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&

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Ch Léoville Poyferré vertical

Two women presented a second growth to two women – with admirable results.

Julia and I selflessly undertook, in stereo in our respective London homes, a vertical tasting recently of one of the St-Julien classed growths that consistently overperforms – see [Top Bordeaux scorers over 10 years](#). While not being quite as glorious and ambitious as [this vertical back to 1929](#) in which Julia participated in 2008, it gave both of us a pretty solid look at 10 recent vintages of Ch Léoville Poyferré plus the 1982.

This exercise was designed to celebrate the hundredth vintage since the current owners' ancestors acquired this second growth in 1920. The team had been hoping to present celebratory events in London, New York, Singapore and Shanghai but the pandemic put paid to that. They managed only one, in Paris on the day before lockdown. They have had to substitute a series of online tastings with individual tasters (or two of them in our case).

Hats off to the all-female team who presented this tasting, for their innovative graphics and their decision on how to package the samples. Instead of sending 75-cl bottles around the planet, they sent us smart boxes of their chosen vintages in the tubes of which I have long been such a fan. These WIT ([wine in tubes](#)) 10-cl samples of wine had been bottled under inert gas and easily withstood the several delays that a bout of COVID-19 and subsequent quarantine imposed on the date of our tasting. (Apparently some tasters objected to the tubes; the team sent them full 75-cl bottles.)

The wines were presented by managing director Sara Lecompte Cuvelier, cousin of Didier Cuvelier who so energetically ran the estate for 40 years

but has handed over to her. She was flanked by oenologist Isabelle Davin (pictured above), with 'brand ambassador' Claire Ridley just off-camera, occasionally volunteering a translation. There were also several references to cellar master Didier Thomann and vineyard manager Bruno Clenet and his assistant David Aguirre. Michel Rolland has consulted here since 1994, nowadays often accompanied by Julien Viaud for the all-important assemblage, when Rolland's skills really come into play.

They confessed that it was more difficult than anticipated to choose which vintages to show for this celebratory tasting but they eventually chose those below, grouped into similar styles. The first group, called 'Hidden in plain sight', consisted of vintages they thought unjustly overlooked, and we were both particularly impressed by the 2014, tasted alongside the 2017, and the 2012, which I also liked.

The next group of three, entitled 'A modern legacy', were designed to show, in the team's words, 'our precision of fruit and improved extraction of tannins' via a cask sample of 2019 together with 2016 and 2010. This was a most impressive group, with both Julia and I agreeing on the sheer class of the 2016 in particular. They admitted that they had hesitated between 2019 and 2018 but decided to show the younger vintage that will be bottled in June. And in any case had earlier sent both Julia and me their complete range* of 2018s.

Isabelle told us that they always bottle in either late May or early June, basically for logistical reasons. 'We make about 200,000 bottles of grand vin every year which involves a lot of organisation, so it's easier to do it at the same time each year', she explained. (They have a particular challenge in that their two cellars are on opposite sides of the road in the middle of St-Julien.) Apparently, even a vintage as weak as 2013 was bottled at the usual time. Their strategy is to transfer weaker vintages from barrel to pre-bottling tank earlier than usual. (Annual production of the second wine, Pavillon de Léoville Poyferré, varies between 80 and 100 thousand bottles a year.)

They chose to include the impressive 2010 in this group because it represents 'the beginning of our quest for precision. We introduced an optical sorter and conical vats, one for each of the plots we'd identified, so we could give each lot of grapes a cold pre-fermentation soak.'

Early deleafing started then too after 2008 trials in their second estate, Moulin Riche. 'Unusually we deleaf on both sides so that the berries get used to sun without burning', explained Davin, adding, 'but now, because of such hot summers, we are thinking of reducing our deleafing of Cabernet Sauvignon because it has less leaf canopy and the grapes stay longer on the vine before they ripen.'

They have also, like so many vine growers, reduced vineyard treatments, mindful of their workers' health, and have employed a special vineyard consultant since 2016. We were told they have adopted an 'organic approach' so that this year they will have 25 ha (62 acres) of vineyard farmed organically. 'But we're not ready to go the whole hog. If we had a problem, we would need to treat all 80 ha [198 acres] (including the 20-ha Ch Moulin Riche) within six to eight hours, which could be difficult using organic measures. We prefer prudence.'

