

A Very Brief Introduction to Bordeaux Wines
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A “Bordeaux wine” is any wine produced in the Bordeaux region (an official *Appellation d’Origine Contrôlée*) of France, centered on the city of Bordeaux and covering the whole of France’s Gironde Department. This single wine region in France is six times the size of Napa Valley, and with more than 120,000 Ha of vineyards it is larger than all the vineyard regions of Germany combined. It includes over 8,600 growers.

Bordeaux is generally viewed as the most prestigious wine-producing area in the world. In fact, many consider Bordeaux the birthplace of modern wine culture. As early as the 13th century, barges docked along the wharves of the Gironde River to pick up wine for transport to England. Bordeaux is the largest producer of high-quality red wines in the world, and average years produce nearly 800 million bottles of wine from ~7000 chateaux, ranging from large quantities of everyday table wine to some of the most expensive and prestigious wines known. (In France, a “chateau” simply refers to the buildings associated with vineyards where the wine making actually takes place; it can be simple or elaborate, and while many are large historic structures they need not be.) About 89% of wine produced in Bordeaux is red (red Bordeaux is often called “Claret” in Great Britain, and occasionally in the U.S.), with sweet white wines (most notably Sauternes), dry whites (usually blending Sauvignon Blanc and Semillon), and also (in much smaller quantities) rosé and sparkling wines (e.g., Crémant de Bordeaux) collectively making up the remainder. Seven white grape varieties are allowed for use in Bordeaux wines.

The climate and soils of Bordeaux are perfect for growing its key wine grape varieties. While the bedrock is well furnished with nutrients and minerals, the topsoil tends to be poor, forcing the roots to grow deep to meet their needs. These deep roots stabilize the vines and allow them to withstand occasional periods of bad weather, including draughts.

Three excellent books on Bordeaux wines are: (1) Steve Brook’s *The Complete Bordeaux: The Wines, The Châteaux, The People*; (2) Oz Clarke’s *Bordeaux. The Wines, the Vineyards, the Winemakers. A New Look at the World’s Most Famous Wine Region*; and (3) Robert Parker’s *Bordeaux: A Consumer’s Guide to the World’s Finest Wines*. The Bordeaux chapter in Karen MacNeil’s *The Wine Bible. 2nd ed.*, is also excellent (as is the entire book).

“Bordeaux-style” wines are wines produced elsewhere in the world that are made in the Bordeaux style (in terms of grape varieties, blending, style of barrel aging, etc.). Most of the best California Cabernet Sauvignons have long been blended more-or-less in the Bordeaux Left Bank style. (In California, a wine labeled Cabernet Sauvignon must, by law, be a minimum of 75% that grape.) The very best California Cabernet Sauvignons that are Bordeaux-style can be difficult to distinguish from Left Bank Bordeaux, although they can often be recognized by their more fruit-forward flavor and higher alcohol level. The best Bordeaux style wines from Napa Valley (e.g., Forman, Caymus Special Selections, Ridge Estate Monte Bello, Joseph Phelps Insignia, Screaming Eagle) are as high in quality as the best wines from Bordeaux (and far less expensive).

The Bordeaux region is home to an arcane regulatory system dating to 1855. However, importantly for red wine enthusiasts, Bordeaux from the “Left Bank” (left side of the Garonne-Gironde River/Gironde Estuary) tend to be bigger, more tannic, more complex, and emphasize Cabernet Sauvignon, whereas those from the “Right Bank” (right side of the Garonne River/Gironde Estuary) emphasize Merlot

grapes and, while often being elegant (notably those of the Saint-Émilion and Pomerol AOCs), sometimes lack the depth and complexity of the Left Bank wines. There are, of course, many exceptions to this generalization, and the very best Bordeaux from either bank consistently rate at 95-100 points (and 100-pointers bring tears to your eyes with that first sip). You can usually tell Right Vs. Left Bank from the nose, the dominant Merlot Vs. Cabernet Sauvignon typically being evident, although with the very best vintages (especially with good age on the bottle) it can be difficult to discern Left Vs Right. The high tannin levels in Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot give Bordeaux red wines strong structure and, due to the preservative qualities of tannin, great aging potential.

