

The Fine Wines of Bordeaux

By Jim Bryant

While it's true that there has never been so much good wine available from so many worldwide viticultural areas, the currently available and highly praised 2003 and 2005 Bordeaux varieties now being offered give us a wonderful reason to look at this famous region.

Bordeaux, a port city on the southwest coast of France, is renowned for producing excellent to great wines (mostly red). In fact, most wine experts defer to Bordeaux or Burgundy as the source of the world's greatest wines.

Situated just inland from the Atlantic, the Bordeaux region is divided into the right and left banks of the Gironde River. Wines from this area became well known over the past several centuries as the preferred drink of French and English aristocrats, as well as of wine and food lovers who could afford the best wines.

The first reference to a Bordeaux was by Samuel Pepys in 1663, and by the late eighteenth century, the greatest vineyards were established. Fame accelerated after the Bordeaux Classification of 1855 was developed to focus tourism on Bordeaux after that year's Paris Universal Exhibition. Essentially, the classification was a grouping of the greatest left-bank wineries (called Médoc wines). These included wineries in the communes of St-Estephe, Pauillac, St-Julien, and Margaux as well as Haut Brion from the Graves commune.

The ranking of these 61 wines into five levels, or "growths," closely followed historical and contemporary pricing levels. A "first-growth" wine is considered the finest. This classification has endured with only one change—the elevation of Château Mouton-Rothschild from second to first growth in 1973. There are similar rankings for Graves as well as St-Emilion.

My favorites from the 1855 Classification include the five first growths Châteaux Lafite-Rothschild, Mouton-Rothschild, Margaux,



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Latour and Haut Brion, as well as La Mission Haut Brion, Cos d'Estournel, Gruaud Larose, Leoville-Las-Cases, Pichon-Longueville-Comtesse-de-Lalande, Talbot, Grand-Puy-Lacoste, Lynch Bages, and Haut-Bages-Libéral.

Are the 1855 Classification wines worthy of the lofty prices and attention given them by wine aficionados worldwide? I believe they are, especially in great vintages. As in most cases, you get what you pay for (however, there are many viable and less-expensive Bordeaux alternatives to these, including Chasse Spleen, Les Forts de la Tour, Pape-Clément, and Sociando-Mallet, as well as others from the Haut Médoc).

While the best 1855 Classification wines are expensive compared to all but high-quality Burgundies, Northern Rhone wines, and several cult wines from Australia and California, they are simply incomparable when drunk at maturity (10 to 30 or more years post-vintage) with the appropriate food. Favorite food pairings include venison, steak *au poivre*, roasted beef, veal, and chicken, Cornish game hens, rabbit *chasseur*, beef Wellington, chicken

cordon bleu, veal chops, steak with shallots, and the quintessential rack of lamb. While great Cabernet Sauvignon from the United States or Australia could be substituted with some of the above dishes, a marriage with mature Bordeaux will be more memorable.

Visiting Bordeaux itself can also be memorable. In recent times, the châteaux have become more agreeable to opening their doors to visitors, partially because today Bordeaux is facing economic challenges. With the exception of the top châteaux, numerous other producers are in distress, due to the worldwide glut of wine, the overall improvement in global winemaking, and for Americans, a weakening of the dollar versus the Euro (as well as some residual anti-French sentiment regarding the war in Iraq). My advice is not to mix politics and wine.

Proper priority on wine led Yves Durand, author of *Connoisseur's Guide to Bordeaux Wine*, to issue one of my favorite quotes: "I look upon my wine cellar as a haven to which I can retreat and laugh at inflation, recession, and shortages." Santé. U