival) ($Inquire) 97-98JS 96-98VN An almost exotic, sweet core of fruit. Chewy and toasty, with lots of modern characteristics, but balanced with minerality and depth. Firm integrated tannins. Quite powerful, but no hard edges. Blend: 58% Cabernet Sauvignon, 34% Merlot, 4% Petit Verdot, 4% Cabernet Franc.

2023 Les Carmes Haut Brion, Pessac Leognan ($Inquire) 98-99JS 97-99WE 96-98TWI 97DC 95-97JD 96JA This is a modern style wine with lots of power, depth and richness. Broad and lush, this still has a lovely balance and precision that keeps the wine in check. Dark fruits fleshy tannins linger. Blend: 50% Cabernet Franc, 30% Cabernet Sauvignon, 20% Merlot. 13.5% ABV. 60% whole bunches. 70% new barrels.

2023 La Mission Haut-Brion, Pessac-Léognan (Pre-Arrival) $244.99 96-100JD 97-98JS 96-98TWI 97DC 95-97JD 96JA Round and rich in the mouth with a broad and dense fruit structure. It shows a lovely purity of fruit and lots of finesse. Surprisingly approachable and delicious. Blend: 52.7% Merlot, 29.6% Cabernet Sauvignon, 17.7% Cabernet Franc.

2023 Haut-Brion, Pessac-Léognan (Pre-Arrival) $424.99 98-100DC 98-100JA 98-100TWI 98-99JS 96-98JD 96-98VN 95-97WA This is much more tightly wound than the La Mission. Aromatic and fresh in the nose, high toned red currant fruit, hints of cedar and a healthy dose of minerals and stone flavors that lingers in the background. Very focused and serious wine. Blend: 52.3% Merlot, 38.6% Cabernet Sauvignon, 9.1% Cabernet Franc.

2023 de Fieuzal Rouge, Pessac-Léognan (Pre-Arrival) $27.99 94-96WA Toasty oak, creamy texture, lots of sweet fruit, rich and decadent but with a firm acidic backbone. Quite good!

**Vin Blancs**

2023 Malartic-Lagravière Blanc, Pessac-Léognan (Pre-Arrival) $54.99 95-96JS 95JA Very crisp, bright fruit with layers and depth. Round at first, but the finish is lean and crisp. Blend: 80% Sauvignon Blanc, 20% Sémillon.

2023 Domaine de Chevalier Blanc, Pessac-Léognan (Pre-Arrival) $101.99 97-98JS 96JA 94-96WA 94-96TWI 94-96VN 93-96JD Rich and creamy the mouth, the 2023 Blanc shows finesse and purity of fruit. The acidity is bright and holds this wine together nicely. Focused and finishes fresh and bright. Very tasty. Blend: 70% Sauvignon Blanc, 30% Sémillon. 14% ABV.

2023 Smith Haut Lafitte Blanc, Pessac-Léognan (Pre-Arrival) ($Inquire) 97-98JS 95-97VN Really jumps from the glass! Very rich and nearly exotic in its fruit character, it shows a fleshy texture with a focused and linear backbone. The finish is mouthwatering and long. Blend: 90% Sauvignon Blanc, 5% Sauvignon Gris, 5% Sémillon.

2023 Pape Clément Blanc, Pessac-Léognan (Pre-Arrival) $119.99 96-97JS 95-97JD 95-97JA 96-97TWI 93-95VN Hints of coconut and vanilla on the nose. The fruit is round, rich, and layered in the mouth, all held together with a wonderfully acidic backbone and mouthwatering finish. Really quite nice. Blend: 60% Sauvignon Blanc, 35% Sémillon, 4% Sauvignon Gris, 1% Muscadelle.

2023 La Mission Haut-Brion Blanc, Pessac-Léognan (Pre-Arrival) $628.99 Focused and bright. Quite a bit of fruit in the middle, but well balanced with crisp acidity that carries to the finish. Hints of lime and minerals linger. Blend: 65.3% Sauvignon Blanc, 34.7% Sémillon.

Magnificent Margaux: The Sweet Spot for 2023 on the Left Bank

By Tracey Rose

The region of Margaux has truly captured the best essence of the 2023 vintage's personality with gorgeous and vivacious wines showing complex aromatics, dense palates of juicy, succulent fruit, and tannins that are fine and integrated.

