

Bordeaux

19 Aug 2008 by Jancis Robinson

In a nutshell: Huge quantity of mainly long-lived, medium-bodied, ultra-digestible reds (called claret by the British) with some sweet whites and extremely varied dry whites.

Main grapes: Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc (red); Sémillon, Sauvignon (white).

Bordeaux is France's most important weapon in the wine war. This large, south-western wine region, ruled by the English for 200 years in the Middle Ages, produces more AC wine than any other. About half of all the wine produced in the sprawling Bordeaux region qualifies for its most lowly appellation, simple AC Bordeaux, whose quality varies from vapid red wine to serious, oak-aged, château-bottled liquids made by quality-conscious individuals exasperated at how little money they can get for a wine made outside Bordeaux's superior appellations. Total production is around 900 million bottles a year, dwarfing all other French wine regions except Languedoc-Roussillon. Red wines outnumber white by about 10 to one.

The produce of most of these appellations' finest wine estates, usually called châteaux, is not only quite exceptionally good and long-lasting, but also available in much larger quantities than other top wines. It is no wonder that the world has heard of Châteaux Lafite, Mouton Rothschild, Latour, Margaux and Haut-Brion, the famous five 'first growths' in the top division of the famous 1855 classification, reproduced below.

In many ways Bordeaux still feels like a separate kingdom from the rest of France. Financially secure, except perhaps at the very bottom of the wine ladder, where prices paid to producers have steadily declined and some have gone out of business, the region is very much directed towards the Atlantic and the outside world. Its agriculture is dominated by neat, carefully-tended vineyards, a significant number of which belong not to locals but to insurance companies, banks or absentee landlords based in Tokyo, Paris, New York and elsewhere.

Médoc

The Médoc, a flat spur of land on the left bank of the Gironde estuary as it widens out to meet the sea, is Bordeaux's most famous wine district, and the Cabernet Sauvignon vine's homeland. It is also home to most of Bordeaux's famous large estates, most of which have built up their international reputations for the last two centuries. (To put the scale of fine wine production here into perspective, the Médoc with its neighbour and partner the Graves district produces almost exactly 100 times as much as all the grands crus of Burgundy put together.) The four most famous parishes, or communes, of the Médoc, are, going north from Bordeaux, **Margaux**, **St-Julien**, **Pauillac** and **St-Estèphe**. In theory each of these communes produces wines of a distinctive character – silky and fragrant, perfectly balanced, minerals and cassis, and slightly austere respectively. In practice, in this era in which there is the public wine scoreboard of points and praise awarded by an international wine press, all too many producers seem to be making their wines to the same, eye-catching and palate-grabbing formula, resulting in deep-coloured, full-bodied, flatteringly oaky wines. Huge quantities of new oak barrels travel up the Médoc each year.

Many is the wine-minded visitor who has navigated his or her way through the northern suburbs of Bordeaux to worship the world's starriest wine district, only to find an undistinguished plateau sloping imperceptibly towards the grey Gironde estuary broken only by the odd copse or huddle of houses carrying one of the names he or she reveres most. True, there are some magnificent railings with some impressively turreted nineteenth-century country houses behind them, but there is still relatively little to welcome the visitor thirsty for wine knowledge and bottles. (And there was even less 15 years ago.)

All but the tiniest fraction of wine produced here is sold, via complicated layers of commissions and brokers, to the wholesale merchants who have been based in and around Bordeaux for centuries. Ch Prieuré-Lichine in Margaux and Ch Pichon-Longueville in Pauillac are exceptional in positively welcoming visitors from the D2, the little road that snakes its way up the Médoc (although the locals thought the late Alexis Lichine was being horribly commercial when he first erected his signs outside Margaux welcoming tourists to Ch Prieuré-Lichine).

This is a district with a carefully stratified society. Only a handful of owners actually live there (Anthony Barton of Chx

Langoa Barton and Léoville Barton is an exception). Most estates are run by several ranks of manager, although at last some of the most talented winemaking managers have acquired a certain status. Every now and then the owners descend to entertain wine merchants, wine writers and influential friends and the châteaux are transformed into bustling country houses, their most important rooms the dining room and extremely formal salon. (It took me a long time to work out why so few of these large houses seemed to have anywhere to relax.)

