

THE NEW BORDEAUX

THE ODDBINS SCHOLARSHIP WSET STUDY TOUR TRIP TO BORDEAUX 25-28 MARCH 2009

Having been a student in Bordeaux for two and a half years, I felt excited at the idea of returning to such a beautiful town in order to study wine in greater depth. My sincere thanks go to Jane Anson, wine school educator at l'Ecole du Vin and freelance wine writer. Her presentations of the New Bordeaux through the various aspects of AOCs and technical developments in both vineyards and wineries, gave me a true picture of today's Bordeaux and the inspiration for writing this study trip report.

Bordeaux is changing, yet remained the same. One can definitely tell that the town has dramatically re-developed its once abandoned quays and its historical town center (le Triangle d'Or), re-establishing the prominence of public transports and giving the town back to the Bordeaux cyclists and pedestrians. At the same time, key players on "La Place" (term used to define the Bordeaux trade ie growers, négociants and courtiers) haven't changed a great deal.

The Bordeaux AOC system is undergoing vital changes too.

From 57 to 54 Appellations: The INAO (Institut National des Appellations d'Origine, ie the national body for AOCs) has approved and launched a simplification of the AOC in Bordeaux, with the disappearance of the following 4 appellations :

Blaye and **Premières Côtes de Blaye**, the largest of all the Côtes, located at the far north of the Right Bank.

Bordeaux Côtes de Francs, located west of the St Emilion satellites.

Côtes de Castillon, located west of St Emilion appellation and south of Côtes de Francs.

Premières Côtes de Bordeaux, located at the far east of the Right Bank, bordering Entre-Deux-Mers appellation from Bordeaux down to Langon.



They are replaced with a common generic appellation: **Côtes de Bordeaux** followed by a place of origin (ex: Côtes de Bordeaux: Blaye or Côtes de Bordeaux: Cadillac). The move is expected to increase recognition of the Côtes de Bordeaux wines in France and abroad, to allow négociants to create and sell big enough brands (in terms of volume), and to accelerate the consolidation of the vineyards and improve the flexibility of production for the Côtes de Bordeaux growers.

The project has yet to be ratified by the French government, only once the plans and methods of control would have been approved.

Source: www.bordeaux-cotes.com/en

A new Vin de Pays for Bordeaux:

Ratified by decree on the 18 October 2006, this new regional classification, Vin de Pays de l'Atlantique, allowed to produce a wine with grapes harvested in the following 5 french departments: Charente, Charente-Maritime, Gironde, Dordogne et Lot-et-Garonne. Red and rosés wines will have to be produced at a maximum yield of 95 hl/ha, and 100 hl/ha for white wines. The wine will have to have a minimum alcohol content of 10.5 % vol. and above. The indication of up to 3 grape varieties is allowed, none of these being inferior to 20% of the blending.

This new designation is a direct response to international markets seeking vast quantities of branded wines, available from large wine producing regions (South-Eastern Australia, Vin de Pays d'Oc). This again will allow négociants and merchants to source grapes from a larger area in order to produce a good quality, high volumes branded wines for export markets. This could help in strengthening the position of Bordeaux wines on export markets and in increasing the Bordeaux trade revenues at all levels (growers and négociants).

New techniques in the vineyards:

Numerous small revolutions are taking place in Bordeaux vineyards. Where resources are available and a planting strategy is at the heart of commercial expansion, soil analysis is performed in order to identify the intrinsic characteristics and qualities of the soils, and to plant or re-plant different vines or different clones. Laurent Lebrun, managing director of Château Olivier in Pessac-Léognan showcased the recent soil studies and experimentations, leading to a re-planting of Cabernet Franc vines on a parcel of the domaine, through a technical and economical point of view and a tasting of 2 wines, one without and the other with the newly planted Cabernet Franc. The outcome is fairly simple. There is no greater way to improve the quality of a wine other than trying to understand your environment better and increasing the care you put into the making of your wine. Prestigious estates in either Left or Right-Bank have already performed these studies on their own, for example Château Kirwan in Margaux and in Château Grand Corbin Despagne in Saint-Emilion. We heard from Saint-Emilion producers that small growers have done global and local soil analysis through their general syndicate. There is a general movement for the identification and better understanding of soil structure and qualities.

This movement leads to another - the increasing use of nurseries for the selection of rootstocks and clones. Knowing which grape variety will thrive best on the newly studied soil will enable the identifying of vines which are weaker for the given environment and need to be uprooted and replaced. François Despagne of Château Grand Corbin Despagne told us he had to compromise the quality of the Cabernet Franc clones, in terms of yield

and fruit quality. The same has been experienced by the entire region regarding the Cot, or Malbec, and the Sémillon grapes of poor quality. Successfully, nurseries have been creating solutions to these problems. Didier Galhaud of Château Guiraud in Sauternes explained us the urgent necessity to create in 2001, The Conservatory of Château Guiraud, where more than a hundred vine stocks of white varietals are kept as a historical record of Bordeaux vineyards, and acts as a centre for knowledge, studies and cloning.