Cool-vintage acids combined with warm-vintage ripeness have really set the stage for luscious, forward wines that are easy to taste, easy to assess, and easy to like, with the most consistent quality of all the regions.

There were multiple variations on the classic Margaux themes: the ethereal (Ch. Margaux); the powerful (Palmer); the buoyant, easy drinkers (Giscours, Lascombes)—and everything in between (too many to list!).

Almost every wine labeled Margaux put a smile on my face—but just how did so many Margaux wines get such intensity of fruit up and down the appellation? It was surely a mix of vineyard vigilance, summer heat at the right time, and strict sorting before vinification that brought out the best from the berries on the vines.

Of course, the top Classified Growths performed well, but whether it was Fourth, Fifth, Cru Bourgeois, or Bordeaux Superieur, all were exceptional, with fan favorites such as Labegorce, Prieure Lichine, Marquis du Terme, and Tour de Mons delighting the team and stamping their ticket with high QPR value.

I rally behind the 2023s depending on price, and so far we are seeing positive signs of “right-pricing” on the first releases. If the trend continues, consumers will want to cast a wide net over Margaux to cellar the gamut, from people-pleasing quaffers to age-worthy powerhouses.

The majority of wines from Margaux are very much the best-ever versions from their estates. That, coupled with attractive first tranche pricing, makes a compelling case to buy early on 2023.

### The Wines

**2023 Brane-Cantenac, Margaux (Pre-Arrival)**

$61.99 95-97JD 96DC 95-96JA 94-96TWI 94-96VN

The Margaux region has really nailed seduction in 2023. This wine is super sexy, super supple. Seamless and round with a mouthwatering finish. One of the few made with 100% new oak (8 different coopers, 28 different toasts), but you’d never know it from tasting it. Elegant and very impressive. 65% Merlot, 30% Cabernet Sauvignon, 4% Cabernet Franc, and 1% Petit Verdot.

**2023 Giscours, Margaux (Pre-Arrival) (Inquire) 96-97JS 95JA 93-95WA 93-95VN**

This is a very appealing Issan. Sweet cherry on the nose—dense, juicy, succulent cherry coated in chocolate with hints of tobacco underneath. Tannins are fine but present, coating the mouth. A long grippy finish with hints of ash. What stands out is how the mouthwatering acidity lingers. Makes my list of WOW wines. 70% Cabernet Sauvignon, 25% Merlot, 2.5% Cabernet Franc, 2.5% Petit Verdot.

**2023 d’Issan, Margaux (Pre-Arrival)**

$51.99 96-97JS 95JA

This is a very appealing Issan. Sweet cherry on the nose—dense, juicy, succulent cherry coated in chocolate with hints of tobacco underneath. Tannins are fine but present, coating the mouth. A long grippy finish with hints of ash. What stands out is how the mouthwatering acidity lingers. Makes my list of WOW wines. 70% Cabernet Sauvignon, 25% Merlot, 2.5% Cabernet Franc, 2.5% Petit Verdot.

**2023 Labégorce, Margaux (Pre-Arrival)**

$29.99 92-94VN

Gravel, Bing cherry, and floral notes on the nose, with a medium body. Fine tannin. Limestone finish fades nicely. Nothing wrong here, this is delightful. 50% Cabernet Sauvignon, 45% Merlot, 3% Cabernet Franc, 2% Petit Verdot.

**2023 Lascombes, Margaux (Pre-Arrival) (Inquire)**

$95-96JS

This is a kinder, gentler Lascombes. The 2023 veers decidedly away from the over-ripe, burly style of the past to a juicy, more elegant, lifted version that is just a delight to taste. In fact my notes say “YUM!” 60% Cabernet Sauvignon, 37% Merlot, 3% Petit Verdot.

