

A Very Brief Introduction to Bordeaux Wines
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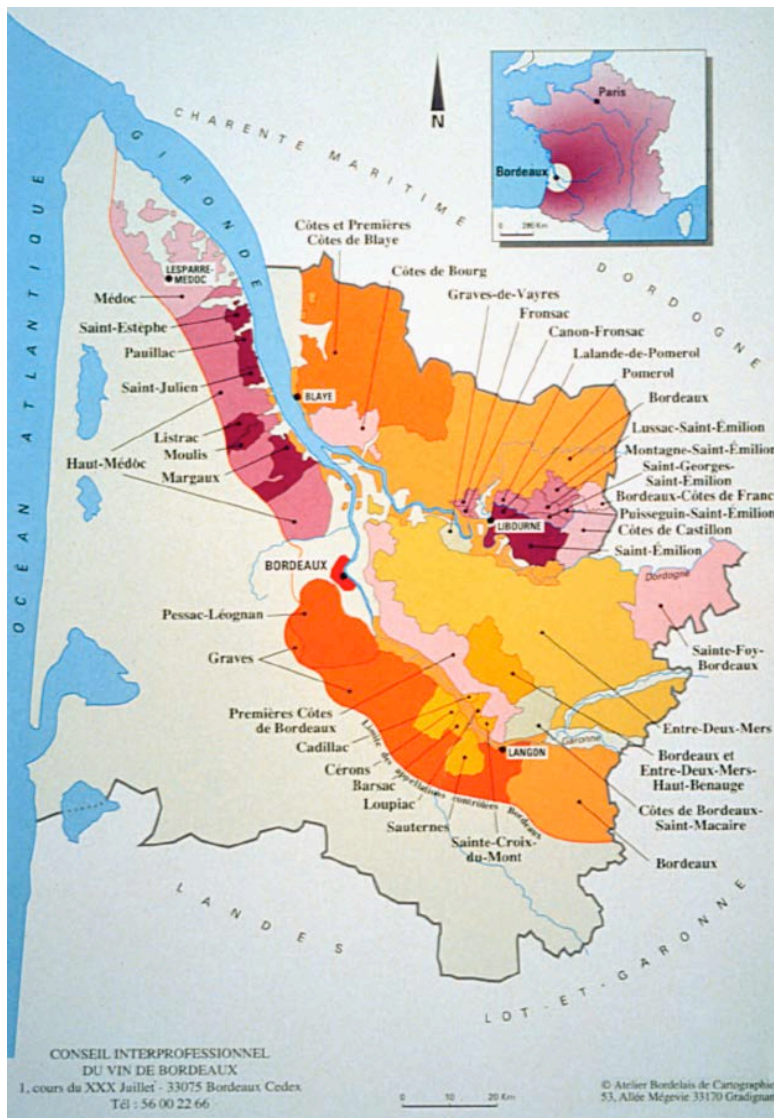
A “Bordeaux wine” is any wine produced in the Bordeaux region of France, centered on the city of Bordeaux and covering the whole of France’s Gironde Department. Bordeaux has a total vineyard area of over 120,000 hectares, making it the largest wine-growing region in France, and it is generally viewed as the most prestigious wine-producing area in the world. In fact, many consider Bordeaux the birthplace of modern wine culture. It is certainly the leading producer of high-quality red wines in the world. Average Bordeaux years produce over 700 million bottles of wine, ranging from large quantities of everyday table wine, to some of the most expensive and prestigious wines known. About 89% of wine produced in Bordeaux is red (red Bordeaux are often called “clarets” in Great Britain and 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 (Crémant de Bordeaux) collectively making up the remainder. 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*.

“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.). Although most of the best California Cabernet Sauvignons have long been blended in the Bordeaux style, recently some red wines from California have taken to being labeled “Meritage,” a California-coined term that overtly implies blending in (or usually beyond) a Bordeaux style. (In California, a wine labeled Cabernet Sauvignon must, by law, be a minimum of 75% that grape.) The best California Cabernet Sauvignons are difficult to distinguish from true Bordeaux, although they can often be distinguished by their somewhat more fruit-forward flavor and higher alcohol.

The Bordeaux region has 57 named and regulated appellations, over 10,000 producers, and 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 and deeper, more tannic, more complex, and emphasize Cabernet Sauvignon, whereas those from the “Right Bank” (right side of the Garonne River/Gironde Estuary) tend to emphasize Merlot grapes and, while often being quite elegant (notably those of the Saint-Émilion and Pomerol regions), 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 96-100 points (and can bring tears to your eyes upon first sip). You can usually tell Right Vs. Left Bank from the nose, the dominant Merlot Vs. Cabernet Sauvignon typically being quite evident.

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 made).