Left Bank soils are perfect for growing Cabernet Sauvignon grapes because they tend to be fast-draining gravels (Garonne gravel, Pyrenees gravel) and limestone. In much of world, limestone soils (or at least calcareous soils, such as marls and limestone muds) grow some of the best red wine grapes. Limestone soils drain well, preventing the vines from getting too much water, and also precluding root rot. While they drain well in heavy rains, they also have an ability to retain enough water in dry weather to help the vines. Calcareous soils also tend to be alkaline (pH 7-8), which improves nutrient uptake by the roots. Overall, the best wine-growing regions have thin topsoils and subsoils, good drainage, and rich subsoils that the deep roots of wine grapes need. Good wine-growing limestone soils occur throughout much of France, including much of Bordeaux, Champagne, Burgundy, Chablis, Loire, and Southern Rhone. They also occur in much of Tuscany (Italy), and in a crescent of land along the central California coast from the Santa Cruz Mountains (in the north) to Lompoc (in the south), which includes the Paso Robles area (especially the west side of Paso Robles, where some of the finest California wines are beginning to be made).



A tasting of 2000 Bordeaux in January 2016. The standout at this tasting was the 2000 Château Troplong-Monot (St. Émilion), 99.5 pts, which can be found online for \$110-\$150

The *Cru*-rated red Bordeaux wines are allowed to use 6 grape varieties: Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc (known in Bordeaux as “Bouchet”), Malbec, Petit Verdot, and Carménère (the last three being used less and less, and Carménère almost no longer used at all). Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon together make up over 80 percent of all the red grape vineyards in Bordeaux. All of these grape varieties but Cabernet Franc appear to have originated in France.

There are 60 different, official appellations within the larger Bordeaux appellation, or region. The best known are the Left Bank appellations of Médoc and Haut-Médoc (together referred to as the Médoc), Graves, Sauternes, Barsac, St.-Émilion, and Pomerol. Within each of these are subregions (smaller appellations), each with their own level of fame. For example, inside the Médoc are St.-Estèphe, Pauillac, St.-Julien and Margaux; inside Graves is Pessac-Léognan; etc.