We moved on to the final group – 2009, 2005 and 2003 as 'A tribute to terroir' – of hot vintages made before they instituted their new techniques to achieve real precision and mused that they would love to see what would have resulted from applying those techniques to these vintages. The first two of these vintages were looking pretty good to us anyway, although the 2003 is definitely weaker than 2009 and 2005 – probably on the way down, and both Julia and I noticed a meaty/gamey note.

When Isabelle Davin arrived in 2000 one of her first missions was to divide the widely dispersed parcels of vines that constitute Léoville Poyferré into smaller homogeneous plots in the modern way. She claims it took all of 10 years to calculate the exact vat capacity needed for each of these plots. Julia asked how they determined the boundaries of these plots: soil pits? satellite imaging? Neither of these apparently. Just experience and tasting. Last year they employed a drone to help with vineyard mapping and it apparently simply confirmed Isabelle's previous assumptions.

The assemblage here is made pretty late. They keep the wine from these plots separate right up to June after the bottling of the previous vintage. The malo takes place in barrel so that each parcel can age separately and they can taste the various different ingredients often, over a prolonged period. (So the blend we taste en primeur in April is not in fact the final blend ...)

Three years ago they started to pick the fruit of the young vines in each plot earlier – quite a logistical exercise. They used to pick the ends of rows, which mature later than the other vines, later than the rest, for their kosher cuvée.

And finally, we were offered a wine from the legendary vintage of 1982, billed as 'An icon', which happened to be Didier Cuvelier's first vintage.

*The team is responsible for the grand vin, the second wine Pavillon de Léoville Poyferré, Ch Moulin Riche from a single 20-ha (49-acre) vineyard in the north-west of St-Julien, its second wine M de Moulin Riche, Ch Le Crock in St-Estèphe and an earlier-drinking version of Le Crock, Ch La Croix. Julia reviewed most of these 2018s enthusiastically in [Bordeaux 2018 – our last instalment?](#)

Below we present tasting notes on these centenary celebration vintages by each of us, mine then Julia's. Although we deliberately did not confer, our assessments are remarkably similar. Right at the end is Julia's note on the 2018, which she was sent for tasting last month but kept aside in order to taste alongside the wines shown below.

Hidden in plain sight

Ch Léoville Poyferré 2017 St-Julien

67% Cabernet Sauvignon, 31% Merlot, 2% Petit Verdot. The team behind this say it has always been charming.

Lustrous dark garnet with a suggestion of velvet texture. Rich, chestnutty nose with just enough acidity on the palate where there is real sweetness too. Tannins are almost imperceptible. Neat, dry finish and this is so smooth and gentle that it could almost be drunk without food, despite its extreme youth in bordeaux terms. Less dramatic than most vintages of this wine. But clearly well made.

13%

Drink

2021

-

2032

16.5

Ch Léoville Poyferré 2017 St-Julien

67% Cabernet Sauvignon, 31% Merlot, 2% Petit Verdot. 18–20 months in French oak, 80% new. Malo in barrel. pH 3.69. 'Charming from the start', says director Sara Lecompte Cuvelier.

Deep crimson. Dark, very slightly leafy black fruit, all cassis and cedar, lovely scent and depth of aroma. The oak shows more on the palate than on the nose, with a smooth chocolate-like impression but without unwanted sweetness. Remarkably smooth, pure fruited. Tannins build to become a little more chewy on the finish but still very rounded for such a young wine. May not live as long as some vintages of this wine. Perhaps just a little gentle overall but beautifully balanced. (JH)

13%

Drink

2022

-

2037

17

Ch Léoville Poyferré 2014 St-Julien

60% Cabernet Sauvignon, 35% Merlot, 3% Cabernet Franc, 2% Petit Verdot. The team describe this as a vintage that has emerged as truly 'classic'.

Deep crimson with some evolution at the rim. Really classy lift on the nose with a suggestion of sandalwood. Smooth as a baby's bottom but with real pace and energy as well as fantastically classic fruit and still quite a bit of tannin in evidence. A combination of St-Julien's immaculate balance with the château's usual extra degree of ripeness. Not flashy. Really very impressive indeed. But not quite ready.