The Principal Bordeaux Appellations

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). 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 result was the “Bordeaux Wine Official Classification of 1855,” which ranked the red wines of Bordeaux into five categories, from

first to fifth *crus* (=first to fifth “growths”). [*Cru* is the French term for an officially classified wine or vineyard.] The top category (First Growth Wines/*Premiers Crus*) are all from the Left Bank, and they remain among the most expensive wines in the world; these wines (the “Fab Five”), and their appellations are:

- Château Lafite-Rothschild (Pauillac, Médoc), designated in 1855
- Château Latour (Pauillac, Médoc), designated in 1855
- Château Margaux (Margaux, Médoc), designated in 1855
- Château Haut-Brion (Péssac-Leognan) designated in 1855 (note: the Péssac-Leognan appellation was distinguished from the general Graves appellation in 1988).
- Château Mouton-Rothschild (Pauillac, Médoc), promoted from second to first growth in 1973 after decades of relentless lobbying by its powerful owner, Baron Philippe de Rothschild.

The principal wine regions of the Left Bank are Médoc and Graves, and within these are numerous designated appellations. In Médoc, the most famous are Pauillac, Margaux, St-Estéphe, St-Julien and Haut-Médoc. In Graves are Pessac-Léognan and Sauternes. The last mentioned appellation produces the expensive, world-famous, lush, tropical-flavored sweet desert wines that are made from botrytized grapes that require a laborious vinification process. Great Right Bank Bordeaux appellations include: Saint-Émilion, Pomerol, Blaye, and Bourg. 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).

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 Château Certan, Château Hosanna, Château La Violette and Château Bon Basteur. The first epitomizes elegance, the second captures the complexity possible in a Merlot-based wine. Both of these Pomerols are typically blended 80% Merlot, 20% Cabernet Franc. I rated the 05 Vieux Château Certan 94 pts, the 05 Château Hosanna 98.5 pts, the 09 La Violette 96 pts, and the 09 Bon Basteur 94 pts (2014 tastings).



05 Vieux Château Certan



05 Château Hosanna



09 Château Angelus

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

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



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 had 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 well over \$1000 per bottle, upon release (partly because the 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”). Château 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 Latour 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 Châteaux (wineries) in both France (6 in Bordeaux) and in Chile and Argentina. But, their top cru is the Château Lafite-Rothschild, 1st cru classé, Pauillac (80-90% Cabernet Sauvignon, 5-20% Merlot, and 0-5% Petit Verdot & Cabernet Franc), and this generally sells, upon release, for \$1200-\$1500/bottle (you will see a picture of the actual Château on the label).

This top cru is aged 18-20 months in 100% new 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 growth-rated Bordeaux châteaux (and “second wines” of first growth châteaux), including the famous Smith Haut Lafite (I rated the 2009 at 98 points; Parker rated this one 100 points and as a result bottles now go for ~\$1000). If you want to taste some of the best that Bordeaux has to offer, without spending \$1000/bottle, I would recommend two great “bargain” second growths (under \$100/bottle): 09 Château Brane Cantenac (Margaux), rated 96.5 points, and 09 Château Bon Pasteur (Pomerol), rated 94 points. A bit more expensive is the exquisite Château Angelus (St. Emilion), at \$300-\$400/bottle (97.5 pts).



Les Forts de Latour, Château Latour's second wine



Château Montrose, St.-Estephe



Château Smith Haut Lafite



Château Le Bon Pasteur

Château 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 château 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.



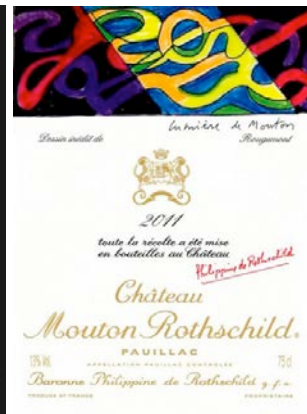
1953



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 ~\$1500-\$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 \$500).

There are many fine Bordeaux wines ranked in the 2nd through 5th growth categories (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*—at ~\$15 - \$20 these are hard to beat. I would also recommend *Beau Soleil*, *Château St. André Corbin*, or *Château Féret Lambert*, *Grand vin de Bordeaux Supérieur* (\$25-\$30). And, if you're willing to go to \$30, the 2010 *Château de Ferrand St. Emilion Grand Cru* will let you taste an excellent Right Bank Bordeaux (this is an exquisite Bordeaux, rated 94.5 pts in my personal database). 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. 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 and 2011. 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: When people use the terms first growth, second growth, *premier cru*, etc. they are usually referring to the original (1855) classification system described above. This classification includes 60 Châteaux, divided into 5 categories called growths or *crus*, as noted 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.