

Wines of France

Bordeaux



Introduction

Previewing this book?

Please [check out our enhanced preview](#), which offers a deeper look at this guidebook.

Wine guides for the ultra curious, Approach Guides take an in depth look at a wine region's grapes, appellations, and vintages to help you discover wines that meet your preferences.

Located in southwest France and pierced through its center by the Gironde river, Bordeaux is probably France's, if the world's, most famous wine-producing region. This Approach Guide is designed as a quick-reference resource for wine enthusiasts seeking to understand what makes Bordeaux's wines unique and make informed choices.

What's in this guidebook

- **Grape varieties.** We describe the primary red and white grape varieties in Bordeaux's famous blends and where they reach their highest expressions.
- **Vintage ratings.** We offer a straightforward vintage ratings table, which affords high-level insight into the best and most challenging years for wine production.
- **A Bordeaux wine label.** We explain what to look for on a Bordeaux wine label and what it tells you about what's in the bottle. In doing so, we provide background on Bordeaux's appellation system and its producer classifications.
- **Map and appellation profiles.** Leveraging our map of the region, we provide detailed profiles of each of Bordeaux's appellations. For each appellation, this guide describes the prevailing terroir, the types of wine produced, and what makes them distinctive.
- **A distinctive approach.** This guidebook's approach is unique: rather than tell you what specific bottle of wine to order by providing individual bottle reviews, it gives the information you need to make informed wine choices on any list.
- **Recommendations.** We mark our favorite appellations with asterisks (*) — our selections have a record for providing quality, consistency and good values.

Contact us anytime

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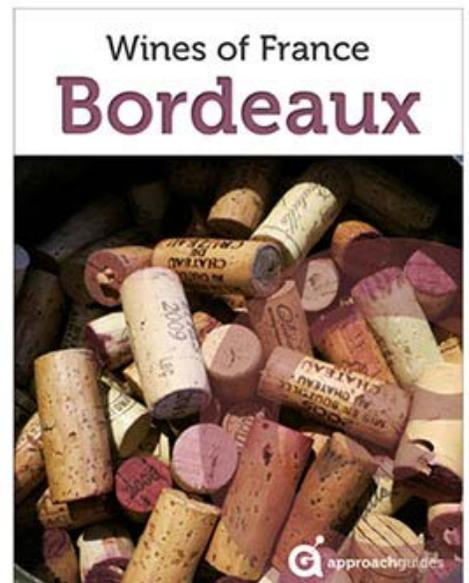
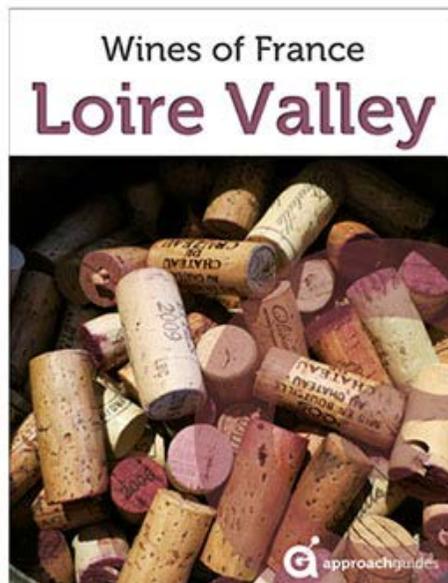
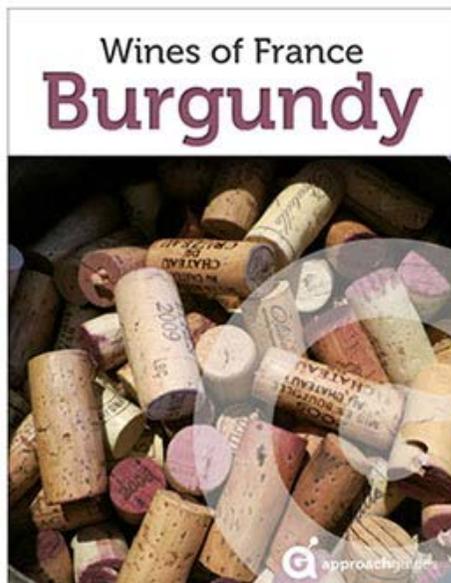
We hope this guide serves as a great resource for your wine adventures in Bordeaux and sets you on a path to making your own discoveries.

