

Bordeaux is down, but not out



BEPPI CROSARIAL
WINES AND SPIRITS

Bordeaux. These days, the word could be French for "hard sell." The world's most famous wine region — and still its most important, in a declining-empire sort of way — is hurting. As you may have read in this newspaper earlier in the week, hundreds of chateaux are on the verge of bankruptcy. Growers are being paid by the European Union and the local growers' association to cut supply by pulling out their vines.

Chalk it up to a phenomenon French producers could not have fathomed 30 years ago: global competition.

In fact, Bordeaux could almost be French for "Detroit" were it not for one detail where the car analogy breaks down. Bordeaux's most luxurious, long-lived reds — the Moutons and Latours — continue to ride an astonishing boom thanks to their genuine quality, longevity and rarity, with some fetching upward of \$400 a bottle on release. By contrast, U.S. luxury cars are generally facing the same decline as the rest of the auto industry.

The big problem with Bordeaux is with the middle and low end of the price spectrum, accounting for upward of 90 per cent of the vast region's output. Bordeaux producers can spin the sad news how they like, which is usually to blame changes in their own bureaucratic appellation system and "unfair" competition from "mass-produced" New World wines. It's all hokey.

To many modern palates, much of the stuff just tastes like it was grown in the shade (which, given Bordeaux's climate most years, isn't far from the truth), lacking the rich fruit of ripe, jammy, sunny-climate cabernets and merlots from California, Australia and Chile. And the

prices can seem outrageous: \$50 for a mouthful of mulched leaves and pencil shavings — flavours prized by connoisseurs but confounding to most other drinkers. Even if some of the wines have the potential to improve with age, few consumers today are going to care.

Okay, so much for the disclaimer. Some Bordeaux chateaux have been working on the problem and there are some decent wines in the middle of the price spectrum. Today's release at Ontario Vintages stores features a bunch of mid-priced Bordeaux from a variety of recent harvests. If you're a diehard Australian shiraz fan, stay away. But if you like your reds firm, tannic, earthy and bracing, and especially if you are looking for reds to lay down for five years or so and then pair with beef, you might be impressed with a few of these nicely structured offerings.

Let's start with what might be the most accessible of the lot, **Château Gigault Cuvée Viva 2003** (\$29.95, product No. 579318). Quite full and rich, this cabernet-dominated star from the Côtes de Blaye displays a fresh, open style, brimming with velvety cassis and cherry fruit, accented by spice, toasty oak and a mineral-like finish.

Another standout, though much pricier, is **Château Prieuré-Lichine 2002** (\$57.95, No. 002261). This Grand Cru from the Margaux district, also dominated by cabernet, offers up big flavours of tobacco, earth and smoke, carried on subdued plum-like fruit and a slightly gritty, tannic texture. It's a good candidate for five to 10 years in the cellar.

From the estimable estate of Château Pichon-Longueville comes **Les Tourelles de Longueville 2002** (\$49.95, No. 733055), a good effort from the lesser 2002 harvest, with ripe, chunky dark-skinned fruit and a big savoury layer of cigar tobacco and spice, finishing with a solid grip. It's drinking well now and should improve with four to six years in the cellar.

Good under-\$25 buys in red Bordeaux are about as scarce as Bush supporters in France these days, but there are a couple of decent buys in this release from Christian



Pick of the week

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Moueix, the proprietor of one of the world's most coveted wines, the \$1,000-a-bottle merlot known as Chateau Pétrus. Don't expect Pétrus-like concentration, complexity or longevity, but do expect admirable elegance and polish in these medium-bodied, very French efforts.

Christian Moueix Saint-Émilion 2003 (\$19.95, No. 979955) is impressively tailored for its "humble" price, full-bodied and slick, built on a core of pure cassis-like flavour and savoury accents of tobacco and cedar and a moderate, fine-grained tannic backbone.

More impressive and concentrated, at a slightly higher price, is **Christian Moueix Pomerol 2004** (\$24.95, No. 903013). Richer than the Saint-Émilion, this one comes from the nearby merlot-dominated

Pomerol district that's home to Pétrus. It's also very polished, showing notes of plum, violet and tobacco, chewy tannins and a firm finish. It's another good candidate for five to seven years in the cellar.

Don't confuse either wine with the more widely available and less expensive **Christian Moueix Merlot** (\$14.95, No. 961227), which is blended from a wider area, shares a similar-looking label and is, nevertheless, a decent buy.

The highlights of the rest of the release include the following (though I'll get to more in next week's column).