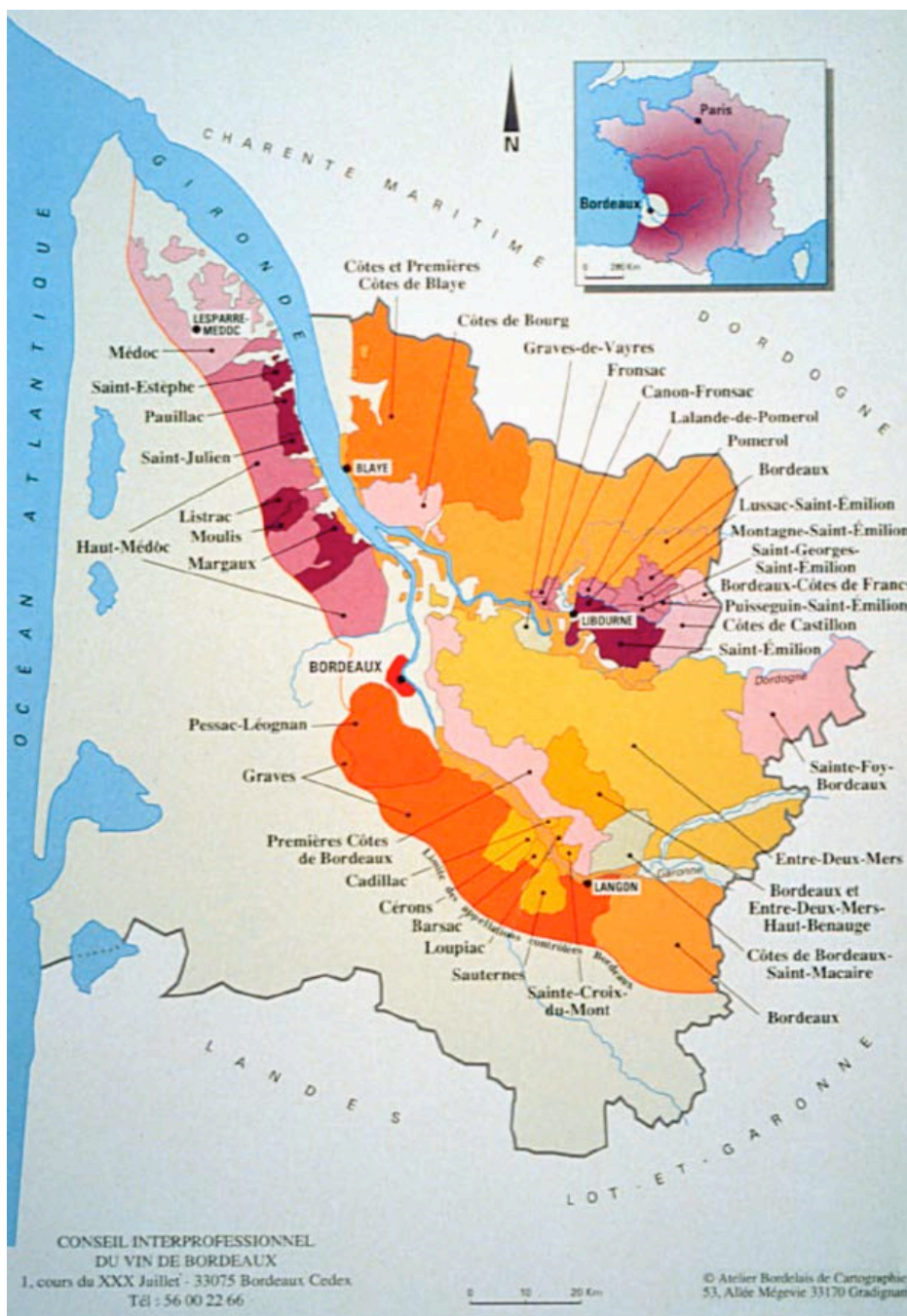
In Bordeaux, the main, official classifications are based on the wine estate, not the area or land (as it is, for example, in Burgundy). The need for a classification of the best Bordeaux wines arose for the 1855 Paris Exposition (*Le Exposition Universelle de Paris*), at the request of Emperor Napoleon III. The classification of Médoc Chateaux was the first and remains the most famous classification. The 1855 classification ranks 60 of the top Chateaux in the Médoc, plus the Chateau Haut-Brion in Pessac-Léognan (Graves). The Chateaux are ranked into 5 categories, from Premier Cru (or First Growth), down to Cinquième Cru (Fifth Growth). Later classifications came along, but the 1855 remains the best recognized and, by law, cannot be changed. In 1954, St.-Émilion was classified with the stipulation it be revised every 10 years.

In the Médoc Appellation are three of the five Premier Cru wineries in Bordeaux: Chateaux Lafite-Rothschild, Chateaux Latour, and Chateaux Mouton-Rothschild. Chateau Mouton-Rothschild (Pauillac, Médoc) was actually promoted from second to first growth in 1973 after decades of relentless lobbying by its powerful owner, Baron Philippe de Rothschild. These three Chateaux produce wines that might sell, on release, for \$1500 a bottle or more. In the Margaux Appellation is another Premier Cru, Chateau Margaux. The last of the Premier Cru wines, Chateaux Haut-Brion, is from Graves. South of Graves, along the Garonne River, are Bordeaux’s five sweet-wine producing communes, the two most well known being Sauternes and Barsac. Sauternes produces the expensive, world-famous, lush, tropical-flavored sweet desert wines that are made from botrytized grapes that require a laborious vilification process.

In-between the Garonne and Dordogne Rivers (which also runs into the Gironde Estuary, north of the Garonne) is a region called *Entre-Deux-Mers* (“between two seas”), where wine grapes are also grown. The compact soils of *Entre-Deux-Mers* do not lend themselves well to red grapes, but this region does produce some fine white wines (e.g., Sauvignon Blanc, Sémillon, Muscadelle).