Santé!

David and Jennifer Raezer
Founders, Approach Guides
www.approachguides.com

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Wines of France: Bordeaux

Version 1.0

by [David Raezer](#) and [Jennifer Raezer](#)

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—
**“My measure is a perfectly sober one of 3. or 4. glasses at dinner,
& not a drop at any other time.
But as to these 3. or 4. glasses
Je suis bien friand [I am very fond].”**
—

Thomas Jefferson,
on his measured wine consumption,
in a 1819 letter to Stephen Cathalan, American consul at Marseilles.
He was a great admirer of the wines of Bordeaux.

PREVIEW
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How to Use This Guidebook

This is a very different kind of wine guide. It leverages the strengths of the digital medium to make understanding Bordeaux's wines easier and more intuitive.

Information

- **Emphasis on themes.** In the grape and appellation profiles, we reinforce fundamental themes that are key to understanding Bordeaux's wines.
- **Everything in context.** We place the wines of each appellation into context by comparing them to benchmarks and neighboring appellations.
- **Strategy and recommendations.** We provide a strategy for each appellation, giving particular consideration to the value proposition its wines offer. Our favorite appellations are marked with asterisks (*).

Presentation and Organization

- **Highlighted information.** The guidebook uses bullet points to organize information and bolds key points, making it easier for you to isolate what is most important.
- **Simplified navigation.** We have designed the guidebook's table of contents so that you can easily jump around to find what you are looking for. Further, you are not forced to read in linear manner, start to finish, since we repeat key points from the introduction in the individual appellation profiles.
- **Quick search.** We encourage you to use the search feature. For finding certain types information, it is even better than using the table of contents.

Overview

Key Differentiators

To begin, here are a few high-level points to help you contextualize wine production in Bordeaux.

- **France's largest wine region.** Bordeaux is France's largest wine-producing area, in terms of both geographic area (120000 hectares) and overall production (6.8 million hectoliters, equivalent to 900 million bottles).
- **Large producers.** Unlike other regions where small, independent producers abound, Bordeaux's production is dominated by large estates with large production levels. For wines from smaller producers, look to the right bank appellations.
- **Reds dominate.** Bordeaux's wine production is split 89% red, 9% dry white, and 2% sweet white.
- **Grafted rootstock.** From 1875-1892, Bordeaux's vineyards were decimated by infestations of phylloxera, a near-microscopic pest that feeds on the roots of grapevines. The only solution was to graft Bordeaux's native noble *vinifera* vines on to naturally-resistant American non-*vinifera* rootstocks. All Bordeaux vines are a product of this grafting process.
- **Flat aspect.** Unlike many of France's regions where cultivation occurs on steep hills, Bordeaux's vineyards occupy largely flat terrain, with some gently rolling hills. This enables widespread use of machine harvesting and encourages high-density planting.
- **Mild, moderate maritime climate.** Given the region's proximity to the Gulf Stream-warmed Atlantic Ocean, weather is less extreme and there is greater stability of temperatures throughout the growing season. This stability enables long hang times for the grapes (harvest occurs approximately 110 days after flowering), which affords the wines great complexity. However, in difficult years, insufficient warmth and frequent rainfall during the ripening period can make it challenging for grapes to reach optimal levels of ripeness.

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Vintage Ratings

We provide a simple 1-5 rating for vintages in Bordeaux: 5 being the best and 1 being the worst. These ratings are general indications of the relative strength of each vintage and meant to provide a basic framework for appreciating which vintages were more conducive to high quality wine production.

Ratings

2012	★	★	★	★	
2011	★	★	★	★	
2010	★	★	★	★	★
2009	★	★	★	★	★
2008	★	★	★	★	
2007	★	★	★		
2006	★	★	★	★	
2005	★	★	★	★	★
2004	★	★	★	★	
2003	★	★	★	★	★
2002	★	★	★		
2001	★	★	★	★	
2000	★	★	★	★	★

Notes on Vintages

- **2012.** A small harvest for the reds: merlot-based wines will likely outperform cabernet sauvignon-based wines, given late season rains that took a greater toll on late-ripening cabernet sauvignon. It was a great vintage for dry whites and a challenging one for sweet whites.
- **2011.** A good, not great, vintage for the reds: uneven ripening required a lot of manpower to harvest optimally, which probably favors large châteaux with greater resources. Dry whites