Trey and Morgan tasting with Marjolaine Maurice de Coninck, General Manager and Winemaker at Marquis d’Alesme.
2023 Malescot-St-Exupéry, Margaux (Pre-Arrival) $47.99 96-97JS
93-95WA A WOW wine for me that the château itself ranked higher than 2014 but a tick below 2015 or 2016, and I agree. Deep dark color. Sweet dark cherry, cocoa, limestone… is that a little anise? Juicy fruit refreshes the palate with chalky highlights. A smooth, almost silky texture that is just addictive. A touch of cherry pit to balance the sweet fruit on a long, long finish where nothing is out of place. 58% Cabernet Sauvignon, 37% Merlot, 5% Petit Verdot.

2023 Marquis d’Alesme, Margaux (Pre-Arrival) $39.99 93-95VN
Tart fruit on attack that moves to sweet red and black currant with a very suave texture. Grippy tannic structure comes off almost spicy. Bright and vibrant, good energy.

2023 Alter Ego de Palmer, Margaux (Pre-Arrival) ($Inquire) 95-96JS An expressive and concentrated second wine from Palmer. Echoing the grand vin with notes of black cherry, limestone, iodine from the nose to the finish. Good acids keep the palate refreshing and the finish is limestone dominated. A fairly big wine for the vintage at almost 14% ABV. 53% Cabernet Sauvignon, 43% Merlot, 4% Petit Verdot.

2023 Palmer, Margaux (Pre-Arrival) ($Inquire) 98DC 97-98JS 97JA 96-97WA 95-97VN Palmer lives up to its Super Second reputation and its high standards with an exquisite and ebullient effort that equals the great First Growth from this storied appellation. The nose took a little coaxing to reveal black cherry, spice, cocoa, iodine, and orange peel aromatics. A thick, sweet attack and a voluptuous, round sweet palate with density that is just insane. Juicy, succulent black cherries and blackcurrant that are the epitome of sappiness. This is so well integrated the tannins only appear suavely on the finish, coat the mouth with a fine powdery texture, and then simply fade away. I agree with Neal Martin who said it is the most opulent Margaux of the vintage. Absolute power and elegance. Tracey’s Pick—a DON’T MISS wine. 50% Cabernet Sauvignon, 46% Merlot, 4% Petit Verdot.

2023 Rauzan-Ségla, Margaux (Pre-Arrival) ($Inquire) 97-98JS WOW! I have never known why everyone’s been so over the moon with Rauzan Segla… until tasting the 2023. The color is dark and saturated, followed by a very classic nose of chocolate-covered cherry and rose petal. Suave and elegant on the attack with super sweet fruit—black cherry, hints of black raspberry—with just the right amount of palate-cleansing acidity. Sublime tannins are nearly imperceptible, leading to a finish that is long with echoes of ash and chalk, (but not a chalky texture). I can see why people get excited about this polished, elegant, and pure-fruited wine that hits on all cylinders in 2023. 85% Cabernet Sauvignon, 13.5% Merlot, 1.5% Petit Verdot.

2023 Margaux, Margaux (Pre-Arrival) ($Inquire) 99-100JS 97-99VN 98DC 98JA Oh, my. This is my first WHOA wine of the trip… made me stop in my tracks and take a moment to really appreciate what great wine is. My description of this absolutely ethereal effort will pale in comparison to what I actually experienced. Purple flower, red fruit, black raspberry, and granite aromas co-mingle on the nose. A core of intense black raspberry fruit that is sweet, succulent, and delicious actually sneaks up rather than hits you in the face. So pure, pure-fruited yet layered with floral, spice, and minerality. This is not powerful per se, but the concentration never lets up. The epic, mouthwatering finish just dances away into infinity. A sublime, refined effort that every wine lover should experience once in their life. Tracey’s Pick—DON’T MISS this if it is in your budget. 89% Cabernet Sauvignon, 5% Merlot, 4% Cabernet Franc, 2% Petit Verdot.
As this trip began, this vintage presented as a bit of a cypher; the hype had been very ambiguous before our arrival. As professionals, though, we always take the wines on their own merits; in retrospect, the vintage was a bit undersold. As we began tasting, the wines were all quite ripe and juicy. Simultaneously they had fresh acids and tension. Ryan Moses started digging into some of the numbers and found that this vintage is one of the warmest, but also one of the wettest, in the last several decades; this helps to explain the thrilling combination of freshness and ripeness that we tasted. Cooler, wetter weather brings freshness, but the heat brings pristinely ripe fruit.