One of the newest appellations to be recognized (in 2009) is Cotes de Bordeaux, east of the towns of Bordeaux and Langon, which brings together several *cotes* of Bordeaux under a single banner—the idea being to improve the marketability of this region’s wines and simplify the overall appellation structure (although France, with its love of tradition, remains far from the concept of “simplifying” their appellation classification). Individually, the Cotes de Bordeaux appellations were struggling to find sufficient marketing resources to combat the increasing popularity of Bordeaux-style wines from emerging wine regions, particularly in the New World. The process began officially in 1985, when the presidents of five *cotes* appellations founded the *Association des Cotes de Bordeaux*. This later became *Les Cinq Cotes de Bordeaux*, as confusion had arisen between the first name and that of the entirely separate *Premieres Cotes de Bordeaux* title. By the end of 2003, the decision had been made to create the Cotes de Bordeaux appellation (with the geographical denominations Blaye, Cadillac, Castillon

and Francs). After another few years of negotiations and red tape, the appellation was confirmed and ratified. The area produces some excellent wines that are generally priced much lower than those from the better known Left/Right Bank areas (e.g., Château Clos de la Vieille Église, Castillon Côtes de Bordeaux; \$20-\$80).



The Principal Bordeaux Appellations

On the Right Bank, west of Saint-Émilion, is the small but prestigious Pomerol appellation. Pomerol produces some of the richest and most complex red wines in Bordeaux (and some of the most expensive wines in the world). These wines are Merlot based, and they are highly regarded for their elegance, richness, and exotic aromas. Some of the best Pomerol's are Vieux Chateau Certan, Chateau Hosanna, Chateau La Violette and Chateau Bon Basteur. These chateaux epitomize both the elegance

and the complexity possible in a Merlot-based wine. These Pomerols are typically blended 80% Merlot, 20% Cabernet Franc. I rated the '05 Vieux Chateau Certan 94 pts, the '05 Hosanna 98.5 pts, the '09 La Violette 96 pts, and the '09 Bon Basteur 94 pts (2014 tastings).



05 Vieux Chateau Certan



05 Chateau Hosanna



09 Chateau Angelus

The best wine-makers in Bordeaux don't use all their grapes in their top vintages, or grand vins. The grapes they don't use may be imperfect or from younger vines, and these go into their second label wines (same winemaker, same methods). The "second labels" are not necessarily the same thing "Second Growth" (the government-based categories) although they can be. Some great second labels are Pavillon Rouge du Chateau Margaux (from Chateaux Margaux), Les Forts de Latour (from Chateau Latour), Carruades de Lafite (from Chateau Lafite-Rothschild), Le Carillon de l'Angelus (from Chateau Angelus), Le Clarence de Haut-Brion (from Chateau Haut-Brion), and Le Petit Cheval (from Chateau Cheval Blanc, a Saint-Émilion wine and one of only four to be ranked Premier Grand Cru Classé, the Right Bank's highest ranking in its classification system).

Second Growth Bordeaux (*Deuxièmes Crus*) are also considered among the best wines in the world, and these include such fine labels as Chateau Les Forts de Latour, Chateau Montrose, Chateau Cos d'Estournel, Chateau Ducru-Beaucaillou, Chateau Smith Haut Lafitte, Chateau Haut-Bailly, Chateau Pape Clément, Chateau Léoville-Las Cases, Chateau Brane Cantenac, and others. Third Growths (*Troisièmes Crus*) include Chateau Lagrange, Chateau Palmer and others. Fourth Growths (*Quatrièmes Crus*) include Chateau Saint-Pierre, Chateau Lafon-Rochet, and others. Fifth Growths (*Cinquièmes Crus*) include Chateau Du Tertre, Chateau Grand-puy-Ducasse, Chateau Dauzac, and others. The labels of Bordeaux wines always list the appellation.