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Appellations and the Classification System

A Bordeaux Wine Label

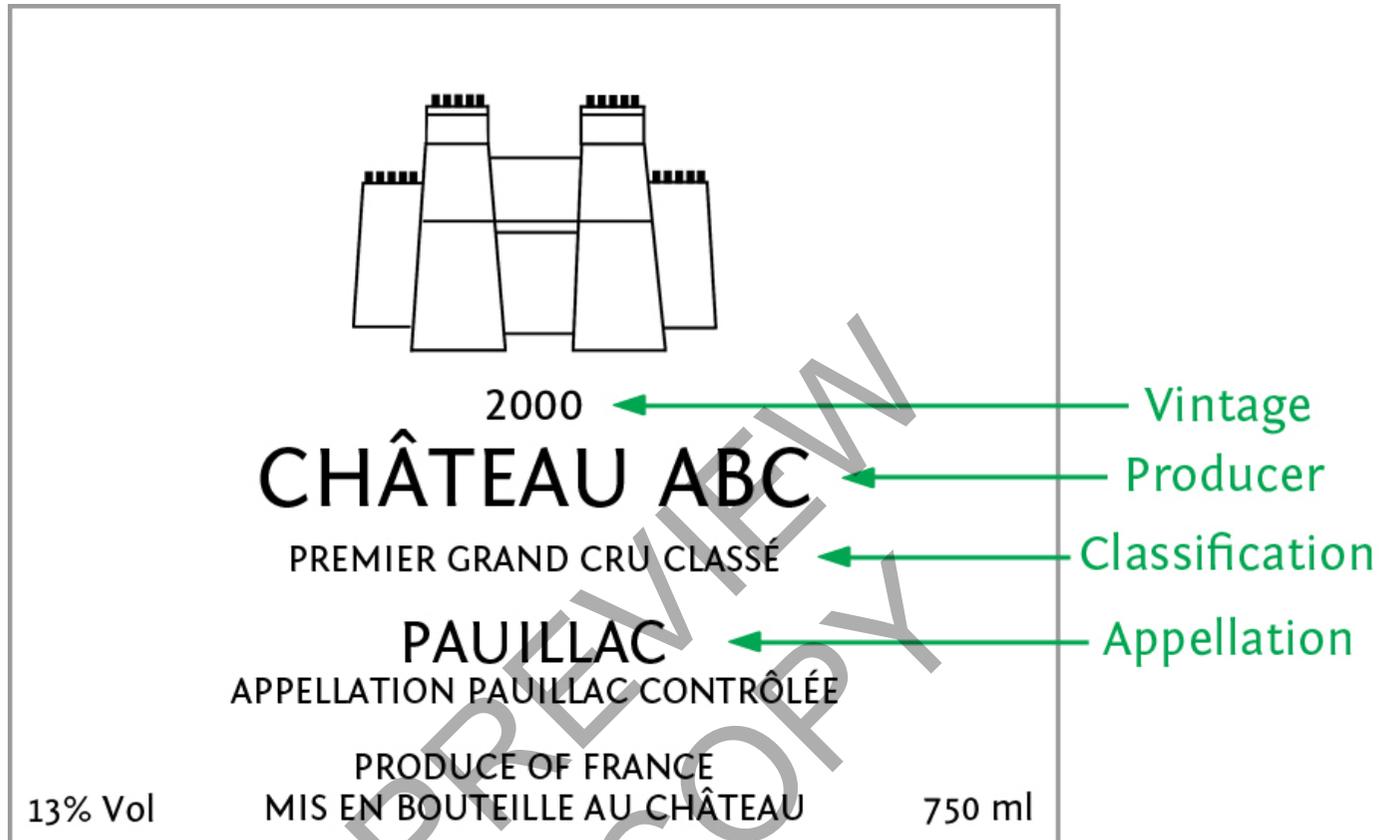


Fig. 1. A Bordeaux wine label.

A Bordeaux wine label provides critical information for understanding what to expect before you open the bottle. Most important, labels reveal the wine's vintage, producer, appellation, and classification (green highlights in Fig. 1). The appellation and classification information are a bit more complicated and require some explanation.

