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Bordeaux Sets Bar High for Vintages

By **Jim Hammond**

For the Journal

WINE COUNTRY: The two most popular and recognizable wine regions in the world are Burgundy and Bordeaux. Their wines have set the benchmark for most wine producers.

"Done in the French style" is a typical line on many wine labels. To appreciate what that means, you must go to the source.

The principal red wine grape in Burgundy is pinot noir, but in Bordeaux, the principal grapes are cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc and merlot. Every serious red wine drinker should experience the way the French craft their red wines, and Bordeaux should be the first stop along the way.

There are 57 wine regions within Bordeaux province, so a study of this area is nearly as challenging as Burgundy. Today, 84 percent of Bordeaux wine is red. The most important red wine regions are Medoc, Pomerol, St. Emilion and Graves/Pessac-Leognan. The Medoc region begins at the mouth of the Gironde River, fed by the Atlantic Ocean. St. Estephe is the first town of significance, followed by Pauillac, and ending at Margaux, one of my favorite French wines.

Further down the Dorgogne River, which forks north off the Gironde River, is the fly-speck area of Pomerol, and then the much larger St. Emilion. The southern fork becomes the Garonne River, which sweeps past the town of Bordeaux and enters the Pessac-Leognan and Graves regions. Graves is also home to Sauternes, noted for its premium dessert wines. One point of interest is that villages and chateaux on the left bank of the river primarily use cabernet sauvignon, and those on the right bank use merlot.

The principal white wine grapes in Bordeaux are sauvignon blanc and semillon. In Graves, these are often blended to produce a dry white wine. Sauternes are made primarily with semillon grapes, which are left on the vine until a mold forms called *Botrytis cinerea*, or noble rot. It better be noble for as much as good Sauternes costs. A bottle of Chateau d'Yquem 1847 sold for \$71,675 at a wine auction in 2004. What kind of dessert would you serve with that?

Bordeaux chateau

Wines with a generic Bordeaux designation on the label are the lowest quality level. Adding the region, such as Medoc, indicates higher quality and cost. Adding the name of the chateau signifies that the grapes come from an

individual vineyard, representing the highest quality and cost. There are more than 7,000 chateaux in Bordeaux, so I'd recommend against memorizing them, except the ones you truly love.

While a chateau can be a grand mansion, it could also be a home with a two-car garage. However, if you see an impressive chateau on the label, French law states it must exist. If you see a modest home and two-car garage on the label, they don't understand marketing.

Two of the best-known Bordeaux first-growth wines are Chateau Mouton-Rothschild and Chateau Lafite-Rothschild, both from Pauillac.

First growth is the highest classification a wine producer can attain. These rankings were established in 1855 at the request of Napoleon III to ensure that only the best wines would represent France at the International Exposition of 1855. Since that time Rothschild was the only house to be elevated from second growth to first, with some judicious lobbying, no doubt.

Some of the artists who have had their work adorn a bottle of Chateau Mouton-Rothschild are Salvador Dali, Marc Chagall and Pablo Picasso.

You don't want to know how much a significant vintage of this stuff costs. However, if you had dined at the Four Seasons restaurant when it opened in 1959, you could have had a 1918 Chateau Lafite-Rothschild for \$18, and you would still remember how good it was.

The big 10

If you can afford an expensive Bordeaux wine, just remember a great chateau and a great vintage need a minimum of 10 years to age. Unlike most domestic wine that can be consumed almost from the time you buy it, great Bordeaux wines need time to develop.

It is also possible to find very good Bordeaux from a lesser chateau that won't smoke your budget, but you'll need to do the legwork to find it.

The Cru Bourgeois designation appeared in 1920 for chateaux not in the original 1855 classification. There are 247 chateaux defined as of 2003, and these represent some of the best wine values in Bordeaux. They are well worth seeking out. For example; a bottle of Chateau Meyney Cru Bourgeois St. Estephe indicates a chateau-bottled wine that comes from St. Estephe in the Medoc region, which was defined under the Cru Bourgeois designation.

To find out what price someone would pay for a wine from highest to lowest quality consider the following: Chateau Lafite-Rothschild goes for about \$300 a bottle in a typical year. A Fifth-Growth Pauillac is about \$60. A Cru Bourgeois Pauillac is about \$30, and a regional Pauillac is about \$20 a bottle. For one-tenth the price of a first-growth wine you can buy a very representative Cru Bourgeois Pauillac that won't burn your pocketbook. You can still experience some of the magic of a first-growth wine.

Is all of this making your head hurt? Not to worry, next month I'm writing

an article that will explain this article. Salut!

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