Below are photos of a 2001 Chateau Lafite-Rothschild (one of the few wines I ever rated 100 points), a 1999 Chateau Margaux (which I rated 98 points), and a 1996 Chateau Haut-Brion (that I also rated 98 points):



Below is a photo of a tasting that featured two vintages of Les Forts de Latour (Chateau Latour's second growth); this lineup of non-First Growth Bordeaux ranked from a low of 94 points (Montrose) to a high of 98 points (the two Latour's):



White wines were also classified in the 1855 declaration into three categories: Superior First Growth (*Premier Cru Supérieur*), First Growth (*Premier Crus*), and Second Growths (*Deuxième Crus*). There are 2 major styles of dry Bordeaux white wines. Those made predominantly from Sémillon are fuller, while those predominant in Sauvignon Blanc are a bit lighter. Both are new French oak-barrel aged. The best white Bordeaux I've enjoyed are the Sauvignon Blanc-Sémillon blends from the Graves or

Pessac-Léognan regions (in which the Sauvignon Blanc predominates).

It can be a bit complicated finding an excellent, but inexpensive Bordeaux. The premier bottlings of the five first growth red Bordeaux will cost you \$600 to well over \$1000 per bottle upon release (partly because wealthy Chinese and Japanese are now snatching them up as futures, driving up the price). These are made from the best grapes of the season, from the best vineyards, and only after intensive cellar tasting/tracking of each batch. Of course, the First Growth-designated vintners of Bordeaux do not produce only \$1000 top cru labels, they also produce more affordable varieties (their own “second growths”). Chateau Latour produces a first growth “Grand Vin de Château Latour,” but they also produce an outstanding second growth, or “second wine,” called Les Forts de Latour (since 1966), and even a third wine, simply named Pauillac (since 1990). The Les Forts de Latours are commonly rated 90-98 points by the experts; I rate the 1990 98 points (\$200-\$300/bottle online). Domaines Barons de Rothschild (Lafite) actually has numerous Chateaux (wineries) in both France (6 in Bordeaux) and in Chile and Argentina. But, their top cru is the Chateau Lafite-Rothschild, 1st cru classé, Pauillac (80-90% Cabernet Sauvignon, 5-20% Merlot, and 0-5% Petit Verdot & Cabernet Franc), and this generally sells, on release, for \$1500-\$1800/bottle (you will see a picture of the actual Château on the label). This top cru is aged 18-20 months in 100% new French oak barrels, and 15,000 to 20,000 cases are produced annually. The price of the top cru Bordeaux red wines varies over time, as their quality improves or diminishes with aging.

There are many outstanding second through fifth growth-rated Bordeaux chateaux (including “second wines” of first growth chateaux). You can easily find and order any of these wines online. If you want to taste some of the best that Bordeaux has to offer, without spending \$1000/bottle, I would recommend these great vintages (ratings are mine, scored in 2014-2016).

Under \$100/bottle (2016 prices)

1989 Château Phelan Segur (Saint-Estephe), 92 pts
1990 Château Tertre Roteboeuf (St. Émilion), 96.5 pts
2000 Château Sansonnet (St. Émilion), 96 pts
2000 Château La Croix du Casse, 95.5 pts
2000 Château Sociando-Mallet (Haut-Medoc), 94-96 pts
2000 Château Yon Figeac (St. Émilion), 95.5-98 pts
2005 Château Monbousquet (St. Émilion), 94.5 pts
2005 Château Tour Bayard (St. Émilion), 94.5 pts
2009 Château Brane Cantenac (Margaux), 96.5 pts
2009 Château Bon Basteur (Pomerol), 94 pts
2010 Château Lilian Ladouys (St. Estephe), 94.5 pts
2010 Château Fourcas Dupré (Lustrac-Medoc), 92 pts
2014 Château Larrivet Haut-Brion (Pessac-Léognan), 92.5 pts
2010, 2011 Château Clos de La Vieille Eglise (Castillon Côtes de Bordeaux), 90.5 pts
2012 Château Le Petit Haut Lafitte, 90 pts.