Appellation

Even if you know nothing about a wine's producer, the appellation gives you the first big clue as to what's in the bottle. Put simply, an appellation **identifies the specific geographic location** in which the grapes for a wine were grown; for reference, Bordeaux's appellations are marked on the map in the next section. Knowing the appellation in which a wine was produced affords you some critical information.

- **Terroir.** Features of each location's physical environment — climate, soil type, altitude, and exposure — fundamentally impact the nature of the grapes grown there. In this way, these features, often referred to collectively as *terroir*, have a profound impact on the wine produced.
- **Vineyard and cellar practices.** The appellation specification typically includes basic vineyard and cellar requirements to which producers working within the appellation must adhere, such as what grapes may be grown, maximum yields, and aging requirements.

Produced from a singular terroir using a consistent set of vineyard and cellar practices, **wines from each of Bordeaux's appellations will typically reveal a distinctive set of trademark qualities.**

Since an understanding of Bordeaux's appellations can provide a great deal of insight into its wines, this guidebook profiles **the most important factors operative in each appellation and how they shape the wines produced.** With this type of information at your fingertips, we believe you will be on your way to making more informed wine choices.

Classification System

Beyond the appellation identification, the label provides one incremental piece of information that will help you understand what to expect: the producer's classification. In Bordeaux, the premier producers within its network of appellations have been ranked in order to help consumers make informed wine choices. Under this system, those producers without a ranking simply use the basic appellation, with no classification designation.

The 1855 Classification

In conjunction with the 1855 Paris World's Fair, Emperor Napoleon III set up a commission to rank Bordeaux's best producers, known collectively as Bordeaux's Grands Crus.

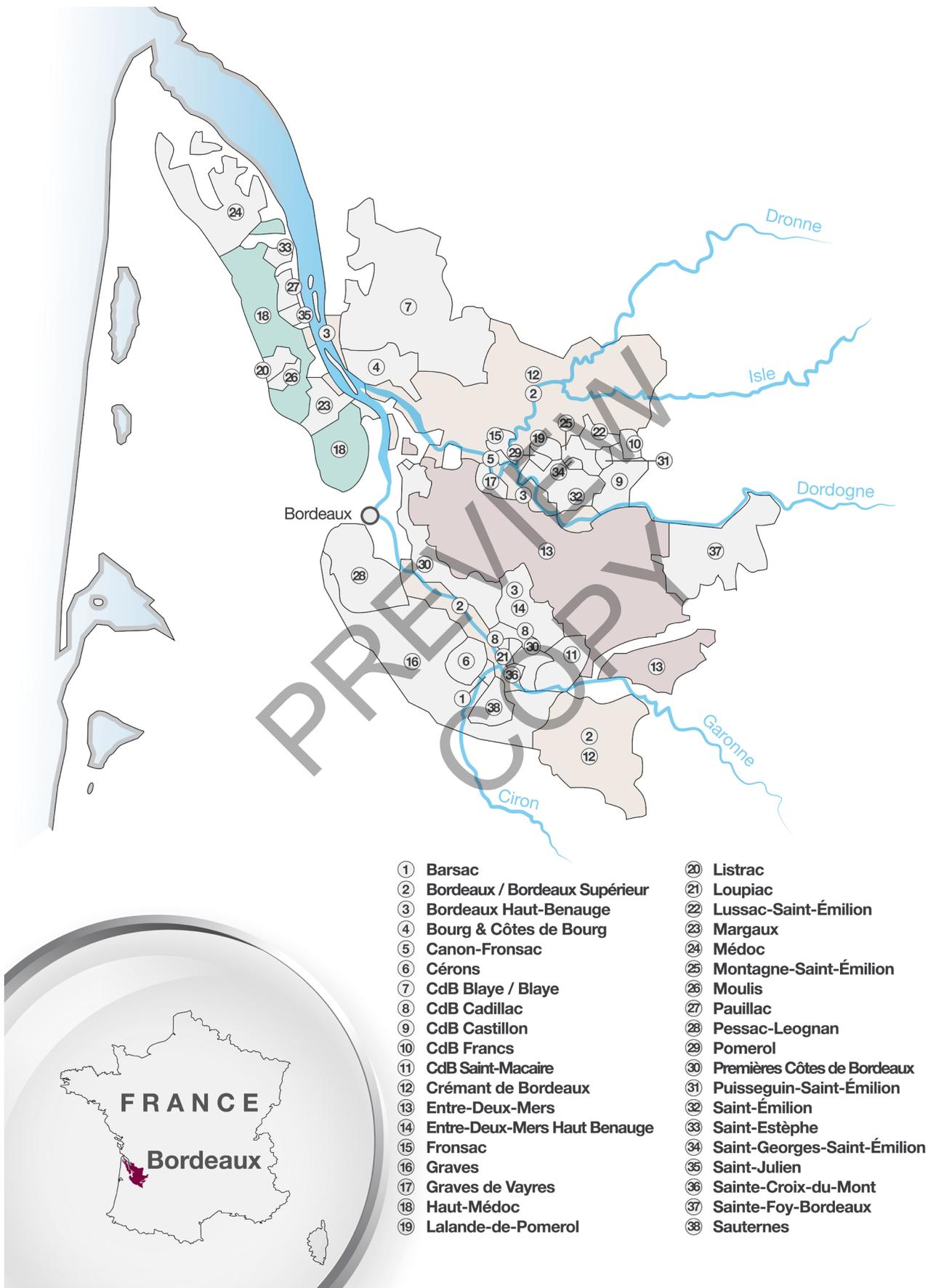
- Bordeaux's 61 **best red wine producers** were classified — based on the prevailing prices at which their wines sold and a round of tastings — into five sub-categories: 5 first growths (*premiers grands crus*, the best of the best); 14 second growths (*deuxièmes grands crus*); 14 third growths (*troisièmes grands crus*); 10 fourth growths (*quatrièmes grands crus*); and 18 fifth growths (*cinquième grands crus*).
- Sauternes' **top sweet white wine producers** were grouped into three sub-categories: 1 first great growth (*premier grand cru supérieur*); 11 first growths (*premiers grands crus*); and 15 second growths (*deuxièmes grands crus*).

