

Week 2 - Bordeaux

Grape Variety

Nearly all Bordeaux wines, including the greatest, are blends of different varieties. For red wines Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc predominate. **Merlot** (40,000 Ha) is most widely planted. It is especially prominent in the Cotes, Pomerol and Saint Emilion. With lower tannin and acid levels and higher sugar content than Cabernet Sauvignon it generally produces “smoother” and fruitier wines. **Cabernet Sauvignon** (25,000 Ha) is especially prominent in the Graves and Haut-Medoc. Intense blackcurrant aromas, moderate to high acidity and high tannins yield complex full-bodied wines that can age for decades. **Cabernet Franc** (13,000 Ha) is grown for acidity and fragrance. Supporting roles are played by **Malbec** (color and body) **Petit Verdot** (color, acidity and tannins) and **Carmenere** (color).

The white wines are also almost always blends. **Semillon** is most widely planted (12,000 Ha). It adds richness, structure and aging potential to dry whites. Also can be significant for acidity. Most notable for its susceptibility to botrytis, or noble rot. Also widely planted is **Sauvignon Blanc** (4500 Ha) Dominates the dry whites. Adds fragrance and acidity. **Muscadelle** (1800 Ha) adds fragrance and fruitiness, especially in sweet whites. Bit parts are played by Merlot Blanc, Ondenc, Mauzac, Colombard, and Ugni Blanc. These are significant for yield and volume rather than any particular quality.

Geographical Boundaries

Bordeaux is a large and ancient wine region in the southwest corner of France, with almost 120,000 Ha planted by 13,000 different wineries. There are 57 (!) different appellations, producing over 650 million bottles a year. This gives the Bordelais the challenge of selling 21 bottles per second, 24 hours a day!

The region is flat and hugs the Gironde and its feeder rivers the Dordogne and the Garonne. The best sites in the Medoc and Graves are quite gravelly and well drained, with more calcareous (clay) soils in the Libournais.

Viticultural Methods

Mainly Guyot training, with low vines and lots of trimming. Rots are common in the damp air, so copper sulphate is de rigueur. Dry whites and merlot are picked first, cabernet usually last. Harvest for dry wines is almost always complete by October 1; sweets may not be done until late November.

Harvest and Yield Restrictions

These vary among the different appellations, with the highest yields allowed to Bordeaux simple, and the sweet whites with the lowest yields.

Minimum Alcoholic Content

Minimum alc/vol is 10%, although in practice most are between 11% and 12.5%. Historically 12.5% has been considered ideal, and is sometimes referred to as Bordeaux weight. Bordeaux reaching a non-chaptalized strength of 11.5% are entitled to the appellation Bordeaux Superieur.

Winemaking Techniques

This region has been an academy for the wine-makers of the world for generations. Fermentations here tend to be slightly warmer than in high end new world wineries, and use of new oak much less prevalent.

Making Sense of This

It helps to remember that there are six families of Bordeaux wines...

1. Bordeaux and Bordeaux Superieur

This appellation is the most common, and can apply to all wines grown in the region. Usually simple everyday drinking, this accounts for half of all Bordeaux, and also represents the area of the region most in crisis. Could be red, white or pink.

2. Libournais (aka Pomerol/St Emilion/Fronsac)

The Libournais vineyards include the prestigious Saint-Emilion and Pomerol wine-producing districts. Situated on the eastern, or right, bank of the Gironde River, the soil is particularly suited for growing Merlot. Libournais wines are generally softer and fruitier than Médoc and Graves wines. They are medium-to full-bodied and can be enjoyed young, but the best appellations should be aged. Other appellations include Saint-Emilion Grand Cru, and the "satellite" appellations of Montagne-Saint-Emilion, Lussac-Saint-Emilion, Puisseguin-Saint-Emilion, Saint-Georges-Saint-Emilion. Lalande-de-Pomerol, Fronsac, and Canon-Fronsac round out the family. The Libournais appellations are for red wine only.

3. Cotes de Bordeaux

The Côtes de Bordeaux vineyards (their name comes from the hillsides along the right banks of the Garonne and the Dordogne Rivers) are spread across the entire region, producing red white and sweet wines. The various Côtes appellations of the Bordeaux region are light- to medium-bodied wines. Some key Côtes appellations are Premières Côtes de Bordeaux, Premières Côtes de Blaye, Côtes de Bourg, Côtes de Castillon, and Côtes de Francs. These are often good values, and there are some age-worthy wines among them, especially from strong vintages. Soon to be merged into two appellations.

4. Medoc and Graves

This is the heart of fine Bordeaux. Médoc (on the western, or left, bank of the Gironde estuary) and Graves (south of the city of Bordeaux) are renowned for the most prestigious châteaux where some of the best and most age-worthy wines in the world are produced. The dominant grape here is Cabernet Sauvignon and in general the wines merit long aging to enhance their rich and complex flavors. Other appellations include Haut-Médoc, Saint-Estèphe, Pauillac, Saint-Julien, Lustrac, Moulis, and Margaux. These apply only to red wines. South of Bordeaux city the Graves and Pessac-Léognan appellations produce red and white wines.

5. Dry Whites

Dry whites are produced throughout the region, especially in the rolling Entre-deux-Mers, literally "between the two seas." The "seas" in question are the rivers Dordogne and Garonne. The dry whites basically fall into two styles, light and delicate with a crisp bouquet (spread throughout the region), or fuller bodied and aged in oak (almost exclusively in Pessac-Leognan). Other white appellations include Bordeaux, Graves, Entre-Deux-Mers, Côtes de Blaye, Premières Côtes de Blaye, Côtes de Bourg, Côtes de Francs and Pessac-Léognan.

6. Sweet Whites

World-famous golden sweet white wines are produced in a pockets ythroughout the region, but most come from a very small part of the southern Bordeaux region, most famously in Sauternes and Barsac. Sweet white wines can be both medium and full-bodied. The dominant varietal is the Sémillon grape. The most famous of Bordeaux's sweet white wine-producing regions is Sauternes, whose classified châteaux produce luscious wines worthy of aging to bring out their intense flavor. Other appellations include Barsac, Loupiac, Sainte-Croix-du-Mont, Cadillac and Cérons.