However, this combination also leads to an inevitability in the vineyards: mildew. In particular, mildew in the Merlot, as the thinner-skinned variety is much more susceptible to the affliction; the overall incredible success of this vintage is a testament to the development in skill, understanding, and technique of how to manage mildew. The pressures of this vintage could have been a tremendous liability to St-Emilion and Pomerol, but the overall quality of the wines is a testament to how incredibly hard-working and technically proficient grape growing has become at top Right Bank estates.

The lessons learned from recent difficult, mildew-prone vintages like ‘17 and ‘21 were on full display. The great estates were prepared both in terms of technique and technology to make the most of this vintage to get wines of both levity and density; the best ‘23s remind me most of the ‘10s; wines of big, muscled power, that also have a brightness and refreshment. While possibly not collectively as finely knit as the ‘10s, these are incredible wines for those with classic brightness and refreshment. While possibly not collectively as finely knit as the ‘10s, these are incredible wines for those with classic brightness and refreshment.

In St-Emilion, Canon was the wine of the vintage for me, with Angelus, Pavie-Maquin, and La Gaffelière nipping closely at its heels. In Pomerol, V.C.C. and Consissante were absolutely ravishing, with Trotanoy and Evangile just behind.

The Wines

2023 Angélus, St-Emilion (Pre-Arrival) $349.99 97-98JS 97DC 96JA 95-96WA 94-96VN A serious prima ballerina St-Emilion. Pristinely ripe red-and-black fruit goes head-to-head with cedar and tobacco notes, with deft, skilled usage of expensive-tasting, flavor-enhancing oak. The terroir high in the village provides elegance in spades here, and they hit the nail on the head in ‘23. Pretty, but oh so strong.

2023 La Gaffelière, St-Émilion (Pre-Arrival) $59.99 96-98TWI 94-97JD 94-96VN A big core of pure midsummer farmers’ market dark red fruit (damson plum, Bing cherry), already building with seamlessly integrated spice box oak notes and pretty red florals. This wine reminds me of the old Harry Waugh quote, when asked, "When was the last time you confused Bordeaux for Burgundy?" he wryly answered, "Well, not since lunch!" Supple and appealing, but enough tang to make you come back for a second sip.

2023 Figeac, St-Emilion (Pre-Arrival) ($Inquire) 98DC 98JA 97-98JS 96-98WA 96-98VN While I do think the house style at Figeac has changed immensely over the last few years to something much more flashy and modern, this is still a family-owned estate that’s doing tremendous work, just possibly not in the old-school, funky Bordeaux bent of years past. The wine has become significantly darker, and masculine, with lots of brooding black fruit. Lush and pristinely ripe, there’s a great backbone of acid and well-managed powdery tannins driving a long finish. Oak spice, floral, and coffee notes are all cozed up next to the fruit.

2023 Cheval Blanc, St-Emilion (Pre-Arrival) $524.99 98-100WA 98-99JS 97-99TWI 98JA 96-98JD 96-98VN 97DC Always iconoclastic, Cheval really sticks out in St-Emilion; considerably more dark, dense, tannic, and brooding than its St-Emilion stablemates, this felt, on initial tasting, more like something from the Left Bank. The Cabernet Franc really does a lot of the talking here, and gives the wine tons of size and structure. Everything here screams of opulence and intensity, but very outside-of-center aesthetics for the appellation.

2023 Pavie-Macquin, St-Emilion (Pre-Arrival) ($Inquire) 98-99JS 94-96VN A favorite for many of us, with a combo of pristinely ripe red-and-black fruit, with profoundly elegant top-end savory and floral notes: hibiscus, rose, juniper, next to a truffle-y, potting soil funk. Oak spice is deftly integrated, amplifying the rest of the wine, rather than obscuring. One of my favorite wines of the vintage.
2023 Valandraud, St-Emilion (Pre-Arrival) $119.99 97-98JS
95-97VN 94-96TWI 95JA Living up to its reputation as a big, rich lush wine. Very dense and purple-dark, with a huge toasty oak signature. The size and girth of this wine is stunning, but not for the faint of heart. A first stop for those who like a more rich, modern style, but the brightness of the vintage provides a great core of energy to keep the wine moving. A top pick if your taste runs in this direction.