Important improvements are under way at many estates, like huge investments in better drainage in the first stratum of the subsoil, and a better understanding and use of windbreaks (trees and natural fences) to protect vineyards and improve its biodiversity. The greatest change happening in Bordeaux vineyards is the quest for quality whilst trying to achieve sustainability. Considering the long traditions in use, it has taken a long time for attitudes to change over the use of chemical products, the introduction of grass and vegetable beds between rows, the creation of a habitat for parasites' predators, the height of vines and the orientation of the canopy. The trend is more towards a precise and sustainable viticulture rather than going to complete organic and biodynamic. As François Despaigne explains, his vineyards are managed in an organic way, but he will never apply for the certificate as if he has to use pesticides or any other unauthorised products or methods to save his vineyard, he will not hesitate. He also reminded us that Bordeaux is a cool climate area, and is subject to a high humidity due to its proximity to the ocean. The agreed result is that the overall quality of Bordeaux wines is improving through the reduction of the spraying and the extensive use of sustainable practices.

One last unthinkable revolution is happening in Bordeaux: the wider use of harvesting machines. Once considered un-ethical to the spirit of harvest, detrimental to quality because of the roughness of the picking and only limited to low profile generic Bordeaux wineries, the idea of machine harvesting is quietly getting acceptance amongst top properties. This phenomenon is backed by dramatic improvements of the machine, which now gently harvest the grapes without damaging them at all, and even sorting the grapes before they enter the belly of the monster. The only drawback of the machine is when used in sweet wines area: absolutely unusable at Château Guiraud at any stage of the picking, as the grapes need to be carefully selected and picked at different times during the harvest.

New techniques in the wineries:

Bordeaux wineries have dramatically changed. François Despaigne told us he was using only one sorting table when he was appointed Managing Director of Château Grand Corbin Despaigne in 1996. Today he is using 6 different sorting methods from the vineyard to the fermenting vat and is thinking of a seventh! From hand sorting of freshly picked grapes (to separate rotten and clean berries) to machine sorting by gravity (to

optimize the qualitative homogenisation of berries), the sorting step has undeniably improved the quality of the wine.

The transportation of grapes from vineyard to winery is also seen as crucial. To avoid the fermentation starting and early oxidation resulting in a loss of aromas, the grapes are carried in refrigerated trucks.

Changes can be seen in the fermenting room. Cement vats have been kept at château Grand Corbin Despaigne and Château Kirwan in order to offer different options to the winemaker and because it is still a reliable container for fermentation and storage of the wine. All wineries we visited had transportable crusher/destemmer and presses, placed in the stainless steel and cement vats room at the time of harvest, allowing a greater flexibility of work and reducing processing time, transportation and risks of oxidation. They were all spotless and immaculately clean, contrasting with a cliché of the past assuming a traditional winery could not produce wine and be clean at the same time.

A common move has also been made towards the use of gravity in the moving of the wine at different stages of production, allowing savings in energy and minimising the risk of altering the aromatics of the wine, like the underground vats seen at Château Guiraud. New techniques that we have not actually seen are now part of the winemaking process in Bordeaux wineries: pumping over through turbopigeur or flash détente, use of micro-oxygenation to accelerate maturation and to soften the tannins, malolactic fermentation optional.

The chais have also seen innovations taking place. The barrels at Château de Lussac in Lussac-Saint-Emilion are placed on rotating holders which allow the contents of the barrel to be moved and facilitate a further development of aromas.

Some have even thought that the technical improvements in the winery could be beneficial to the visitor, transforming their fermenting room and chai into an architectural masterpiece, such as Château de Lussac where wood, glass and works of art are mixed to offer an experience out of the ordinary.

Conclusion:

The future of Bordeaux lies in a subtle mix of tradition and innovation. It has been and remains a decisive place for the wine trade and wine making. Quiet but necessary adjustments are under way (VDP, simpler AOCs), to offer more commercial opportunities for growers and négociants. Technical revolution, inspired by leading scientists and enlightened wine consultants, is helping to get Bordeaux back on track with innovation and consolidating its attractive position in terms of winemaking and financial investment.

The future is still challenging for Bordeaux. The Bordelais will have to fight against the large international brands and the appearance/growing of fine wine regions that reduce its historically predominant presence on the shelves of supermarkets and vintners around the world. Bordeaux will have to fully take on-board the sustainable approach to weaken the dramatic effects that climate change could have on such a fragile microclimate. Bordeaux will have to choose between tradition and stasis, and adequately following the trends of global wine consumption towards richer, fruitier wines. Bordeaux will have to keep its pricing policy realistic if it wants to save its unique en-primeur operations for the future.

Bordeaux has been through many crises and revolutions over the last 2 millennia, but with careful investment and the retention of the unique character of its wines there is no doubt it will secure its leading position for the foreseeable future.