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Bordeaux Bordeaux is the largest appellation region in France, in terms of both volume and value. It is home to many of the most prestigious names in fine wine. However, these wines only represent a tiny proportion of total production and there is a massive gap between the resources available to a few very wealthy producers and the vast majority of growers and producers.

CLIMATE AND GRAPE GROWING

Bordeaux has a moderate maritime climate that benefits from the effect of the Gulf Stream. This warming ocean current extends the growing season: spring frosts are rarely a problem and grape ripening can continue well into October. However, the Atlantic also brings high levels of rainfall and humidity. The vineyards are protected from the worst of the Atlantic storms by the Landes forest and the coastal sand dunes that lie to the west of the region. Rain falls throughout the year and can disrupt flowering and fruit set, promote rot and dilute the flavours in the grapes at harvest. Consequently, vintage variation is an important consideration in Bordeaux although the top producers can greatly reduce the differences in style and quality between the vintages by rejecting unhealthy and unripe grapes. Changes in canopy management techniques have resulted in healthier grapes (plus a decline in the use of sprays) and a marked rise in the levels of sugar and flavour development at harvest time.

GRAPE VARIETIES AND WINEMAKING

Almost all red Bordeaux wines and most Bordeaux whites are produced from a blend of grape varieties. The variability in the weather, in particular rainfall, means

that it can be very risky to rely too heavily on one variety. The different varieties permitted in Bordeaux flower and ripen at different times, meaning that one bad frost or heavy shower is unlikely to ruin an entire crop.

Thirteen grape varieties are permitted under the appellation regulations, but in practice three black grapes and two white predominate.

Black Varieties

Cabernet Sauvignon dominates in the Haut-Médoc, and it is also very important in the Bas-Médoc and the Graves. The high stone/gravel content of the soils here raises vineyard temperature and consequently these are the only areas where Cabernet can reliably ripen. Here it can account for three-quarters of the blend in the finest wines.

Cabernet Franc is widely used in Saint-Émilion and, to a lesser extent, in the Médoc and Graves. It produces wines with less body and tannin than Cabernet Sauvignon. It can have herbaceous or stalky flavours when unripe but when ripe it can contribute vibrant fruit and floral notes to a blend. Like Cabernet Sauvignon it prefers well drained warm soils.

Merlot is the most widely planted variety in Bordeaux and is particularly important in the premium wines of Saint-Émilion and Pomerol. This is because Merlot can successfully grow on the cooler clay soils found in these areas, whereas Cabernet Sauvignon would struggle to ripen. Merlot's softness means it is usually the grape that is predominant in high volume, inexpensive wines.

Petit Verdot has far smaller plantings than the three black varieties above. It ripens fully only in very hot years, giving a very deep-coloured, tannic wine that ages slowly. It never plays more than a minor role in a blend, where it is used mainly to add tannin, colour and some spicy notes.

Winemaking practices are very varied. This is a reflection of the style of wine being made and the resources available to the producer. There is little agreement over which fermentation vessels produce the best wines: some of the best producers use the traditional oak vats as well as steel or concrete vats to increase their blending options.

Most wines are blended in the spring following the vintage, although some winemakers prefer to keep their different parcels of wine separate until the end of maturation. In order to maintain the quality and style

A vineyard in the Haut-Médoc showing the high gravel content of the soil.



of their top wine, most of the leading châteaux now make second and even third wines from blends that are not suitable for the *grand vin* (best wine). Some wine may even be sold off to a *négociant*.

Top-quality red Bordeaux is aged in small oak *barriques* of 225 litres. In the finest châteaux, all the wine may be put into new casks. Lesser properties may use a smaller proportion of new casks and generic Bordeaux wines are unlikely to see oak at all.

Constant improvements in the winery have led to riper, fruitier and more concentrated wines even in difficult vintages.

White Varieties

Given its thin skin and affinity for noble rot, **Sémillon** is the most important variety for sweet wines in Bordeaux. It is also blended with Sauvignon Blanc in the premium dry white wines of Pessac-Léognan and Graves, where it adds body to these wines.

In Bordeaux, **Sauvignon Blanc** produces wines with citrus and green fruit aromas. It is used increasingly for varietal, dry white wines: the one exception to the generalisation that all Bordeaux wines are blends. In blended wines it provides high acidity, which is particularly necessary for sweet wines. **Muscadelle** has a pronounced grapey, floral flavour and plays an important supporting role in sweet and dry white wine production.

It only makes up a small percentage of any blend.

Similar to the red wines, dry white Bordeaux is also made in a range of styles. Those at the lower end of the market tend to be fresh and fruity, fermented in temperature controlled, inert vessels with minimal further ageing, but some show toasty hints of oak. Premium dry whites from Pessac-Léognan are frequently fermented and matured in new oak barrels and have a richness and concentrated nutty flavour overlaying the fruit. The great sweet wines of Bordeaux are made from fruit that has been infected by noble rot. The best examples are fermented and matured in new oak barrels for anything up to three years.