\$100 to \$400 (2015 prices)

1989 Château Pichon-Longueville Baron, ~\$200 (93.5 pts)
1990 Château Angelus (St. Émilion), \$300-\$400/bottle (97.5 pts)
1990 & 2009 Château Canon la Gaffeliere (St. Émilion), ~\$150 (95 pts)
1990 Château L'Angelus (St. Émilion), \$380-\$380, 97.5 pts

1990 & 2009 Château Latour, Les Forts de Latour (Pauillac), \$200-\$300, 98 pts
 1990 Château Montrose (St. Émilion), \$125-\$200, 96 pts
 1992 Château Montrose (St. Émilion), \$125-\$200, 98 pts
 2000 Château Montrose (St. Émilion), \$125-\$200, 94-99 pts
 2000 Château Troplong-Monot (St. Émilion), \$110-\$150, 95 pts in 2013; 99.5 pts in 2016.
 2000 Château Gruaud Larose (St. Julien), \$65-\$125, 98 pts
 2000 Château La Conseillante (Pomerol), \$125-\$250, 96.5 pts
 2003 Château Léoville-Las Cases “Grand Vin de Léoville du Marquis de Las Cases (St. Julien), \$150-\$400 (98.5 pts)
 2005 Château Pape Clément, Grand Cru Classes de Graves, ~\$350, 96 pts
 2005 Château Branon (Pessac-Léognan, Grand Vin), ~\$200 (98.5 pts)
 2005 Château Hosanna (Pomerol), ~\$300 (98.5 pts)
 2009 Château Lascombes (Margaux), ~\$120, 96.5 pts
 2009 Château la Violette (Pomerol), ~\$375, 96 pts
 2009 Château Smith Haut Lafitte, Grand Cru Classé (Graves), \$700-\$950, 98 pts (100 pts by Parker)



Les Forts de Latour, Château Latour's second wine



Château Montrose, St.-Estephe



Château Smith Haut Lafitte



Château Le Bon Pasteur

Chateau Mouton-Rothschild produces 3 vintages in Bordeaux: Le Petit Mouton de Mouton Rothschild, Aile d'Argent, and the famous Châteaux Mouton-Rothschild (in the village of Pauillac, Médoc). For the latter, Baron Philippe de Rothschild long ago came up with the idea of having each year's label designed by a famous artist of the day. In 1946, this became a permanent and significant aspect of the Mouton image with labels created by some of the world's great painters and sculptors. The only exception to date was the unusual gold-enamel bottle for 2000. Artists have included some of the most celebrated of their time, including Miró, Chagall, Braque, Picasso, Francis Bacon, Dali, Jeff Koons, and even Prince Charles (the Prince of Wales). To celebrate the hundredth birthday of the acquisition of Château Mouton, the portrait of Baron Nathaniel de Rothschild appeared on the 1953 label. In 1977, Queen Elizabeth II and the Queen Mother visited the chateau and a special label was designed to commemorate the visit. Some of the Mouton labels are shown below.

Twice in the history of Château Mouton's special labels, there have been two used for the same year. The first occurred in 1978 when Montreal artist Jean-Paul Riopelle submitted two designs. Baron Philippe de Rothschild liked them equally, so he split the production run and used both designs. The 1993 Mouton label, a pencil sketch of a reclining nude by the French painter Balthus was rejected for use in the United States by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (I know, hard to believe in 1993!). So, for the U.S. market the label was made with a blank space where the image should have

been and both versions are sought after by collectors. The popularity of the label images results in auction prices for older and more collectible years being far out of sync with the other first growths, whose labels do not change year to year.



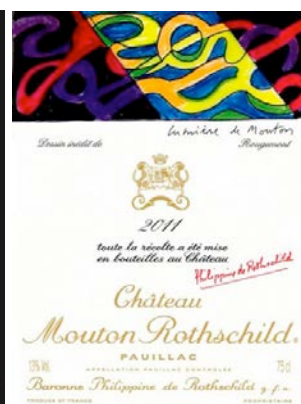
1953



1993



2000



2011

The Château Mouton-Rothschild 1970 vintage took second place, and was the highest ranked French wine at the historic 1976 Judgment of Paris wine competition. And Mouton plays an important role in the 1971 James Bond film, *Diamonds Are Forever*. Bond (played by the incomparable Sean Connery), after tasting a glass of Mouton '55, casually remarks that he had expected a Claret with such a fine dinner. When the evil Mr. Wint replies that the cellars are all out of Clarets, Bond exposes the rogue's ignorance, replying that Mouton-Rothschild is, in fact, a Claret!

