

OVERVIEW OF BORDEAUX

Bordeaux is the single largest wine growing region in the world. Over 800 million bottles are produced annually from 10,000 estates and cooperatives. Its annual production represents about 2.5% of the world production. Bordeaux alone is nearly equal to that of Australia, South Africa, 70% of Chile and 30% of the USA.

There are 54 appellations in Bordeaux, although many of them are rarely seen outside the region. The largest and most important appellation (in terms of volume) is the Bordeaux AC, commonly known as Bordeaux Red, Bordeaux Superieur and Bordeaux White.

Geographically, Bordeaux is split into two areas by the Gironde estuary – hence the reference “left bank” and “right bank,” particularly for the all-important fine and expensive red wines. The left bank wines (Médoc and Graves) are simply those wines produced on the left side of the Gironde River. The right bank wines (St Emilion and Pomerol) are those produced on the right. Where the Gironde estuary splits into the Garonne and Dordogne rivers, there is the vast Entre-Deux-Mers (“between two seas”) district in the middle.

On the left bank, in the Médoc region, one finds the famous appellations of Margaux, St-Julien, Pauillac and St-Estèphe, together with the slightly less illustrious and, significantly, more inland appellations of Listrac and Moulis. There is also the appellation Médoc and Haut Médoc. Most of the finest wines of the Graves come from an enclave awarded its own appellation in 1987, Pessac-Léognan.

On the right bank, Pomerol and St-Emilion are the most famous appellations. There are also several “satellite” appellations: Lalande de Pomerol, Montagne-St-Emilion, Lussac-St-Emilion, St-Georges-St-Emilion, and Puisseguin-St-Emilion. West of Pomerol are the increasingly respected appellations of Fronsac and Canon-Fronsac.

Although a certain amount of white wine is made in the Entre-Deux-Mers region, Bordeaux’s best white wines are made south of the river Garonne: the dry white wines from Graves and Pessac-Léognan, and the sweet white wines which include some of the finest in the world from Sauternes and Barsac.

Also important quantitatively, and increasingly in quality, are the so-called Bordeaux Côtes, the Premières Côtes de Bordeaux along the right bank of the Garonne; the Graves de Vayres enclave near Libourne on the left bank of the Dordogne; Côtes de Bourg and Côtes de Blaye across the wide Gironde estuary from Margaux; and the appellations which lie between Bordeaux and Bergerac to the east: Côtes de Castillon, Bordeaux Côtes de Franc, and Ste-Foy-Bordeaux (not technically part of the Bordeaux Côtes).

In 1855, the top wines of the Médoc (“left bank”) were classified into 5 categories: 1st growth (Lafite, Haut Brion, Margaux, Latour, with Mouton being upgraded from 2nd growth to 1st in 1973); 2nd growth, 3rd growth, 4th growth and 5th growth. Just under this ranking are the “Cru Bourgeois” rankings. Again, this only refers to the Médoc wines.

The right bank wines only began receiving international acclaim in 1955. They have their own classification. They are either St Emilion, or St Emilion Grand Cru, St Emilion Grand Cru Classé, St Emilion Premier Grand Cru Classé A, or St Emilion Premier grand Cru Classé B.

BORDEAUX'S VARIETALS

Bordeaux wines are unique in that they are always created from a blend of several varietals (“assemblage”). This gives the wines a smoothness and complexity because each varietal adds its own characteristics. This means that the role of the winemaker is very important because he needs to use his/her own judgement to decide how to blend the wines. Hence, the term that winemaking is an art, not a science. This also means that each vintage will taste differently, depending on the percentage of the varietals used in the blend.

The recent trend in California to create “Meritage” wines or “Bordeaux-blend wines” is an acknowledgement that the Bordeaux tradition of blending several varietals in a wine gives added complexity and sophistication.

In Bordeaux, there are basically 6 varietals used to make red wines and 3 varietals used to make white wines.

I. Red Varietals

❖ Merlot:



It is the most planted grape in the region (France’s Merlot planting totals 60,000 ha/142,200 acres) and is the dominant grape in the production of the right bank wines (St. Emilion, Pomerol, satellites, Cotes and Entre-Deux-Mers). It is a vigorous, productive vine, which has the advantage of budding early and ripening earlier than both Cabernets. Given Bordeaux’s unpredictable weather, this is an advantage. Merlot is susceptible to *coulure* (failure of the flower to set into fruit), downy mildew and botrytis (rot) which can cause considerable damage if there is rain at the time of harvest. The grape cluster is cylindrical, but looser than the Cabernets, and the berries are round, less thick-skinned, but larger and less intensely coloured. A Merlot wine is generally a degree or two higher in alcohol than the Cabernets, less acidic, less tannic and less muscular. It is softer, fatter, very fruit and aromatic in character.

❖ Cabernet Sauvignon:



Cabernet Sauvignon is traditionally the grape of the left bank (Médoc) and Graves region of Bordeaux and is the varietal that comes to mind when connoisseurs think of the top Bordeaux wines. (France’s planting totals 36,500 ha/90,000 acres, of which two-thirds are in the Bordeaux region). Cabernet Sauvignon is a vigorous but small producer. It ripens very slowly and is generally harvested very late in the season, which can be problematic if the rainy season begins too early. The blockbuster vintages of Bordeaux are those years when outstanding weather conditions allowed the Cabernet Sauvignon’s to be harvested very late at full maturity. Cabernet Sauvignon is less susceptible to *coulure* or to *pourriture grise* (grey rot) than Merlot, but vulnerable to powdery mildew. The grape cluster is cylindrical-conical, made up of small round berries, very black on colour.