REGIONS AND WINES

The Dordogne and Garonne rivers combine to form the Gironde Estuary and divide the Bordeaux vineyards into three broad areas. West and south of the Gironde/Garonne lie the districts of Médoc, Graves and Sauternes. This area is often referred to as the Left Bank. Most of the area between the Dordogne and the Garonne is covered by the appellation Entre-Deux-Mers. Finally, the principal districts to the north and east of the Gironde and Dordogne are Saint-Émilion and Pomerol, commonly referred to as the Right Bank.

There are over 50 different appellations in Bordeaux. They range in size from the very large generic

BORDEAUX CLASSIFICATIONS

With the exception of Saint-Émilion, Bordeaux's classification systems lie outside of the appellation system. Furthermore, the classifications do not rank individual vineyards but individual estates, commonly known as the châteaux. Over the years the estate may vary in size due to the purchase or sale of individual vineyard plots. Thus a château name is more of a brand than a designation of a specific vineyard.

The Médoc and Sauternes

In 1855, on the occasion of the Paris Universal Exhibition, the Bordeaux Chamber of Commerce was approached to produce an official list of their best red wines from the Médoc and white wines from Sauternes. This is now known as the 1855 Classification. Over the intervening years the classified châteaux have undergone numerous changes in their number, size and ownership, and in the quality of the wine made; how far the 1855 Classification actually represents the current quality levels of the wines is a constant source of debate. Nevertheless, the classification still stands virtually intact. Châteaux that are listed within this classification are referred to as *crus classés*. In the Médoc, the châteaux were divided into five ranks. The top rank consists of Châteaux Lafite Rothschild, Latour, Margaux and Mouton Rothschild, together with Château Haut-Brion from the Graves. In Sauternes there are three ranks, Château d'Yquem occupying the top rank.

The 1855 Classification accounted for only a very small number of the estates of the Médoc and therefore a further classification of *cru bourgeois* was later introduced for the other châteaux. Currently, *cru bourgeois* is only awarded to wines in a specific vintage, rather than to the château itself, and therefore wines from new vintages must be submitted each year to gain classification.

Graves (Pessac-Léognan)

The wines of the Graves are classified with parallel, but separate, lists for red and white wines. There is no ranking: all listed wines may simply call themselves *crus classés*. All the *cru classé* châteaux now lie within the limits of the Pessac-Léognan, as this appellation was created after the Graves classification was drawn up.