This 150-year-old classification scheme prevails, largely unchanged, today. Although it functions as a helpful guideline, it remains controversial, not only for the producers selected (some of whose wines are seen as underperformers), but also for the fact that it excluded all white wines and, as it turns out, all producers located outside of the left bank's Médoc (with the exception of Bordeaux's most prestigious and longest-standing producer, Graves' Haut-Brion).

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Map of Bordeaux



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Haut-Médoc AOC *

Overview

- **Location.** The vast Haut-Médoc — a stretch of land running 50 kilometers (31 miles) along the left bank of the Gironde river, north of the city of Bordeaux (marked as **number 18** on the Map of Bordeaux) — is home to the **premier vineyards in the Bordeaux region**; it accounts for approximately one-third of the left bank's total vineyard area. Within this large red-wine-only appellation, six communes have their own separate appellations: Saint-Estèphe, Pauillac, Saint-Julien, Margaux, Listrac, and Moulis.
- **Soils.** Soils are generally gravel based and exceptionally well drained; the prevailing subsoil consists of an iron-rich sandstone (*alios*), into which vines penetrate for nutrients.

Throughout much of Bordeaux's early history, the land that makes up the Médoc and Haut-Médoc was marshy, prone to regular flooding, and unsuitable for grape cultivation. At the start of the 17th century, it was **drained by Dutch traders**, exposing vast gravelly beds that were ideal for the vine and setting the stage for the establishment of most of the Haut-Médoc's great estates in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. Prior to this time, Bordeaux's premier winegrowing area was Graves.

Reds

First and foremost, this is **cabernet sauvignon territory**; gravelly soils are perfectly suited to this grape variety, providing excellent drainage for the vines and a reflective heat source that assures optimal ripening. The grapes involved in the Haut-Médoc's claret red blend include cabernet sauvignon (60-65%), merlot (20-35%), cabernet franc (10%) and petit verdot (5%).

For purposes of perspective, keep in mind the following with regard to the blend: the wines of the Médoc (especially the Haut-Médoc) are the most cabernet sauvignon-centric in Bordeaux; this compares versus the merlot-centric right bank wines of Pomerol and Saint-Émilion; the wines of Graves and Pessac-Leognan strike a relative balance. The favoring of cabernet sauvignon or merlot relates to the local terroir: cabernet sauvignon fares better on the softer, warmer gravelly soils of the left bank, while merlot prefers the harder, cooler clay soils of the right bank.