This is the grape that gives claret its particular blackcurrant taste. It provides the firmness, the tannin and the backbone. It gives the colour and the acidity, from whence comes the longevity, the depth, the finesse and the complexity of top Bordeaux wine.

❖ Cabernet Franc:



Cabernet Franc shares many of the characteristics of Cabernet Sauvignon, though the wines made from this varietal are often less distinctive. Though losing ground in the Médoc, it is widely preferred to Cabernet Sauvignon in Saint-Emilion and Pomerol, where it thrives better on the more limestone and clay-based soils and ripens earlier. Wines made from Cabernet Franc are softer, more subtle, and more aromatic than those made from Cabernet Sauvignon. The clusters are looser and the grapes larger than those of the Cabernet Sauvignon. The resultant wine is often more fragrant, but less coloured, less full and less tannic. Cabernet Franc is planted on a total area of 13,400 ha.

❖ Malbec:



This grape is little grown in the top properties of the Médoc, though it can be found in small proportions in the top estates of Saint-Emilion and Pomerol (only 1,500 ha). The berries are large and the cluster loose. Malbec is prone to *coulure*, downy mildew and rot. The quantity of wine which results is large, compared to other Bordeaux varieties. It is quite rich in tannin and colour, but with less intensity of aroma and with much less finesse. It is only medium in body.

❖ Petit Verdot:



This variety is of minor importance (Franc's planting is just over 300 ha/740 acres) and is found in the Médoc region. It is a sort of super-concentrated Cabernet Sauvignon, and has all but disappeared except in some of the top Médoc estates (such as Château Pichon Longueville Comtesse de Lalande). In recent years, there has been re-newed interest in this varietal because of its intense fruitiness. It is difficult to grow, prone to disease and ripens last of all, often not completely successfully. Some growers swear by it, saying it brings finesse, acidity, alcoholic concentration and backbone. It is rarely found outside the Médoc.

❖ Carmenère:



It is of even more minor importance than Petit Verdot. It was widely grown in the nineteenth century in the Médoc, before Merlot was in vogue here, but it was found to be susceptible to odium as well as to *coulure*. The Carmenère gives a low yield of well-coloured, concentrated, rich, high-quality wine. It is rarely found outside the Médoc.

II. White Varietals

❖ Sémillon:



Sémillon is the most planted white grape variety in the Gironde (12,000 ha/29,640 acres planted in Gironde). It is the principal grape in the production of Bordeaux's famous sweet wines because of its susceptibility to botrytis ("noble rot"), a fungus that dries out the grape leaving a super concentration of sugar. However, Sémillon's value for dry wine production is only just beginning to be appreciated once again. Sémillon is a vigorous, productive variety. It is spur-pruned; and pruned very hard in Sauternes to reduce the crop to a minimum. It produces a cylindrical bunch of round berries, noticeably larger than the Sauvignon Blanc. These tend to develop a pinkish shade at full maturity, turning to brownish-purple with over-ripeness. At its best,

Sémillon wines, though dry, are rich, fat and aromatic, with almost tropical, nutty fruit flavours and quite sufficient acidity.

❖ Sauvignon Blanc:



It is a vigorous variety which matures early, forming a compact, conical cluster of small round berries. It is prone to botrytis, though not so much as Sémillon. The Sauvignon Blanc grape produces a wine with a very individual flavour; steely, grassy, high in acidity, very flinty and aromatic. Words like gooseberry, blackcurrant leaf, even cat's pee are employed. Strange as it may seem for a white wine, this variety produces a wine with a certain amount of tannin, and as a result of this,

fermentation and *élevage* (initial maturing) of pure Sauvignon in new oak is a procedure which needs to be handled with care. Combined with Sémillon in various proportions and aged in oak, Sauvignon produces the great white Graves.

❖ Muscadelle:



It has nothing in common with either Muscadet (Pays Nantais) or Muscat. It is moderately vigorous but very productive, develops late, and produces a large, loose, conical cluster of sizeable round berries. It adds intense floral and perfumed notes to white wines. However, it is a fragile grape that is difficult to cultivate because it is susceptible to *coulure*, powdery mildew, *pourriture grise* and botrytis (*pourriture noble*), and is therefore used in very small proportions.

❖ Sauvignon Gris:



Long considered a sub-variety of Sauvignon Blanc, it is now realised that Sauvignon Gris is a distinct variety. The colour of the berry is much more apricot when mature and the flavour of the wine has a pronounced sweet-sour taste. A little goes a long way. But this little can add complexity to a blend. This grape is not used very often.

The first three varieties above must make up 70% of Bordeaux Blanc, 85% of Bordeaux Blanc Supérieur and 100% of the top appellations such as Graves, Pessac-Léognan, Sauternes and Barsac. In theory, Bordeaux Blanc wines are allowed to use Ugni Blanc, Colombard, Merlot Blanc, Ondenc and Mauzac. In practice these last two are no longer planted.