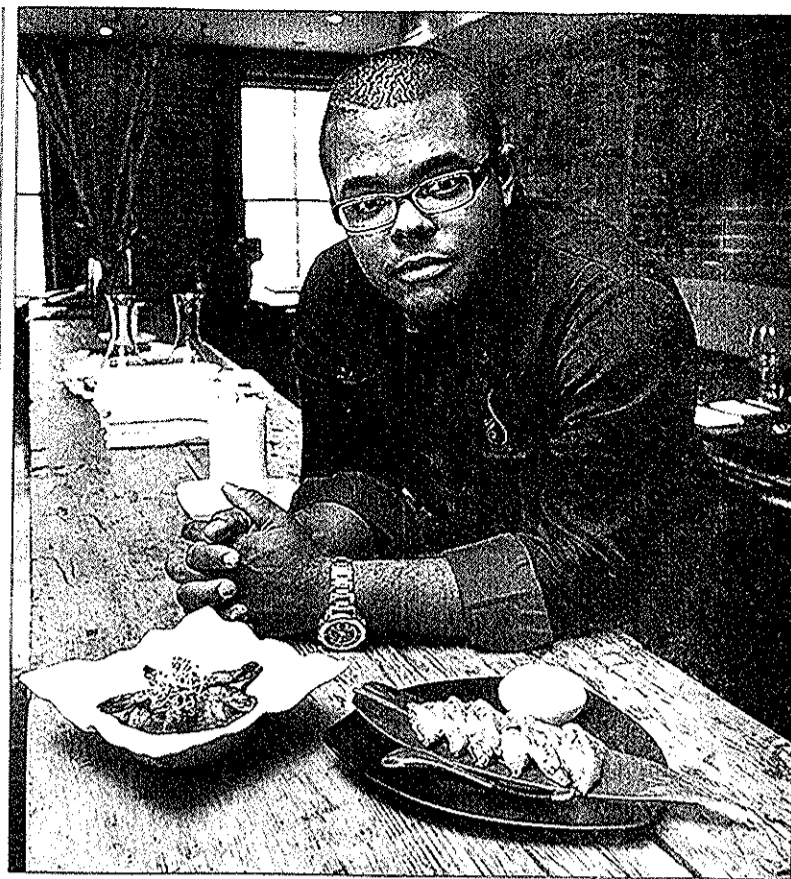
Sticking with the big-red theme, the wine that's sure to sell out quickly is **Domain du Vieux Télégraphe Châteauneuf-du-Pape 2003** (\$55.95, No. 951475), an especially big, ripe vintage for this reliable label, with dense cherry and dark fruit flavour and lively spice notes.

The star from Australia is **Yalumba The Signature Cabernet Sauvignon Shiraz 2001** (\$44.95, No. 528356). A coveted collector wine, it's packed with a sweet, luscious core of plum and vanilla, lifted by black pepper and carried on a silky frame and smooth tannins. Approachable now, it should be quite age-worthy.

You may know Lindemans for its ubiquitous \$10 Bin 65 chardonnay, but the Australian brand can impress at the high end with some of its best reds, most notably **Lindemans St. George Cabernet Sauvignon 2001** (\$47.95, No. 353581). Dense and brimming with blackberry, black cherry, cigar tobacco and cedar, it finishes long, with a bitter-tannic edge. Ten years would do it proud.

And for my best-value white and red picks of the release: **La Fortuna Sauvignon Blanc 2005** from Chile (\$12.95, No. 687772), a crisp, clean, citrusy white made from organically grown grapes; and **Mas Janeil Côtes du Roussillon-Villages 2003** (\$15.95, No. 992800), a full-bodied, herbal, earthy red from southern France with a silky core and an impressively layered palate of dark chocolate, licorice, pipe tobacco and leather.

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Chef Roger Mooking serves up spicy sensations at Kultura.

Kultura: small plates with big flavours

JOANNE KATES
ON THE MENU

Kultura
169 King St. E., Toronto, 416-363-9000. Dinner for two with wine, tax and tip, \$150.

I don't get it about trends in dining. Call me old-fashioned, but to me, if something tastes great, then it tastes great. If it tastes bad, it tastes bad. What does that have to do with fashion's fickle hand, or trendsetters pronouncing on where the lemmings ought to flock next? If I thought that the purpose of this column were either to predict, create or follow dining trends, I would fall upon my sword — which might, of course, make a significant number of Toronto restaurateurs very happy.

My food pronouncements are based on the utterly subjective (and individual) responses of my taste buds to food. Whether something is "in" or "out" hardly determines that, although often the two converge, and not by coincidence.