Producers that use the "Haut-Médoc" appellation label are necessarily situated outside of the six premier communes. These less advantaged positions typically **experience slightly cooler temperatures and have slightly harder soils**, both of which hinder the optimal ripening of cabernet sauvignon; accordingly, wines possess less polish. That said, expect the typical Haut-Médoc profile: **firm, tannic, and austere, with blackcurrant highlights** being the most distinguishing component of the flavor profile.

The Haut-Médoc has a large number of appealing below-the-radar **Cru Bourgeois (CB)-level wines** worth pursuing. Given that Cru Bourgeois wines are almost always priced attractively, this is where we recommend that consumers look for high quality, value-priced wines from the Médoc. Match your CB choices to quality vintages and you will be rewarded.

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Pauillac AOC *

Overview

- **Location.** Pauillac is the **most prestigious appellation in Bordeaux**. It is the second most northern of the premier left bank Haut-Médoc appellations (marked as **number 27** on the Map of Bordeaux).
- **Soils.** It possesses the **gravelly soils** typical of the Haut-Médoc's best sites, which provide good drainage and heat reflection for optimal grape ripening. The vines are forced to work their way through the gravelly topsoil to a layer of iron-rich sandstone (*alios*) below, where nutrients are readily available.

* Reds

The appellation sits between relatively cooler Saint-Estèphe (to its north) and warmer Saint-Julien and Margaux (to its south). While generalizations are difficult, this affords Pauillac's wines an **especially nice balance** between the relatively bigger, harder, and more acidic wines of Saint-Estèphe and the juicier, softer, and more fruit-forward wines of Saint-Julien and Margaux.

Overall, they are full-bodied, long-aging wines that display dark fruit (blackberry, cassis), mineral, chocolate, and spice flavors; notes of cedar are a trademark. Further, Pauillac's wines are exceptionally tannic when young and **require significant bottle aging** to reach their full potential.

In Pauillac, the typical grape ratios used for the red blend in the Haut-Médoc — cabernet sauvignon (60-65%), merlot (20-35%), cabernet franc (10%) and petit verdot (5%) — tend to **lean a bit more heavily toward cabernet sauvignon** (as in Saint-Julien). For purposes of perspective, keep in mind the following with regard to the blend: the wines of the Médoc (especially the Haut-Médoc) are the most cabernet sauvignon-centric in Bordeaux; this compares versus the merlot-centric right bank wines of Pomerol and Saint-Émilion; the wines of Graves and Pessac-Leognan strike a relative balance. The favoring of cabernet sauvignon or merlot relates to the local terroir: cabernet sauvignon fares better on the softer, warmer gravelly soils of the left bank, while merlot prefers the harder, cooler clay soils of the right bank.

Pauillac is **awash in high-profile châteaux**, the best in Bordeaux, including the famed Premiers Grands Crus Lafite-Rothschild, Mouton-Rothschild, and Latour, among a total of 18 classified growths; they account for 80% of the appellation's overall production. However, of course, the wines from these masterful producers come at a steep price, making Pauillac a **particularly challenging appellation in which to find values**.

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Pessac-Leognan AOC *

Overview

- **Location.** The Pessac-Leognan appellation is situated in the northernmost portion of the larger Graves AOC and is its premier wine-producing area (marked as **number 28** on the Map of Bordeaux). The appellation is similarly protected against temperature variation by the Landes pine forest along its western boundary.
- **Soils.** It has **gravelly soils and subsoils**, which provide excellent drainage for the vines and a reflective heat source for optimal ripening of the grapes; there is a lower sand component in the soils of Pessac-Leognan than in the rest of Graves, affording even better drainage.
- **Distinguishing features.** It is probably the site of the **earliest vineyards in Bordeaux**, with vine cultivation dating back approximately 2000 years.

* Reds

In Pessac-Leognan's reds, there is close to an **even split between cabernet sauvignon and merlot**, although cabernet sauvignon typically edges out a slighter greater percentage of the blend, with the balance (20%) being cabernet franc (sometimes with a very small percentage of petit verdot). For purposes of perspective, keep in mind the following with regard to the blend: the wines of Graves and Pessac-Leognan sit midway between the cabernet sauvignon-centric left bank wines of the Médoc and the merlot-centric right bank wines of Pomerol and Saint-Émilion.