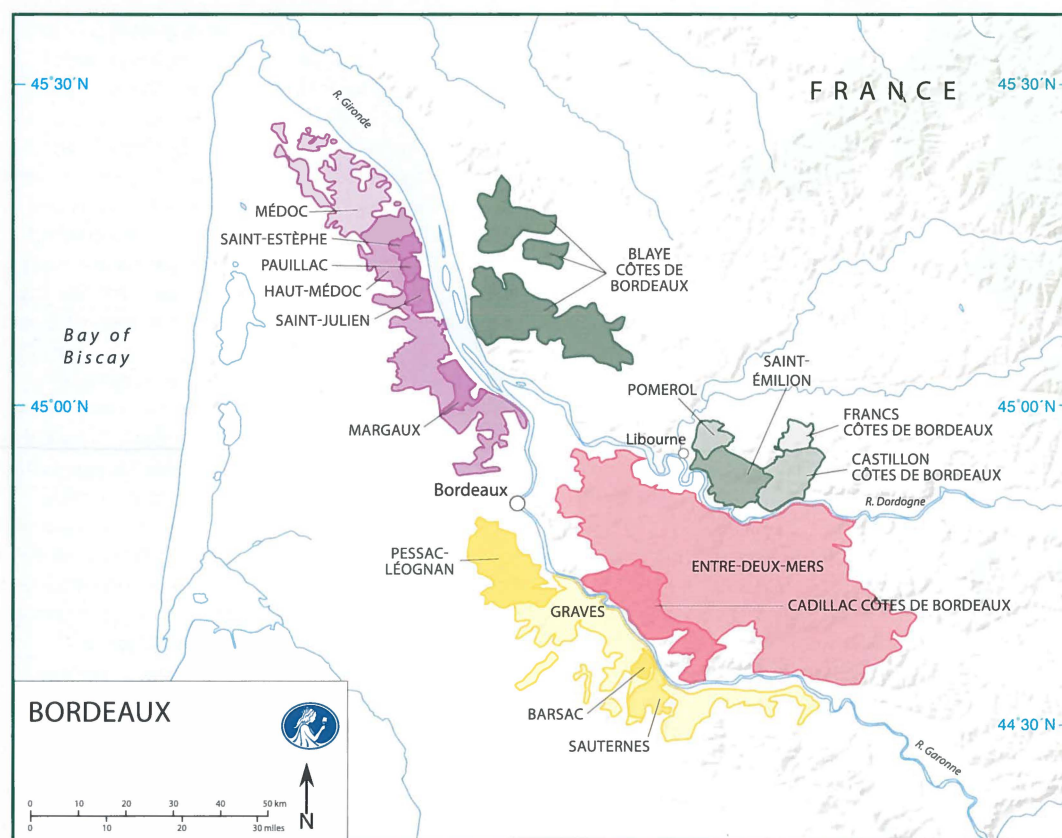
Saint-Émilion Grand Cru

The classification system in Saint-Émilion is integrated into the appellation system. Within Saint-Émilion there is a separate appellation Saint-Émilion Grand Cru, and within this appellation there is a classification of the best châteaux. The lower step within the classification is simply Saint-Émilion Grand Cru Classé. Above this comes Saint-Émilion Premier Grand Cru Classé, which is subdivided into *Premier Grand Cru Classé A* (the best), and *Premier Grand Cru Classé B*. There are reclassifications, with the possibility of promotion and demotion, which occur at least once every ten years.

KEY

100–200 m

0–100 m



appellations, which cover the whole vineyard area, down to the small commune appellations. Unlike Burgundy, these various appellations do not form a neat hierarchy based on quality and it is easier to look at them in groups based on the styles of wine made in them.

Generic Appellations

The output of the generic appellations is mainly red labelled as either **Bordeaux** or **Bordeaux Supérieur** (the latter designation has slightly stricter appellation rules and requires a higher level of alcohol in the final wine). The remainder is white labelled as Bordeaux and rosé labelled as Bordeaux Rosé or Bordeaux Clairet. The standard of these basic Bordeaux wines has improved considerably and continues to do so as export-focused producers are trying to ensure that their wines can compete with similarly priced wines from other parts of the world.

At their best, red Bordeaux and Bordeaux Supérieur are early drinking medium-bodied wines with ripe red and black fruit, and sometimes cedar notes from oak. The cheapest can be lighter in body and have more astringent tannins than the better wines. The best Bordeaux rosé is fresh and fruity with an increasing number of producers making high-quality examples. Clairet is a style of wine that is mainly popular on the French market. It undergoes a longer maceration than a typical rosé and is deeper in colour and fuller in body.

White Bordeaux is increasingly dominated by Sauvignon Blanc and shows a vibrant grassy character.

The Reds of Médoc and Graves

The Médoc lies to the north of the city of Bordeaux and Graves lies to the south. The northernmost part of the Médoc is called the Bas-Médoc, and the wines from here are labelled simply **Médoc**. Here, the soil is predominantly clay, but there are outcrops of gravel. These wines tend to have a higher proportion of Merlot in the blend than those just to the south and tend to be more early-drinking in style. From Saint-Estèphe southwards lies the more highly rated area of the **Haut-Médoc**. Within the Haut-Médoc there are a number of smaller appellations, sometimes referred to as 'communes', in which most of the higher classified châteaux can be found. From north to south, the four with the highest reputation are **Saint-Estèphe**, **Pauillac**, **Saint-Julien** and **Margaux**. These wines have a high percentage of Cabernet Sauvignon in the blend and generally display a core of blackcurrant fruit, complemented by cedar notes from oak. They can have grippy tannins when young, and often have a long ageing potential.

Immediately to the south of Bordeaux lies the **Pessac-Léognan**, the most highly rated area in Graves. Soils, like those of the Haut-Médoc, are gravelly and well-suited to

Cabernet Sauvignon, but in general the wines are a little lighter in body and more fragrant than the finest wines of the Haut-Médoc. Wines from the top châteaux are made with as much care as any in Bordeaux, with prices to match. **Graves** extends to the south of Pessac-Léognan, making red wines that are similar in style, but less concentrated and complex, and usually with a higher proportion of Merlot.

Saint-Émilion and Pomerol

The wines of the Right Bank are dominated by Merlot and to a lesser extent Cabernet Franc. **Saint-Émilion** is the larger of the two principal appellations, with three distinct groups of vineyards on differing soils. First are the vineyards on a plateau to the north and west of the town of Saint-Émilion. Here, areas of warm, well-drained gravel and limestone soils encourage the inclusion of Cabernet Franc and, occasionally, some Cabernet Sauvignon. Second, there are vineyards on the escarpment to the south and east with clay limestone soils. The most prestigious wines of Saint-Émilion come from these two sub-regions. The wines have medium to high tannins but, compared with the more structured wines of the Left Bank, they have a soft and rich mouthfeel with complex red berry fruit and plum aromas, developing tobacco and cedar notes as they evolve. Finally, the vineyards on sandy soils at the foot of the escarpment are typically a source of lighter-bodied, less prestigious wines.

