

Tastings | *Dorothy J. Gaiter and John Brecher*

Looking for Value in a Prized Vintage

2005 Bordeaux Made Affordable; Avoiding the Traps

IN A FEW MONTHS, you'll have the privilege of paying about \$1,000 or so to take home a single bottle of Château Lafite Rothschild or one of the other first growths of Bordeaux from the acclaimed vintage of 2005. But you can go into most wine stores today and spend less than \$20 on one of the more-obscure wines of the vintage, many of which are hitting the shelves as you read this. Is this a good idea? We conducted a broad blind tasting to find out.

Bordeaux is known for its expensive, famous wines, but it's a large area with thousands of châteaux, many of them small, that most of us have never heard of. These are often wines with simple appellations such as Bordeaux Supérieur or lesser-known appellations such as Côtes de Bourg. Over the years, our advice for wine-drinkers seeking value is to buy the best wines in lesser vintages and the lesser wines in the best vintages.

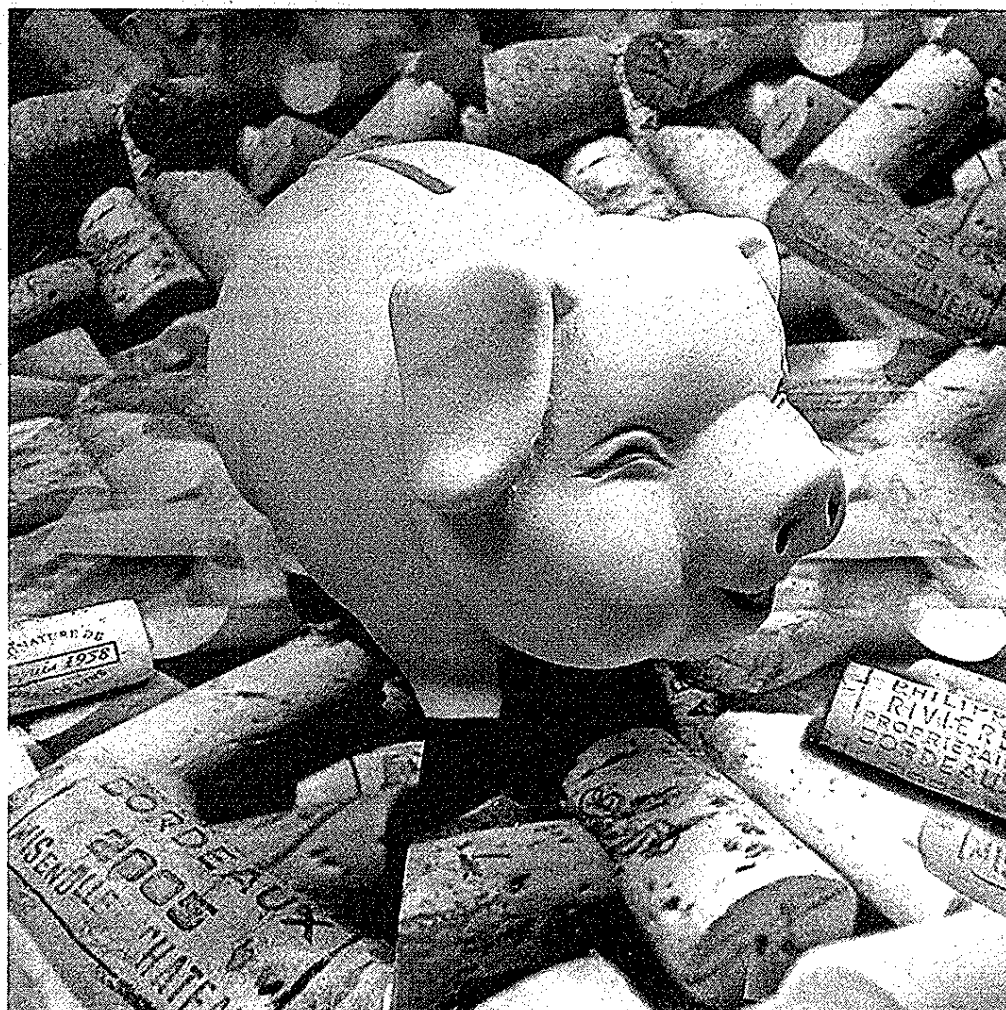
LOTS OF LITTLE WINERIES

To test this theory with the 2005 wines, we bought more than 50 Bordeaux reds that cost less than \$20 from stores around the country. We cannot emphasize this too strongly: It's impossible to know which of these little-guy Bordeaux you will see. They are generally produced in small quantities and imported in even smaller quantities. Many are imported directly by wine stores that have a relationship with the château or the château's export representative. You'll find plenty of inexpensive 2005 Bordeaux on shelves, but you might find a totally different selection at two stores down the block from each other.

The average price of our sample was about \$12, which would just about constitute a rounding error on the price of a bottle of Lafite. Most had only recently arrived in the States. Like expensive Bordeaux, they are made primarily from Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, but, unlike their pricey relatives, they are released sooner and meant to be drunk younger. We tasted them in blind flights over several nights. This is what we found:

These are among the best bargains at the wine store right now. You simply must go out and try one.

Wine after wine was easy to drink, with good fruit, some



minerals and a lovely, dry finish. Too many red wines under \$20 these days—a great deal of Merlot and Cabernet from the U.S. and Shiraz from Australia, for example—are stupid wines. They're thick, simple, sweet,

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smelly with vanilla and oak and impossible to pair with food. These wines generally avoided those traps. They were light on their feet, dry, a bit grapey and very easy to enjoy. These are not world-class, head-banging, great wines, but pleasant, somewhat classy everyday wines that would make everyday meals a little more special.

