

Right Bank Terroirs and Classifications

Like the Left Bank, many of the Right Bank vineyards, especially the higher ranked ones, have many small plots or micro crus that they manage individually and blend the grapes from the different micro crus into their offering. But the Right Bank has very different terroirs from the Left Bank and while they have only one significant Classification, it rivals the Left Bank for being very complex and easily misleading. In this handout I will attempt to cover the terroirs and the classification to help you in choosing Right Bank wines and enjoying them. I will also talk about a couple of the major Right Bank estates that we visited last year.

Terroir

As covered in the first post about Bordeaux wines, when the glaciers melted millions of years ago, all of the Bordeaux region was totally under water. When that water receded it left the Gironde River and the Dordogne River flowing north into the Atlantic. The soil conditions that are on the eastern or Right Bank of those two rivers are very different from those the glaciers left on the western or Left Bank side of the Gironde River. The picture below shows the three areas that make up Bordeaux: the Left Bank, the Right Bank and Entre-Deux-Mers which translates to “between the waters” referring to the two rivers.



When grapes were planted centuries ago, it was found that certain grapes made much better wine on the left side or the Left Bank, and other grape vines grew better on the Right Bank. But this was not exclusive. The norm is that each red wine vineyard typically grows 2-4 different grapes. On the Right Bank Merlot is the most common grape followed by Cabernet Sauvignon and then

Cabernet Franc with a small amount of Malbec. On the Left Bank Cabernet Sauvignon is the most common grape followed by Merlot, then Cabernet Franc, and sometimes some Petit Verdot.

As the picture below shows, the Right Bank has gently rolling hills compared to the very flat landscape on the Left Bank. Most of the micro crus are heavily limestone and clay which is



what Merlot loves so that is the #1 grape in terms of volume on the Right Bank. For many years I playfully referred to my cellar as a Merlot Free Zone because I had only tasted Merlot made in California and I found nothing exciting about it. That is just my taste and not any criticism of those who enjoy the California Merlots. Before our trip to Bordeaux last year I had focused on Left Bank wines because of my low opinion of Merlot. We spent three days on the Right Bank and I discovered how wrong I had been. The Merlot grown and processed by Bordeaux wine makers makes a rich complex wine that I am happy to drink. Bordeaux built its reputation on blending wines from several different varietals and single varietal wines are very rare, especially for red wines. I did taste one single varietal Merlot wine, and I loved it and it is on the attached recommended wine list. Many of the other wines were 80% Merlot or higher.

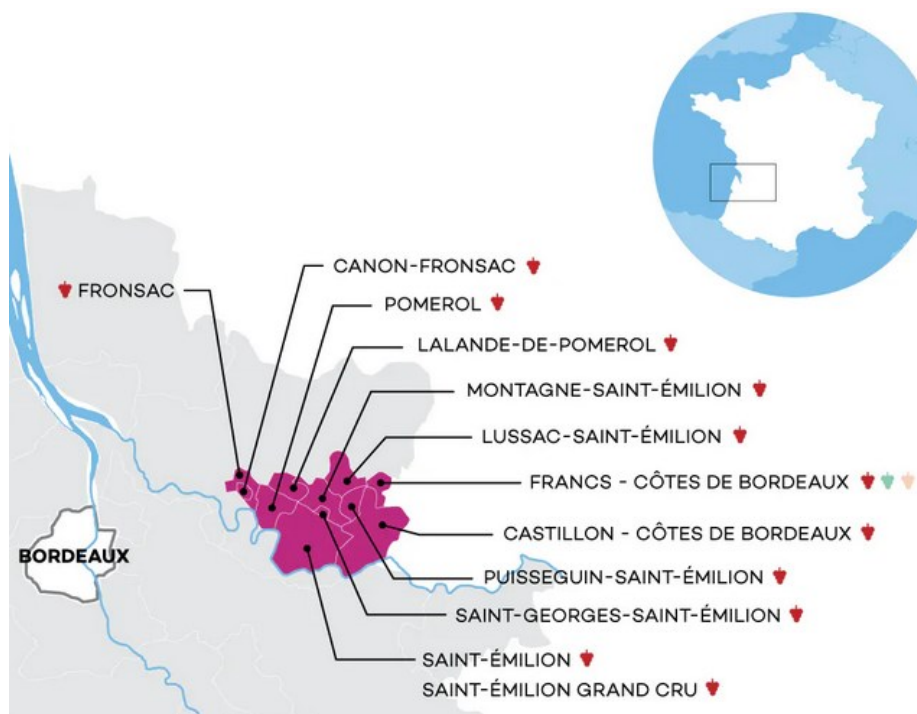
Just as the Left Bank has a number of the micro crus that are limestone and clay and used to grow the Merlot that compliments the Cabernet Sauvignon that is the primary grape in left Bank wines, the Right Bank has micro crus that have the sandy soil with large rock gravel that are used to grow the Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc that complements the Merlot in most of their wines. Interestingly, the Cabernet Sauvignon and the Cabernet Franc do not play well

together and any of the wines use one or the other with their Merlot or just a splash of the third wine.