For much of the 20th century, these large wine estates made very little money, but the world economy and a succession of very successful vintages in the 1980s changed all that. During the 1980s and 1990s the Médoc crawled with architects and builders renovating cellars, vineyards and, often most spectacularly, the château buildings themselves. However, reduced consumption at home, increased competition from other parts of the wine world offering darker, richer wines, expansion of the vineyards in the 1990s and the rather up and down vintages of the last 15 or so years have made financial success more elusive for all but the very top layer of properties, who seem to be able to call the tune on prices. The gap in demand for the best and for the rest continues to widen. Marketing has never been Bordeaux's - or France's - strong point.

The most obvious stratification of Bordeaux's wines was drawn up, doubtless without any realisation of quite how influential it was to be, in 1855. Just before Napoleon III's Universal Exhibition in Paris, the organisers asked the Bordeaux merchants to draw up a quality ranking of the top wine châteaux. What emerged was a five-division list of 61 Médoc wines which had already established their reputation, together with Ch Haut-Brion, the most famous property in the Graves district. See [here](#) is an up-to-date version, which takes account of the fact that some estates have virtually disappeared, their land having been acquired by other proprietors. Otherwise, there has been no significant change to the classification since 1855 apart from the promotion of Ch Mouton Rothschild from second to first growth in 1973. Baron Philippe de Rothschild, one of the wine world's few marketing geniuses, responsible for the branded wine Mouton Cadet and the growth of château bottling, finally nagged the authorities into it.

Very unusually for a cosmopolitan aristocrat of his period, he had devoted much of the previous four decades to his family's wine estates in the Médoc, and the wine was well worthy of first growth status. But the heavy price premium which a first growth can command over a second (even greater than a second can command over a third, etc.) suggests that there is a certain element of self-perpetuation about the 1855 classification. Properties with a higher rank can afford more drainage ditches (vital for quality in this district that was a marsh before the Dutch drained it in the 16th century), enough pickers that they can choose exactly when to harvest which plot, more new barrels, and more fastidious selection than those whose status and therefore selling prices are lower down the scale. Estate owners would claim that their particular land is unique, but many of them would have to admit that there has been a considerable amount of inter-château vineyard exchange since 1855.

There are some slackers among the châteaux classified in 1855. Few would argue that Ch Rauzan-Gassies is worthy of second-growth status, for example. I have asterisked some properties whose wines are usually superior to their official status.

Graves and Pessac-Léognan

Graves is the Médoc's mirror image on the inland side of Bordeaux and the other major left bank appellation. Like the Médoc, much of it is based on gravelly soils (hence the name of this wine region, which was famous even before the Médoc). Pessac-Léognan is an appellation created in 1987 to include all of the Graves' most famous châteaux, the greatest of which are actually in the southern suburbs of the city itself: Ch Haut-Brion and, once a great rival and now under the same, American ownership, Ch La Mission-Haut-Brion just across the road. As well as making firm, dry wines with the sort of minerally, 'warm bricks' overlay often found in red Graves, these properties also produce a full-bodied, oak-aged dry white wine needing lots of time in bottle (called Laville-Haut-Brion in the case of La Mission's white), which is typical of the Graves region too. Less glorified properties in the Graves proper along the left bank of the river Garonne can provide appetising reds and some much more interesting dry whites (which also age well) than the Bordeaux norm.

Some favourite producers: Clos Floridène (for whites), Couhins Lurton (for whites), Domaine de Chevalier, Fieuzal, Haut Bailly (red only), Haut-Brion, La Louvière, La Mission Haut-Brion, Pape-Clément, Smith-Haut-Lafitte (since 1990).

St-Émilion

The Merlot vine reigns here on the right bank (of the Gironde), as it does in the greater Bordeaux region, producing generally warmer, more obviously fruity wines than in the Médoc and Graves, most of which mature between three and

ten years earlier. It is typically blended with some Cabernet Franc, the aromatic, lighter-bodied parent of Cabernet Sauvignon, which is easier to ripen than Cabernet Sauvignon in St-Émilion, which is less temperate than the heavily maritime-influenced Médoc.