13.5%

Drink

2024

-

2044
17.5 +

Ch Léoville Poyferré 2014 St-Julien

60% Cabernet Sauvignon, 35% Merlot, 3% Cabernet Franc, 2% Petit Verdot. 18-20 months in French oak, 80% new. Malo in barrel. pH 3.66.

Deep, slightly smudgy crimson. Still vibrant though a hint of deep brick-red at the rim. It actually smells a little of warm bricks too. Spicy with a hint of incense but still plenty of lively dark-red fruit. Just beginning to show some tertiary notes but not yet undergrowth, more seductively sweet spice. Extremely inviting. On the palate, more tension than in the 2017 and more sinewy but that just increases the freshness. Chewy, finely grained texture also gives freshness. Moreish and like a trailer for future complexity. Lovely balance between fruit and structure in a more modest vintage (in terms of power). Spicy character increases with aeration. (JH)

13.5%
Drink
2022
-
2038
17.5

Ch Léoville Poyferré 2012 St-Julien

62% Cabernet Sauvignon, 32% Merlot, 6% Petit Verdot.

Deep blackish crimson; this looks much younger than just over eight years old. But it smells like a fully mature claret. Lovely tertiary aromas and the tannins well in retreat. Just a little chewy on the end and I'd certainly want to eat something with this. Lightly inky on the end. Very correct, very dry and very St-Julien. If I were given this blind, I might take it for Langoa-Barton rather than something that usually tastes a little sweeter than this. Fresh finish.

13%
Drink
2022

-
2040
17

Ch Léoville Poyferré 2012 St-Julien

62% Cabernet Sauvignon, 32% Merlot, 6% Petit Verdot. 18–20 months in French oak, 80% new. Malo in barrel. pH 3.76.

Deep crimson and similar in colour to the 2014, with just a hint of deep brick-red at the rim. I find the aroma quite similar to the 2014 too, that same warm spice, a sort of biscuity note, but here the fruit is a little more evolved though still clearly black- and dark-red fruited on the nose. On the palate the fruit is more evolved, with the tertiary flavours showing more clearly and overall a leaner specimen. Certainly fresh enough but doesn't have the persistence of 2014. Fine and very dry texture but not out of balance. (JH)

13%
Drink
2020
-
2035
16.5

A modern legacy

Ch Léoville Poyferré 2019 St-Julien

Cask sample. The wine will be bottled in June 2021. 67% Cabernet Sauvignon, 27% Merlot, 3% Cabernet Franc, 3% Petit Verdot.

Deep, lustrous, dark crimson with purple highlights. Fresh nose with obvious Cabernet Sauvignon leafiness plus a hint of Earl Grey tea. Sweet palate entry followed up by no shortage of well-managed tannins and oak. Still very embryonic. Sweet at the start and dry on the finish. All the ingredients are there but they are

not yet integrated.

14%

Drink

2027

-

2047

17.5 +

Ch Léoville Poyferré 2019 St-Julien

Cask sample. 67% Cabernet Sauvignon, 27% Merlot, 3% Cabernet Franc, 3% Petit Verdot.

Deep dark red with opaque core and purple at the rim. Intense aroma of cassis and cedar but also a more savoury black, cherry note, almost tarry, but pure. Fabulously dry tannins, grainy but not thick. Really fresh even with this higher alcohol.

Powerful, deeply fruited and finishes deliciously dry without being in the least astringent. Lots of embryonic, upright pleasure even though it is nowhere near ready to drink. (JH)

14.2%

Drink

2029

-

2049

18

Ch Léoville Poyferré 2016 St-Julien

63% Cabernet Sauvignon, 29% Merlot, 6% Petit Verdot, 2% Cabernet Franc.

Very deep, glowing, purplish crimson. Muted but very intriguing nose; this is clearly a superstar. Beautiful balance between smooth texture and crunchy, fresh, attention-grabbing, pure fruit. This is really very exciting indeed. Almost electric! The subtle fruit almost disguises the considerable ripe tannins underneath. Lovely balance and a magnificent expression of St-Julien. Admirable restraint.

13.5%

Drink

2026

-

2050

18.5

Ch Léoville Poyferré 2016 St-Julien

63% Cabernet Sauvignon, 29% Merlot, 6% Petit Verdot, 2% Cabernet Franc. 18–20 months in French oak, 80% new. Malo in barrel. pH 3.57.