They were not all winners, of course. Some tasted watery, as though good wine had been diluted. A few—but fortunately just a few—were leaden with oak. But the average quality was quite high. Even many that simply rated Good had an attractive vibrancy about them that made them easy to drink and enjoy. Many of the wines had nice

earth, good blackberry fruit, sometimes a hint of chocolate and a little splash of lemon. Some offered far more than that, including some of the structure—layers of flavors and tastes—that we associate with fine Bordeaux. Our best of tasting, for instance, Château de Lugagnac, impressed us even before we tasted it. The nose alone offered rich fruit, dark earth and juicy acidity. (It is half Cabernet Sauvignon and half Merlot.) But our experience with this wine will give you some idea of the complexities involved in buying these wines.

We first bought it off the shelf, with several other wines, at a store in Chicago. We paid \$8.99. After our tasting, we were so impressed with it—this was a stunning bargain—that we decided to buy more, so we could retaste it. The store not only was sold out of the wine by then, but knew nothing about it and expressed no interest in getting more when we called as regular consumers. So we looked online and found the same wine at a store in Florida. We ordered the store's last six bottles, so we could retaste and also experiment with aging them. (These cost \$16.99 each, which is still a bargain but not quite so stun-

ning.) The importer there, Stacole Co. of Boca Raton, Fla., said it imported just 29 cases and distributed them only in Florida. Other importers brought it into other states. For instance, we noticed with a quick online check that it was also available in Louisiana, Massachusetts and Michigan at prices ranging from \$12.36 to \$14.99.

'CLOSED MARKET'

We contacted the winery, where second-generation owner and winemaker François-Thomas Bon said that the château produces about 45,000 cases of wine each year and that about 2,000 cases of the wine we tasted were exported to the U.S., where it went through about 40 distributors to stores and restaurants. He said the wine has been distributed in the U.S. for a "very long time" but "it's not very regular because the sales for the U.S. are sensitive to journalists' comments." He added that "the wine market in the U.S. is a real high-quality market and it's closed: By that I mean it's closed because the people who are already selling wine over there are protecting their job. It's hard for us to come down with a case and try to sell like that." In China, he said, winery representatives might

The Dow Jones Inexpensive 2005 Bordeaux Index

In a broad blind tasting of red Bordeaux from the 2005 vintage that cost \$20 or less, these were our favorites. It is impossible to know which 2005 Bordeaux you will see, but there are many of them out there. These are good with steak, but, because they are Bordeaux, they make any meal special. We wouldn't hesitate to open one of these with a good pizza, and we like these with meatloaf. Overall, these are meant to drink young, but we felt that a few of them, as noted, would age well for at least a couple of years.