In 1980, Château Mouton-Rothschild officially announced their joint venture with Robert Mondavi to create Opus One Winery in California. In 1997, Château Mouton-Rothschild teamed up with Concha y Toro of Chile to produce a quality Cabernet Sauvignon-based red wine in a new winery built in Chile's Maipo Valley, The Almaviva.

2011 was one of the hottest and driest of the last 40 years in Bordeaux. Early spring weather gave the grapes a head start, and flowering of the vines was the earliest in living memory. By the end of August, the rainfall total was nearly 8 inches below normal. Harvesting of the fully-ripened grapes began in mid-September. The result of this early spring and low rainfall was low yields, but well-structured, deep wines that Château Mouton predicts will become one of the finest in the history of Bordeaux. As I write this, bottles of Château Mouton of the famous 2000 vintage are selling for ~\$1800-\$2000 each. The 100-pt (my scale) 2001 Lafite I tasted in 2013 is currently selling in the U.S. for \$600 to \$1200/bottle (upon its initial release it probably sold for less than \$600).

There are many fine Bordeaux wines that are not "first growths" (there are many that aren't so good too!). If you want a good introduction to the red wines of Bordeaux, without breaking the bank, try a bottle Château Rauze Lafargue, Primières Cotes de Bordeaux, or Château du Retout Cru Bourgeois or Château Clos de la Vieille Église, Castillon Côtes de Bordeaux—at ~\$20 - \$25 these are hard to beat. I would also recommend Beau Soleil, Château St. André Corbin, Château Paloumey (Cru Bourgeois), or Château Féret Lambert, Grand vin de Bordeaux Superieur (\$25-\$30). And, if you're willing to go to \$30, the 2010 Château de Ferrand St. Émilion Grand Cru will let you taste an excellent Right Bank Bordeaux. There are many many others, of course, so have a conversation with a local Sommelier or wine steward that you trust, or spend some time on-line (see listings above). One of the best white Bordeaux I've had is the 2011 Château La Louviere (85% Sauvignon Blanc, 15% Semillon), from Graves (\$40-\$50); unfortunately, the market seems to be flooded at this moment with the 2009, which

is only average and is over-priced. The vintage year is very important (for any wine) because of climate variability; for Left Bank red Bordeaux some of the best recent years that you might want to “invest in” are: 1989, 1990, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2005, 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2015. It’s probably best to avoid Bordeaux from 2003, 2007, 2011, 2012, and 2013. As global climate change progresses, Bordeaux is one of the lucky wine regions where warmer days and nights are allowing grapes to ripen faster, produce more sugar, avoid frost damage, and produce more consistently fine wines year after year.

A NOTE ON BORDEAUX WINE CLASSIFICATIONS (the “Appellation Laws”): When people use the terms first growth, second growth, *premier cru*, etc. they are usually referring to the original (1855) classification system described above. However, other classifications for Bordeaux wines exist. In 1954, the red wines of Saint-Émilion were given their own classification system, comprising two categories—*Premier Grand Cru Classé* (13 châteaux) and *Grand Cru Classé* (55 châteaux). The Saint-Émilion classification is reviewed and updated every 10 years, but be aware that wines classified under this system as *Premier Grand Cru* do not hold that ranking in the 1855 system. Only two wines in the Saint-Émilion appellation were given an “A” ranking among the *Premier Grand Cru Classé*—Château Cheval Blanc and Château Ausone—and these are sometimes loosely referred to as First Growths, although they do not hold that title by the 1855 classification system. Be that as it may, the red wines of Saint-Émilion are indisputably some of the best in the world. In 1959, the Graves Classification was created for 16 châteaux. As one might suspect, the 1855 classification is criticized by many people for a variety of reasons, one being that the great red wines of Saint-Émilion and Pomerol (Right Bank appellations) are not included. In France, the inertia of history has great momentum.