Pessac-Leognan's reds display a more sophisticated palate than those of the basic Graves AOC. They have aromas of dry earth and violets, tinged with **trademark notes of tobacco and stone**. Further, they are **slightly lighter in body**, most similar in weight to the wines of Margaux; perhaps this shared delicacy is attributable to the fact that these two appellations have the finest-grained gravelly soils in Bordeaux.

Overall, the Pessac-Leognan appellation is worth exploring for unique, high quality red wines, however, they can lack compelling quality-to-price metrics, particularly compared to Cru Bourgeois wines in top vintages.

Whites

While reds lead in Pessac-Leognan, there are also **quality whites**. Although there are no set ratios, **the blend of sémillon and sauvignon blanc typically favors the latter**, in contrast to the slight edge given to sémillon in the slightly warmer basic Graves AOC; there is sometimes a small percentage of muscadelle.

Pessac-Leognan's medium-bodied whites reveal crisp acidity (no malolactic fermentation), aromatic complexity, and citrus notes, all trademarks of top flight Bordeaux sauvignon blanc. Further, the high percentage of sémillon delivers exotic flavors of **honey, wax, and hazelnuts**, while musc-

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Saint-Émilion AOC *

Overview

- **Location.** Saint-Émilion, the largest of the premier appellations in Bordeaux, is positioned on the right bank of the Dordogne river, south of neighboring Pomerol (marked as **number 32** on the Map of Bordeaux). The climate is temperate, as warmer temperatures are kept in check by the cooling presence of the Dordogne river.
- **Distinguishing features.** Unlike the vast Médoc estates located on the left bank, Saint-Émilion consists of over one thousand family-based producers, operating on smaller vineyard plots (the average is under 7 hectares).

Soils and sub-areas

Wines come primarily from two distinct sub-areas within Saint-Émilion.

- **Côtes-Saint-Émilion.** This area lies on rolling hills south of the city. Soils are based on limestone and clay over a limestone base. The wines of this area develop quickly, revealing **generous, fruit-forward profiles**.
- **Graves-Saint-Émilion.** This area lies in western Saint-Émilion, on the border with Pomerol. Soils are based on a mixture of sand, gravel, limestone, and clay over a limestone base. The wines of this area take longer to develop and are **the most concentrated and powerful in Saint-Émilion**, similar in style to those of Pomerol.

* Reds

Saint-Émilion's red wine blends are **dominated by merlot** (approximately 60%); cabernet franc makes up most of the balance (30% of total, even slightly more than in neighboring Pomerol), while cabernet sauvignon is relegated to a small percentage. For purposes of perspective, keep in mind the following with regard to the blend: the wines of the Médoc (especially the Haut-Médoc) are the most cabernet sauvignon-centric in Bordeaux; this compares versus the merlot-centric right bank wines of Pomerol and Saint-Émilion; the wines of Graves and Pessac-Leognan strike a relative balance. The favoring of cabernet sauvignon or merlot relates to the local terroir: cabernet sauvignon fares better on the softer, warmer gravelly soils of the left bank, while merlot prefers the harder, cooler clay soils of the right bank.

The predominance of merlot in the blend gives Saint-Émilion's wines — similar in this respect to neighboring Pomerol — their **distinctive approachable, fruit-forward characters**; they have lower tannins and require less aging. Further, bouquets and flavor profiles lean more toward the rounder, plusher side of the spectrum. Expect plum, black cherry, and raspberry fruit.

- **Compared to the merlot-based wines of nearby Pomerol**, the most stylistically similar appellation, they are generally lighter, softer, a bit spicier, and rely a bit more on the red

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Sauternes AOC *

Overview

Sauternes is known for its **world-class sweet wines**.

- **Location.** The appellation is positioned in the southern portion of Graves, on the left bank, where the tiny Ciron river joins the Garonne river (marked as **number 38** on the Map of Bordeaux). Bordeaux's other famed sweet wine appellation, Barsac, is only a few kilometers north. At 1900 hectares (4700 acres), it is the largest sweet wine appellation in Bordeaux; there are over 200 producers.
- **Soils.** A bit variable, soils in Sauternes generally consist of terraced levels of sandy gravel on a limestone base, with a touch of clay; in addition to providing good drainage, gravel serves to reflect back the sun's warmth, assuring optimal grape ripening and the humid conditions necessary for noble rot.
- **Distinguishing features.** All of the vineyards have northeastern exposure, as it assures gradual, even maturation over the lengthy growing season.