Deep crimson with wide, soft cherry rim. Open and aromatic and totally inviting: black and dark-red fruits together with just a light leafy note lifting it from the glass. Smells extremely pure. On the palate, perfect balance between the freshness and the vibrant fruit, the tannins dense but polished. Becomes increasingly aromatic in the glass. The oak is receding but still present in a light sweetness and just a hint of spice. Dry tannins like many layers of paper, no grain, just dry, compact finesse. Both aromatic and elegant. Persistent, too. I found this very hard to spit and fully enjoyed the rest of the 100-ml test tube after I had finished tasting. (JH)

13.5%

Drink

2026

-

2045

18.5

Ch Léoville Poyferré 2010 St-Julien

56% Cabernet Sauvignon, 34% Merlot, 7% Petit Verdot, 3% Cabernet Franc. This was the vintage, the team says, when their new, more precise techniques kicked in. Still very deep crimson – deeper than the 2017! Savoury nose suggestive of balsam – classic perfume indeed, despite the relatively low proportion of Cabernet Sauvignon. Then on the palate it's very sweet and broad initially and then dry and savoury on the finish. Just a little loose on the mid palate. I wonder what this would have tasted like with a bit more Cabernet? Quite a bit of tannin in evidence still. Suffers by comparison with that intensely gorgeous 2016.

14%
Drink
2021
-
2037
17.5

Ch Léoville Poyferré 2010 St-Julien

56% Cabernet Sauvignon, 34% Merlot, 7% Petit Verdot, 3% Cabernet Franc. 18–20 months in French oak, 80% new. Malo in barrel. pH 3.62.

Lower proportion of Cabernet Sauvignon than in most vintages. Deep garnet with ruby rim and opaque core. Funnily enough this smells very Cabernet. Lots of blackcurrant and cedar but with air this shows itself to be rather ripe and decadent with a touch of damson fruit, even dried fruits. Very little evolution in the aroma just ripeness and power. The flavour is showing a more tertiary character with just the start of undergrowth and little bit leathery. Powerful and chewy in texture but just a little bit rustic. A big rather than an elegant wine. Powerful, thick tannins but I am not sure the fruit has the freshness and vibrancy for a very very long life, despite my general expectations of the vintage. Tails away a little on the finish. (JH)

14%
Drink
2022

-
2035
17

A tribute to terroir

Ch Léoville Poyferré 2009 St-Julien

60% Cabernet Sauvignon, 29% Merlot, 6% Petit Verdot, 5% Cabernet Franc.

Looks quite a bit older than the 2010, especially at the rim. Very sweet, ripe nose is pretty seductive, I must confess. Tea-leaf notes on the flattering nose. Sweet start and very round and gorgeous. OK, the tannins are drier and the palate less concentrated than the 2010 but I love this! Certainly for drinking now, even if it won't last nearly as long as the 2010. Slightly loose-textured but oh, so enjoyable.

14%
Drink
2018

-
2036
18

Ch Léoville Poyferré 2009 St-Julien

60% Cabernet Sauvignon, 29% Merlot, 6% Petit Verdot, 5% Cabernet Franc. 18-20 months in French oak, 80% new. Malo in barrel. pH 3.69.

Deep garnet with ruby rim. Cedar, cassis and spice dominate here on the nose – I thought it would smell riper than this but as it opens this side is revealed. Very Cabernet in its aroma even though there is quite a dollop of Petit Verdot that adds its own perfume. Smells generous and forthcoming. On the palate there are more tertiary flavours, a definite mature taste of undergrowth, unexpected freshness and a slight suggestion that the tannins are gaining ground on the fruit but currently showing finesse. This gives the impression of firm extraction in the dry, grainy finish but it's still clearly in balance for quite a bit longer in bottle. Rather leathery on the finish. (JH)

14%

Drink

2019

-

2034

17.5

Ch Léoville Poyferré 2005 St-Julien

68% Cabernet Sauvignon, 26% Merlot, 6% Petit Verdot.

