

The Wines of Bordeaux

Written by Terry Connor

Tuesday, 20 November 2012 10:37

Mon Dieu! I thought writing about Bordeaux was going to be easy. It is not. There is so much material out there on this complex region that it would require all of us to quit our positions and work full-time just reading and tasting Bordeaux wines. That is not going to happen so let's try to attack this subject in miniature.

Bordeaux wines have long been considered the "master" ...something to imitate. Andrea Immer Robinson, a Master Sommelier and wine writer based on the west coast, states it best when she tells us that Bordeaux wines are the style model for every single varietal Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon, as well as many proprietary red blends, produced throughout the world. How did Bordeaux get so famous? For starters, Bordeaux has been producing acknowledged great wines for a long time. This fact probably would have remained a secret for a longer period of time were it not for famous people in high places like our thirsty third President Thomas Jefferson. During the time that he served as ambassador to France, Jefferson left Paris and travelled to Bordeaux, visiting many of the Chateau Estates that are still top names today. He further endorsed the wines by having them shipped to the United States. (I wonder who paid for that.)

To get our heads around this famous region let's break it down. First, the grapes. Red Bordeaux wines are almost always a blend. Depending on the winery, up to five grape varieties may be used. The two major grapes would be Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. The three minor grapes are Cabernet Franc, Malbec, and Petit Verdot. Each grape contributes something to the wine. Cabernet Sauvignon gives the wine acidity and tannin, Merlot yields fruitiness, Cabernet Franc gives the aromatics, Malbec contributes spice, and Petit Verdot brings color to the blend.

Now let's look at the wine regions. Bordeaux is categorized geographically according to districts or villages. The districts or villages are separated by a river called the Gironde. On the left bank of the river the dominant grape is Cabernet Sauvignon. The principal wine villages are Margaux, St Julien, Pauillac, and St. Estephe. On the right bank, where the dominant grape is Merlot, the two wine villages of note are St. Emilion and Pomerol. (NOTE: the label on the bottle will show the name of the village and the winery or Chateau name.)

The third item to look at is the Chateau or the Estate. In the case of Bordeaux, the most famous wines that are responsible for the regions world class status come from estates called "Chateau." The actual Chateau could be modest or Grand. In the case of the latter, you will probably see an outline of the Chateau on the label. The key point to remember in the case of a "Grand" chateau is that the wine that is produced from that chateau is produced from grapes

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grown only on that particular estates property.

I have taken advantage of the opportunity to visit both modest and grand Estates. I walked away from the modest facility realizing that wines produced were for the low price market and very limited aging potential in the wine. The Grand Chateau wines are meant to provide the consumer with a classic product with excellent aging potential. Yes. These wines can be expensive. However, as I usually admonish: just go easy and try only one or two.

The three main points mentioned above are an excellent starting point from which to build your knowledge of Bordeaux. Your follow-up would be how Bordeaux wines are priced, the classification growths of 1855 which also show the top producers, the soils of Bordeaux (terroir), and what effect Bordeaux has had on the World Market. Put it all together and you have Bordeaux 101.

WINESPEAK

I must have been asleep. Cabernet Franc, mentioned above as a grape to be used in blending wines, is actually a varietal very capable of standing alone. It was brought to my attention on my last trip to California. I bought a bottle of Vinum Cellars Cabernet Franc called "The Scrapper." I enjoyed it with dinner a few days ago. I was floored. I had stereotyped that it would be harsh and bitter. Not even close. It was rich with intense cassis notes and spices like clove and sandalwood. On the palate there was a concentration of cherry, dark chocolate, and dark roast coffee. This is a wine that will age through 2022.

Cabernet Franc grapes will always be used in blending. However, this new and additional role for the grape; discovered only a few years ago, will flourish. The best Cabernet Franc grapes for the 100% product are grown in France, California, and The Loire Valley.

This column completes 21 months of a trip around the world as I know it. Future articles will cover such subjects as individual wineries, very old European Family wineries, current events

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such as the Hilton Head Island Wine and Food Festival.

Hope everyone has a safe and Happy Thanksgiving.

Cheers

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