* Whites

Grapes

Sauternes' sweet wines are based **principally on sémillon** (80%), while sauvignon blanc (15%) and muscadelle (5%) make up the balance of the blend.

Process

Just as in the other top sweet wine appellations (Barsac, Cérons), the entire process of creating sweet wines is set in motion by the morning fog created when the cooler waters of the Ciron river join the warmer waters of the Garonne. This daily fog activates the *Botrytis cinerea* mold, which in combination with warm afternoon temperatures, engenders the **noble rot** that is the key to these wines' sweetness. Sémillon is particularly susceptible to this rot, given the grapes' thin skin (which breaks open easily) and the tight clusters in which it grows (which allows the fungus to spread). The mold dehydrates the grapes, concentrating their sugars, without any loss of acidity or the introduction of any unattractive moldy flavors.

Since the ripening of each individual grape is highly variable — due to the type of grape variety, its exposure to the sun, its position in the bunch, and the pace of rot — the grapes must be harvested selectively by hand, an iterative process that typically requires five or six passes through the vineyard; picking normally starts around the beginning of October and continues into November. Although yields are already limited to a low 25 hL/ha, the best wineries typically have yields of only

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France Reading List

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Here are just a few of our France recommendations ([see the complete list](#)):

- **Adventures on the Wine Route** The famed California-based importer recounts his adventures in France's vineyards. *By Kermit Lynch.*
- **“France's Troubled Romance with Beef”** Is French gourmet culture becoming less French? *By Tanya Basu.*
- **My First French Book** Just for kids! A bilingual introduction to words, numbers, shapes and colors. *By Mandy Stanley.*

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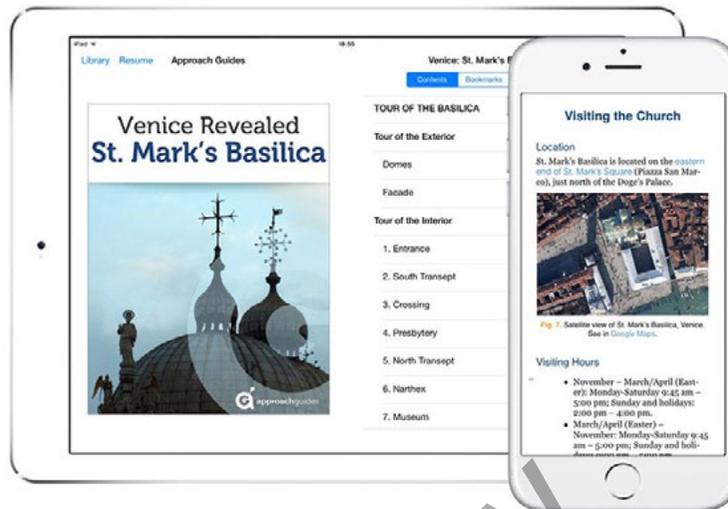
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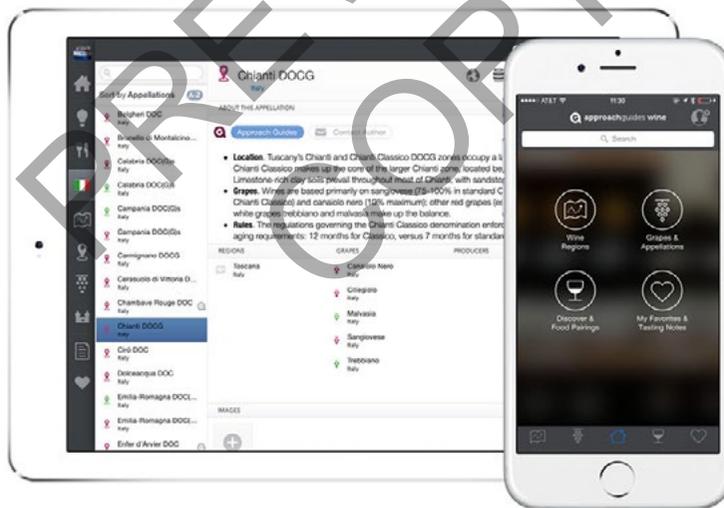
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