Take, for example, the health craze that has changed how we dine at both the low and high end. My favourite thing in the world used to be hollandaise sauce, which is no longer in style, and I don't love it any more. It lost its cachet because too many foodies figured out that ingesting a sauce made of butter and egg yolks was likely to reduce our time on the planet; for that precise reason, I trained myself to fall out of love with the grandmother of all French butter sauces. But that's not fashion, it's making choices based on medical research.

Fashion has decreed that we will all eat tapas for dinner. And fashion is an idiot.

In Spain, where they come from, tapas are not dinner, but only a way station in the early evening. There is a theory that tapas originated when an illness forced Spain's King Alfonso the Wise to take small bites of food with wine between meals. Once recovered, the king decreed that inns were not allowed to serve wine without a bite to eat, so that his poor citizenry would not consume alcohol only.

It may also be that tapas arose to sustain agricultural workers in the fields until their late dinner. Which is very much the function tapas fulfill today in Spain, where people stop at a tapas bar for a quick nibble after work, to tide them over until the country's traditional 9 p.m. dinner. (I've never been able to figure out how Spaniards eat that late and then drag themselves to work in the morning.)

So where then do Toronto trendsetters get the idea that tapas should be dinner? For that is the big idea. All over town, there are restaurants springing up selling small plates for dinner — Cava, Doku 15, Lai Toh Heen, Lee, Mo-Do, Torito, not to mention all the more traditional Spanish places. They all tell you that the table is supposed to order a bunch of small plates and share them.

Logic suggests that sharing small plates would be harder than sharing big ones. But that's not the core downside of small-plate dining. It's not relaxing! It feels fragmented and confusing, figuring out how many items to order and then responding to all of them. Dining out ought not to be stressful; indeed, the opposite.

Hence my predisposition against Kultura, with its many mini-plates and its almost funny

pretentiousness. The waiter tells us that this is "social dining" and explains soberly that's a play on words. When asked to explain this, he cannot. The menu gushes that chef Roger Mooking's cuisine "embraces cuisine without borders. Food concepts are reinterpreted and redressed . . ." Publease.

Our waiters have been schooled in the same art of overblown rhetoric. When they talk, are they channelling Nietzsche, or perhaps Proust? These guys are all about long sentences and flowery descriptions, but not so much the basics of service. Our first dinner at Kultura, five different servers wait on us — hardly conducive to continuity and comfort.

If the restaurant were not so damn gorgeous, we would never set foot in the door. But the space formerly occupied by Arts on King is one of Toronto's oldest buildings, gloriously restored. The downstairs bar is dark and sexy, the second-floor dining room has dark wooden floors and tables with brown leather chairs, huge windows, purple backlights and fat white pillar candles in the fireplaces. As for the food, aside from the silly portion sizes and pretentious language, one is hard pressed to do anything but fall in love.

Chef Mooking has an astonishingly deft hand with the big flavours. Caribbean shrimp are plump and perfect, and jumped up with spicy sweet banana sambal. Chicken samosas are crisp little triangles of chicken with asiago and sage, and a side of spiced apple chutney.

Kultura walks on the hot side: Tofu has been barely fried, so its heart is silken and its skin crisp and thin. It sits in a pool of hoisin sauce zinged with Thai hot sauce. Cold white noodles made from Japanese mountain potato come with two sauces: hot mustard and mouth-searing sweet Thai chili sauce. Tuna tartare is also Thai-inflected, tiny green chilies heating it up, with lime, grapefruit and lemon for citric smoothing. Tender chunks of tandoori beef come with sweet/hot tamarind sauce. The only misstep of the meal: store-bought, too-sweet coconut shreds. Still, coconut makes a star appearance in the Jamaican chicken risotto composed of unusually moist jerk chicken breast and risotto spiked with coconut shreds and lemon, a most unusual and delightfully wrought notion.

Lobster appears in ravioli with toasted tops (another unusual idea, and again masterfully pulled off) and sits in a delicate saffron bisque. Chef deconstructs fish and chips, papering the outside of the fish with paper-thin potato slices and then deep frying the "package perfectly." Totally terrific save for the price/quantity ratio: \$12 buys three small packages.

The only time chef Mooking's mind games fail is with "savoury cheesecakes" — pecorino, chèvre and gorgonzola that have been puréed with cream cheese and reformed into facsimiles of their former shapes. The waiter explains that because cheese is so expensive, it's a way to make it cheaper. God help us, when three nasty little cream-cheese aggregates cost \$12 and they call that cheap.

Despite the entertaining food, Kultura is not a foodie magnet; it's already getting traction with diners who have different fish to fry. Like owner Hanif Harji's other successful resto-lounge, the uber-cool Blowfish, it's made to be a scenesters' hangout, a happy place for people who are pretty enough to see and be seen.

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