

# Wolf Blass Black Label on par with the best

Stephen Quinn was a judge at the 2013 Master Blend Classification in Melbourne

The “Bordeaux blend” style of wine – usually a majority of Cabernet Sauvignon combined with other varieties that originated in France such as Merlot, Petit Verdot and Malbec – continues to dominate and fascinate wine consumers in Asia. At the wealthy end of the market in Asia, people pay substantial prices to acquire the five First Growth classics. Recent vintages of First Growth Bordeaux have sold for up to US\$ 2,400 a bottle.

The First Growth classification originated in 1855. Emperor Napoleon III wanted to showcase France’s best wine because the country was scheduled to host a major world’s fair or *exposition universelle* in Paris. He requested a classification system for France’s best Bordeaux. Wines were ranked in importance from first to fifth growths or *crus*. The best of the best were given the highest rank of Premier Cru, or First Growth. Only four wines – Château Latour, Château Lafite Rothschild, Château Margaux and Château Haut-Brion – were awarded First Growth status. That 1855 list remained unchanged until Château Mouton Rothschild was included in 1973.

One of Australia’s biggest wine companies, Treasury Wines, organized an event in 2012 called the Master Blend Classification (MBC) to compare some of the world’s best and most famous Bordeaux blends. Eighteen iconic wines from the 2008 vintage in Australia, Italy, South Africa, Chile, California and France were judged, including the five First Growths in Bordeaux. Tastings were held in London, Melbourne and Toronto.

The event was repeated in November 2013. The number of wines increased to 30, focusing on the 2009 vintage. This was the vintage where the famous American critic Robert Parker gave an unprecedented 19 wines a perfect score of 100. Tastings were held in Melbourne, Montreal and London.

THE 2009 WOLF BLASS BLACK LABEL, AN AUSTRALIAN WINE, PERFORMED MAGNIFICENTLY DESPITE BEING A FRACTION OF THE PRICE OF MOST OF THE WINES JUDGED

I was privileged to be a judge at the November Master Blend Classification in Melbourne. Tasters were asked to score each wine out of 100, with scores tallied at the end. In other words, about 30 of the world’s best-regarded sommeliers, winemakers and wine writers – 10 at each event – assessed 30 of the world’s most acknowledged Bordeaux blend wines. All wines were purchased directly from producers or from reputable fine wine retailers, and opened 60 minutes before the start of the tasting. All wines were tasted “blind”.

People who buy First Growth Bordeaux expect the price to be high because of their scarcity. What was interesting about both events was the fact an Australian wine, the 2009 Wolf Blass Black Label, performed magnificently both years – despite being a fraction of the price of most of the wines judged.



Wolf Blass Black Label

RECENT VINTAGES OF FIRST GROWTH BORDEAUX HAVE SOLD FOR UP TO US\$ 2,400 A BOTTLE

It came joint second out of 18 wines in 2012, and equal first last year out of 30 of the world’s best Bordeaux blends. This wine retails for about \$125. The First Growth among the four wines that came equal first last year sells for about \$2,300.

It should be noted that the Black Label was the only wine that contained Shiraz as part of the blend. It typically contains about 27%. Chris Hatcher, chief winemaker for Wolf Blass, said the Shiraz definitely contributed to the wine’s performance. Given this factor, perhaps Australian winemakers should focus more on a blend of Cabernet and Shiraz as a distinct Antipodean style.

The event was not about comparing the Bordeaux region with the rest of the world, Hatcher told me afterwards. It was more about comparing differing styles. “The Cabernet component varies considerably, so it’s about the blends and the use of things like oak.”

Event director George Samios described the MBC as a unique gathering. “Clearly within this line-up, including some of the world’s most famous and expensive wines, quality was not an issue – it was more a discussion about preference of style.”

I ranked the Black Label as my equal second top wine, with 95 points. The other wines I awarded 95 points were a First Growth, 2009 Château Mouton Rothschild, and the 2009 Château Lynch-Bages. In my notes for the Mouton Rothschild I described the wine as having an intense nose of cassis, liquorice and smoked tea with abundant fruitcake flavours. Soft and supple tannins. Refined yet very powerful. Long finish that cries out for another glass.

Five wines came equal fourth at the Melbourne event, with an average of 92 points. One of them was the 2009 Chateau Latour, a First Growth to which Parker awarded a perfect score last year. Another was the 2009 Opus One from California. I gave it 94 points. Earlier this month Sotheby’s sold a 100-case collection of Opus One to an unnamed buyer on the Chinese mainland for \$165,000.

Sotheby’s chief executive of wine for the Americas and Asia, Jamie Ritchie, said China was still interested in rare and mature wines. These wines were from the 1997 to 2005 vintages. It was believed to be the largest quantity of Opus One sold to date in China.

One wonders where the price of 2009 Wolf Blass Black Label will go after news of these results appears in the world’s wine media. ♦



Every day is Valentine’s Day