Transparent ruby with a pale rim. Meaty and gunmetal nose. Lots of evolution. Attractive sweet integration with only very, very slight, appetising dryness on the end. This is looking very appealing at the moment even if it seems fully mature. Charm laced with a little inkiness. Delicate rather than the full-on assault that this wine sometimes seems to provide in youth. OK, not the most concentrated wine, but everything is in balance.

13.5%

Drink

2015

-

2034

18

Ch Léoville Poyferré 2005 St-Julien

68% Cabernet Sauvignon, 26% Merlot, 6% Petit Verdot. 18–20 months in French oak, 80% new. Malo in barrel. pH 3.6.

Lots of Cabernet Sauvignon this year and no Cabernet Franc. The most evolved in colour of all the wines so far, not surprisingly, with quite a bit of brick and rather smudgy. Hedonistic mature aromas of forest floor and leather, with sweet spice. Senescent fruit but still so full of gorgeous aromas. Dry tannic finesse, great freshness and still has upright purity as well as great length. Mature but full of life and depth of fruit. Grainy but rounded texture. Big but not brash. (JH)

13.5%

Drink

2015

-

2035

18

Ch Léoville Poyferré 2003 St-Julien

70% Cabernet Sauvignon, 25% Merlot, 5% Petit Verdot. The heatwave vintage – should be very interesting to taste now.

Transparent blackish ruby. Quite a gamey nose. And then on the palate it's a bit medicinal as well as sweet. I wonder whether it fully fermented to dryness? There's a lightly smoked quality on the nose. I don't think anyone would describe this vintage as 'classic'! It's great to have a chance to taste it at 18 years old but I don't think it is going to go anywhere interesting. In fact the fruit is really already fading in the glass.

13.5%

Drink

2009

-

2026

16.5

Ch Léoville Poyferré 2003 St-Julien

70% Cabernet Sauvignon, 25% Merlot, 5% Petit Verdot.

Deep bricky core and some browning at the rim. Very evolved nose of undergrowth, leather – developed but not oxidised. Starting to show a balsamic note with spice/incense. Complex and inviting if fully mature. On the palate, some coffee and quite dry but not as tough as some 2003s have become. Perhaps it is drying out a little. I wouldn't want to keep this much longer but it still gives pleasure. Almost meaty on the finish. (JH)

13.5%

Drink

2010

-

2025

16.5

An icon

Ch Léoville Poyferré 1982 St-Julien

68% Cabernet Sauvignon, 30% Merlot, 2% Cabernet Franc. Presumably this was made before they were able to include the 'late-ripening' Petit Verdot in the mix. Famous vintage.

Transparent fox-red with a pale rim. Lovely, almost decadent nose of warm bricks that recalls Haut-Brion! Great combination of sweetness and a certain vegetal quality. Really sweet and delicate at the moment with no tannins to speak of. Really communicates the quality of the (disparate) vineyards. Winemakers today may tut at the finish that suggests the tannins may have been a tad rustic initially but it's a glorious wine with wonderful life and vibrancy to it on the finish. This is great, mature wine.

13.5%

Drink

1992

-

2028

18

Ch Léoville Poyferré 1982 St-Julien

68% Cabernet Sauvignon, 30% Merlot, 2% Cabernet Franc.

What a treat to taste this. Brownish red colour. A great example of the beauty of mature bordeaux aromas. Hard to describe but unmistakable. Lots of mulched leaves and something more balsamic, even minty, plus coffee, earth and a savoury umami character. On the palate, this has a succulent leathery sweetness and silky tannins. What a beauty. Perfect balance still. So much freshness. More mushroom with aeration, less mint, more umami. Gorgeous. Captivating, ever-changing in the glass. (JH)

13.5%

Drink

1992

-

2028

18.5

2018 grand vin

Ch Léoville Poyferré 2018 St-Julien

Full bottle 1,350 g. 62% Cabernet Sauvignon, 33% Merlot, 3% Cabernet Franc, 2% Petit Verdot.

Beautiful silky-smooth cork. Darkest crimson with purple rim and black core. Charry, savoury black fruit though the char seems to be as much the darkness of the fruit as the oak barrels. Massively tannic (though I have just tasted the silky 1982) and deliciously dry while packed with dark, savoury (non-sweet) fruit. Deep and firm and fresh enough for balance even if the acidity seems modest. Chewy, youthful, promising. (JH)

14.5%

Drink

2028

-

2048

18 +