VINEYARD	RATING	PRICE	TASTERS' COMMENTS
Château de Lugagnac (Bordeaux Supérieur)	Very Good/Delicious	\$13.98*	Best of tasting. The nose immediately says, "Fine stuff," with earth, tobacco and juicy fruit. Well balanced and nicely complex. Even better after an hour. Remarkably complete for such a young, inexpensive wine.
Château Au Grand Paris (Bordeaux Supérieur)	Very Good	\$10*	Best value. Lovely, with restrained but abundant fruit, red-berry tastes and some complexity. Fine wine. Could age some. Perennial favorite.
Château Les Tours de Peyrat 'Vieilles Vignes' (Premières Côtes de Blaye)	Very Good	\$14.99	Good fruit, lots of minerals and earth. Blackberries. A touch of licorice, especially at the end, and maybe a little bit bitter on the finish, but classy and more austere than most. Could age a bit.
Château Bourbon la Chapelle (Médoc)	Good/Very Good	\$13.99*	Pleasant and grapey. Simple, good fruit, without too much of anything. Easy to drink, with some nice, crisp acidity.
Château Caronne Ste. Gemme (Haut-Médoc)	Good/Very Good	\$17.99	A drinkable fruit bowl of blueberries and blackberries, with a great deal of life and terrific acidity to give it lift and make it great with food.
Château Haut Sociondo (Premières Côtes de Blaye)	Good/Very Good	\$10.99	Interesting. Good, tight, somewhat bitter fruit, with oomph. Clean and focused, with some edge. Finishes a bit weak.
Château la Rose Tour Blanche (Bordeaux)	Good/Very Good	\$9*	Big, blackberry fruit and plenty of minerals and earth. Give this some time to soften. Serious wine for the price.
Château Marjosse (Bordeaux)	Good/Very Good	\$14.99	Pleasant and dry, with raspberry fruit. Smooth, with plenty of soft, easy fruit. A real crowd-pleaser.
Château Nodeau (Côtes de Bourg)	Good/Very Good	\$9*	Round and particularly ripe, with loads of black fruit. Really tastes true, like good fruit left to ripen on the vine.
Château Pey La Tour (Bordeaux)	Good/Very Good	\$14.49	Tight, dark fruit, with nice depth and a lovely little bite. At the end, it opens up into a surprisingly voluptuous finish.

NOTE: Wines are rated on a scale that ranges: Yech, OK, Good, Very Good, Delicious, and Delicious! These are the prices we paid at wine stores in California, Florida, Illinois, New Jersey, New York and Washington, D.C. *We paid \$8.99 and \$16.99 for Lugagnac, \$8.99 for Grand Paris, \$12.99 for Bourbon la Chapelle, \$7.99 for la Rose Tour Blanche and \$7.99 for Nodeau, but these prices appear to be more representative. Prices vary widely.

travel and take a case with them to sell. One of the châteaux' négociants, Bill Blatch of Vintex in Bordeaux, said some of the wine was also sold in several other states, including California, Virginia and the Carolinas.

In the attached index, you will see the 10 favorites from our tasting. It is unlikely you will run across any of those, but you will see plenty of 2005 Bordeaux. Be bold. Try one. Keep

this in mind: For the price of that 2005 Lafite, you can try 83 of these.

Melanie Grayce West contributed to this column. You can contact us at wine@wsj.com.

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Watch John and Dottie taste and talk about inexpensive 2005 Bordeaux at WSJ.com/Tastings.