2023 Barde-Haut, St-Emilion (Pre-Arrival) $34.99 97-98JS 95JA A long-time K&L favorite, this remains a killer wine for the money, with lightly overripe red and black fruits, integrated with exotic oak spice notes: cedar bark, tobacco, with cardamom. This is matched with red and purple florals and additional depth of gin-y herbal spice. Straddles the worlds of old-school Bordeaux and new-school flashiness.

2023 Canon, St-Emilion (Pre-Arrival) ($Inquire) 99-100JS 98-100TWI 98DC 96-98WA 94-96VN Absolutely stunning nose, with a heady concentration of pristine, late-summer red-and-black fruits, with just-so florality and oak-spice deftly tuned in background, with that elegant mineral-limestone signature. So, so pretty, with tremendous length and seamless velvety texture. Bright acid helps drive refreshment to the finish that really ties the whole wine together. Profound, but also effortless, and imminently craveable.

2023 Troplong Mondot, St-Emilion (Pre-Arrival) ($Inquire) 97-98JS 96-98TWI 95-98VN 97DC 97JA 95-97WA Definitely a unique style in St-Emilion—the raw density, size, and character of the fruit suggests something akin to Valandraud or the ’23 Cheval, but the wine is quite unadorned on the wood side of things. I like this, as the focus on big, rich, pure fruit is a stellar way to do this style. The tell-tale ’23 acid keeps things moving, but you don’t have the elements of château 2x4 which mark some of the other estates that push this level of ripeness.

2023 Trotanoy, Pomerol (Pre-Arrival) ($Inquire) Really showing its stuff as one of the crown jewels of the Jean-Pierre Moueix (Christian of Dominus fame, and his son Edouard) estates family. Very poised, with a great core of ripe, dark red fruit. Effortlessly elegant, with a just-so ripeness and fruit well-balanced by pretty red florals (cherry blossom and rose) as well as cedar and cardamom oak notes. The structure is pristine with perfectly managed, powdery tannins, middle-plus weight, and bright acid: think Porsche 911. I could drink a lot of this.

2023 l’Evangile, Pomerol (Pre-Arrival) $199.99 97DC 96-97JS 96JA 94-96VN The finesse and elegance here is quite apparent: pristinely ripe red and black fruit intermingle with a heady purple florality, with supporting nodes of cedar, pine, and cacao. The Merlot’s elegance really shines through here with absolute class: velvety texture and a persistent, mouthwatering finish.

2023 Ninin, Pomerol (Pre-Arrival) $64.99 94-95JS This stands out as one of the more modern Pomerol, with quite a bit more purple-plum and chocolate notes. The tannins and structure are still classic Bordeaux, but this will be more recognizable to someone coming to Bordeaux from California: round, lush, and a bit boozier.

2023 Vieux Château Certan, Pomerol (Pre-Arrival) ($Inquire) 98DC 97-98JS 96-98JD 96-98VN 96JA 94-96WA Absolutely one of the top wines in the vintage, and Pomerol is just on a different level from the rest of the Right Bank. This will be one for the ages. A big baseline of exotically ripe purple plumy fruit is mingled seamlessly with perfumed purple flower notes, baryl-herb amaro-esque varietal spice combines with deft cardamom and vanilla oak-derivative notes. I just can’t get over how perfectly integrated these all are, combined with an absolutely spotlessly poised, refreshing acid, and tannins that drives very long finish. This a wine that’s easy to understand now, but will only improve with time.

2023 La Conseillante, Pomerol (Pre-Arrival) 98-100WA 98DC 97-98JS 96-98VN 97JA Completely in the same league as its neighbor, V.C.C. Conseillante is a personal, sentimental favorite, and the ’23 is absolutely thrilling. To trot out an old battle axe of yesteryear’s wine writing, if V.C.C. is the King of Pomerol, Conseillante is the Queen. They are cut from the same energetic, pristinely perfumed purple-fruited cloth, but there’s something more elegant and graceful about Conseillante: more red fruit, allspice, cedar, potting soil notes. The wine is big and complicated, but never flashly or imposing. I wish I had a lot of this in my cellar.