The reputation of nearby **Pomerol** is as high as that of Saint-Émilion. The wines tend to be richer, with a spicier, blackberry fruit character.

A movement that has been particularly associated with these Right-Bank appellations is the appearance of full-bodied, incredibly ripe wines made in tiny quantities from small plots of land, and with no expense spared in the vineyard or the winery. The collective term *vins de garage* was once frequently employed to describe these



wines (and the term *garagiste* used to describe the winemaker); however, many of them are now famous in their own right and have been classified within the Saint-Émilion appellation system.

Pomerol and Saint-Émilion are surrounded by a group of appellations that produce Merlot dominated wines that are stylistically similar to the more famous appellations.

Côtes de Bordeaux

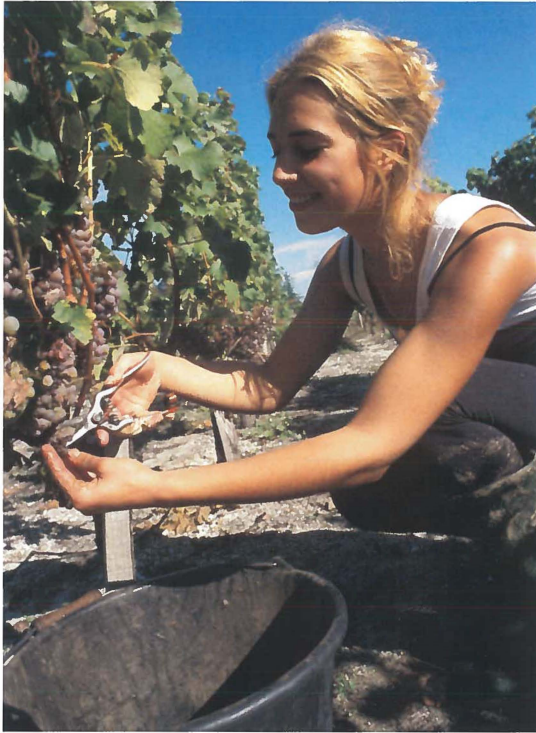
There is a group of lesser-known red wine appellations that have agreed to share the name **Côtes de Bordeaux**. The appellations of Blaye, Cadillac, Castillon and Francs are able to put their names in front of Côtes de Bordeaux. The wines from these appellations tend to be

New oak *barriques* being made in a cooperage in Bordeaux. The heat is needed to soften the wood so it can be bent into shape.



A sorting table in a vineyard in the Médoc. Some producers choose to do this in the winery.

The botrytis-affected grapes used for Sauternes cannot be harvested by machine and must be selectively picked by hand.



Merlot based and meant for early drinking. The best wines can offer excellent value for money. The producers in Côtes de Bourg who make wines of a similar style chose not to join this group. Note that Premières Côtes de Bordeaux is a sweet wine appellation, unconnected with the Côtes de Bordeaux group.

Premium Dry White Wines

A few appellations are permitted to produce dry white wines. **Entre-Deux-Mers**, a large appellation located between the Rivers Garonne and Dordogne, can only produce white wines (red wines from this area must

be labelled with a generic appellation name). The appellations of **Graves** and **Pessac-Léognan** are permitted to produce white wines as well as reds. The white wines of Graves and Entre-Deux-Mers tend to be made from Sauvignon Blanc in an unoaked style. Pessac-Léognan is the home of many of the very best dry whites, and here the whites may be eligible for *cru classé* status. They tend to be blends of Sauvignon Blanc and Sémillon and have usually been fermented and/or matured at least partly in new oak, giving a medium to full body and toasty oak flavours. Some producers in Médoc and Sauternes also produce premium dry whites. However, these wines cannot be sold using these appellations and instead they are sold using the generic Bordeaux appellation.

Sweet Wines

The top sweet wine appellations of Bordeaux are grouped on the banks of the Garonne and its tributary the Ciron. The rivers create the ideal misty autumn conditions for noble rot to develop on fully ripened grapes. The level of noble rot in the vineyard varies from year to year. *Passerillage* is needed to help concentrate sugars in years when there is little noble rot.

The best wines come from **Sauternes**, which lies on the west bank of the Garonne. Within Sauternes lies the village of **Barsac**. Producers in Barsac have the right to use either the appellation of Barsac or that of Sauternes. In these appellations, Sémillon dominates because of its thin skin and susceptibility to botrytis. Sauvignon Blanc supplies refreshing acidity and fruity aromas, and Muscadelle, where used, adds exotic perfume. The best wines tend to be high in alcohol, sweet yet balanced by high acidity, and display the apricot and citrus peel aromas of noble rot, along with notes of toast and vanilla from oak fermentation and/or maturation.

There are a number of other sweet wine appellations near Sauternes that are made in a similar style.