Global warming is a significant concern in Bordeaux, especially in the Right Bank vineyards. Their Merlot vines are at the very high end of the temperature range that is good for those vines. A number of the winemakers told us that they are considering that the wines they have made for hundreds of years, and gotten a world wide reputation for, may have to undergo a fundamental change. For centuries only six red grapes could be used if the wine was to have Bordeaux on the label. In 2021 four additional varietals were approved because of the concerns over global warming and many of the estates have plantings of many or all of the now ten red grapes that are permitted so they can experiment with blends that will continue to meet their quality and taste objectives even with the higher temperatures. There have been eight white grapes that have been permitted and two additional ones were also added in 2021. One of the original six red grapes originated in Bordeaux but was rarely used for many years. Wine makers in South America tried it and it has done very well in their warm climates. That grape is Malbec.

Classifications

Any wine made from grapes grown on the Right Bank and processed in the overall Bordeaux region can be labeled as Bordeaux. Just as on the left Bank the next step up is defined



geographically. There are eleven small regions that have defined themselves and set up rules for wine made in that area. The map below shows those regions.

Each location is controlled by an appellation d'origine contrôlée or AOC. Each AOC defines a set of standards that a vineyard must follow to be able to put that AOC name on their label. The three most common requirements are:

- All the grapes are grown in the geography defined by that AOC
- The wine is produced in a facility located in that AOC
- The vineyard is meeting the yield requirements of that AOC. Yield means pruning the vines to produce fewer grapes with then have more flavor in each grape so them make better wine, but less of it.

An AOC designation allows that wine to command a higher price. The most prestigious of the AOCs is Pomerol, home of Chateau Petrus. The largest AOC is Saint-Emilion and as you can see on the map, two other AOC's that neighbor it includes Saint-Emilion in their name.

Most of my focus on Right Bank wines has been on the ones in the Saint-Emilion AOC. Within that AOC there is a sub AOC that is named the Saint-Emilion Grand Cru. Any of the wines that meet the requirement can put Grand Cru on their label but it is just a geographic designation of what has been rules as the very best growing area in the Saint-Emilion AOC. In all of the other areas of Bordeaux the designation Grand Cru was determined by a classification process that ranked the wines and gave the best ones that designation, so seeing Grand Cru can give a mistaken impression of quality. Any of the estates that located in that Grand Cru AOC and meet its requirements can call their wines Saint-Emilion Grand Cru.

Since nothing is simple in France, especially in Bordeaux, a quality classification for Saint-Emilion wines was started in 1954. It was supposed to be updated every ten years but has only been updated six times. The 2012 classification was HIGHLY controversial. It was redone in 2022, using wines from the 2020 vintage, and 71 wines were given the Grand Cru Classe designation. Fourteen wines were given the designation of Premier Grand Cru Classe. In other areas of France such as Burgundy, Grand Cru is the highest level and Premier Cru is the second level just under that. However here, Premier Grand Cru Classe is higher than Grand Cru Classe. Two of the fourteen estates were given the very highest ranking, Premier Grand Cru Classe, Class A. Those two estates are Chateau Pavie and Chateau Figeac. One of the estates that had been ranked at the highest level since the classification started in 1954, Chateau Ausone, decided after all of the controversy over the 2012 classification that it was just not worth the effort and cost to participate so they did not submit a wine for the 2022 classification. The price for their 2020 vintage which can no longer say Premier Grand Cru Classe is \$800 so not being part of the classification has not hurt them yet.

It can be pretty confusing, but the bottom line is that if the word Classe is on the label, it is very high quality.

High Quality Estates

The most famous estate on the Right Bank is Chateau Petrus in the Pomerol AOC. The 2020 vintage is currently commanding about \$4,200 a bottle, compared to \$700 for Lafite Rothschild. I have not tasted Chateau Petrus, and that price I don't think I ever will.

Of the two Premier Grand Cru Classe estates, Chateau Pavie is about \$350 for the 2020 vintage and Chateau Figeac \$300. I have not tasted the Chateau Pavie, but we did have a wonderful lunch with one of owners of Chateau Figeac and from that



experience it became my current favorite Right Bank estate. The picture shows the three wines we had with the lunch and the 2009 and 1981 bottles were magnums. The Petit Figeac, their 2nd wine, was a 2018. All of them had been opened that morning and decanted to open up and were served at the cellar temperature, about 60° F. It was pretty easy to all in love with these wines and the lunch they served us was equal to the wines. Both wines are on the list of recommended wines that is the other attachment for this post.

The other estate we visited that we really enjoyed was Chateau Valandraud, which was my introduction to Right Bank wines. Our tour and tasting was done by Jean-Luc Thunevin, who has been labeled the “bad boy” of Bordeaux, a title he relishes. He and his wife bought a small, abandoned estate in 1991 and had it earn Premier Grand Cru Classe status in 2012 with their 2010 vintage. Jean-Luc is a character and he expresses his opinions on every topic forcefully. We tasted the 2018 Chateau Valandraud and the 2018 Virginie de Valandraud, named after their daughter, which is a St. Emilion Grand Cru, not Classe. We thoroughly loved both and they are on the attached list of recommended wines. He also makes two other red wines. Thunevin “Origine” is also a St. Emilion Grand Cru, not Classe, which is hand harvested from a micro cru and is on the recommended list of under \$30 wines. He also makes Virginie Thunevin, which was on the list of recommended wines from the broader Vin Bordeaux part 1 post and is only \$15. Clearly, I am a fan of the wines that Jean-Luc is making.

Please download the Recommended Bordeaux Red Wines for Under \$30 – Part 3 Right Bank Wines. There are 14 wines on that list, 5 of them for under \$30. The download is available from the post Bordeaux Red Wines – Part 3 Right Bank Wines.