The medieval town of St-Émilion can supply the wine tourist with everything the Médoc lacks: pretty countryside round about, cobbled streets, a ruined but cavernous church, cloisters and literally scores of wine shops dedicated, almost too rapaciously, to selling wine by the bottle to visitors. St-Émilion has its own classification system, revised every decade. Only wines described as Grand Cru Classé on the label are seriously superior and Chx Ausone and Cheval Blanc share the same ranking as a Médoc first growth; the words Grand Cru alone mean little. In recent years St-Émilion has seen a rash of small production, so-called 'garage wines' with particularly ambitious pricing and varying degrees of success.

Some favourite producers: Angélu, Ausone, Canon, Cheval Blanc, Figeac, Pavie Maquin, Tertre-Roteboeuf, Valandraud.

Pomerol

Like St-Émilion, Pomerol is a small plateau dotted with small wine farms, on an even smaller scale. The most famous Pomerol of all, Ch Pétrus, comprises hardly 12 ha (30 acres) of a very special clay, and there are other properties such as Ch Lafleur and Le Pin whose extremely limited size helps to bolster the prices of their extremely fine, opulent wines. Pomerols are velvety, rich, Merlot-based wines which can smell almost meaty and can give an enormous amount of pleasure. Bargains from this small appellation are as rare as badly made wines, but the produce of vintages which were much more successful for Merlot than Cabernet (2006, 2001, 1998, 1994 and 1993, for example) are often relatively underpriced because the Cabernet Sauvignon-dominated left bank tends to make the reputation of each vintage in Bordeaux (and to a certain extent in the whole of France).

Some favourite producers: La Conseillante, L'Église Clinet, Évangile, Lafleur, Pétrus, Le Pin, Vieux Château Certan.

Sauternes and other sweet white wines

In a sense the Bordeaux region's most distinctive (and certainly its least appreciated) wines come from its south-east corner in and around Sauternes, the great sweet white bordeaux appellation. Practically every wine region in the world tries to make a fair copy of great red bordeaux, but very, very few have the particular natural conditions that favour the development of [noble rot](#)/botrytis. Sauternes is unique in being able to produce reasonable quantities of long-lasting, truly noble, full-bodied sweet whites.

Sauternes, including the Barsac appellation within it, benefits from autumnal morning mists which form where the cool Ciron flows into the warmer Garonne. Provided nature co-operates by supplying sun to burn off the mist, the botrytis fungus will concentrate fully ripe grapes and great sweet whites can be made, if and only if estate owners are prepared to take the risk of leaving the grapes on the vine. Many of these proprietors, particularly those discouraged by the relatively modest selling prices of most sweet wines, simply pick the grapes and add sugar so that, even after fermentation, the wine is sweet, if usually over-sulphured to stop it refermenting. The most famous sweet white wine of all, Ch d'Yquem (pron. 'Ee-kem') can live for well over a century and sells for other-worldly prices but, so demanding is the production process, it is said to be difficult to make even this fabulous property pay.

Other sweet white bordeaux appellations, in roughly descending order of quantity of wine produced, are Ste-Croix-du-Mont, Loupiac, Cadillac and Cérons, although the appellations Premières Côtes de Bordeaux and Graves Supérieures also produce some medium sweet white.

Some favourite producers: Climens, Rieussec, Suduiraut, Tour Blanche, Yquem.

Other appellations

Perhaps the most significant development in the Bordeaux of the last 20 years has been the increasing number of seriously dedicated producers in Bordeaux's less glamorous appellations, Bordeaux, Côtes de Blaye, Côtes de Bourg, Côtes de Castillon, Côtes de Francs, Fronsac, Lalande de Pomerol, Premières Côtes de Blaye, Premières Côtes de Bordeaux and the satellite appellations with St-Émilion in their name for reds, and Bordeaux, Entre-Deux-Mers, and Blaye for dry whites. Their wines usually fetch a mere fraction of the classed growth prices, but properties such as those listed below offer Bordeaux's best current value.

Some favourite producers: Chx Belcier, Belgrave, Bertinerie, Bonnet, Carsin, Chantegrive, Chasse Spleen, Côte-Monpézat, Fontenil, de Francs, Haut-Marbuzet, Haut-Rian, Jonqueyres, Juge, Monbadon, Parenchère, Potensac, Puygueraud, Reynier, Reynon, Roquefort, du Seuil, Sociando Mallet, Suau, Tanesse, Thieuley, Tour Carnet, Tour de By, Tour de Mirambeau, Tour du Haut Moulin.

See [JancisRobinson.com](#) for more information on this region.