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Getting to the Bottom of Bordeaux

With thousand-dollar bottles, complex classifications and a dizzying number of estates, this great French wine region is difficult to comprehend. Here, a simplified guide to the territoire—plus some surprisingly affordable offerings

By LETTIE TEAGUE

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Photo Illustration by Jonathan Kantor for The Wall Street Journal

Bordeaux shows its many shapes and colors

There are only a handful of wine regions that manage to transcend mere geography to achieve true iconography. One of the first—and arguably still the best—is Bordeaux. This roughly 300,000-acre region in southwest France has been a reference point for the world's winemakers for hundreds of years and a sought-after address for aristocrats, billionaires and the occasional oligarch, too. But Bordeaux is much more than a single region or type of wine; it's an increasingly fractured place where the big names (Lafite, Latour and Mouton) turn out wines that sell for thousands of dollars while the lesser crus and the unknowns (just about everyone else) are forced to scrabble after a euro or two.

There's also a divide separating wine drinkers: While top-spending collectors still

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Jay McInerney, the author of seven novels, including "Bright Lights, Big City," is one of the country's best-known contemporary fiction

Lettie Teague on Lunch Break demystifies Bordeaux, long regarded as the most prestigious wine region in the world. Some of its wines are among the world's most expensive but many at the affordable end (under $30) are better than ever.

buy up Lafite and Latour, more and more consumers—and even some sommeliers—shy away from Bordeaux, dismissing it as too expensive, too old-fashioned, too intimidating or simply too dull. But for those who dig a bit deeper, there can be some real rewards. Thanks to Bordeaux producers who are investing in some less-heralded regions—and a recent great vintage, 2009—there is more good low-priced Bordeaux now than ever before. But where to start looking? This (highly) simplified guide offers some Bordeaux basics—and a look at what's starting to change.

THE LAY OF THE LAND

The most important geographic facts about Bordeaux can be summed up in two words: Left and Right. This has nothing to do with political orientation—it refers to a region's position relative to the Gironde estuary that divides two sides of Bordeaux.

The Left Bank is home to Cabernet-based wines and includes famous subregions like Pauillac, St.-Julian, Margaux, St.-Estèphe and Graves. It's also where the great sweet wines, Sauternes and Barsac, are made, and all the top dry white wines, too. On the Right Bank, Merlot and Cabernet Franc are the dominant grapes, and the two primary regions are Pomerol and St.-Émilion. Though the best-known subregions tend to dominate discussions—and sales—of Bordeaux, there are actually more than 50 Bordeaux subregions, including little-known appellations such as Fronsac, Entre-Deux-Mers and the Côtes de Castillon. Until recently, most of these smaller regions were considered second-rate or worse, but that has begun to change as ambitious and talented (though often poorer) producers have sought to make a less pricey but still good-quality Bordeaux.

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THE BORDEAUX BLEND

No single grape reigns supreme in Bordeaux; the wines are almost always a blend. Six red varietals are employed—Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Petite Verdot, Carménère and Malbec—though the last two are rarely found. Each chateau determines its own ratio, but there are regional styles. As for the whites, they're largely a blend of Sauvignon Blanc and Sémillon with an occasional bit of Muscadelle.

There are many good reasons to make a blended rather than a single-varietal wine. One is consistency. It's easier to achieve a consistent profile with several varietal players: One grape may provide aromatics, another structure and depth. And in an uncertain maritime climate like that of Bordeaux, it's good to have options—grapes that not only contribute different characteristics but ripen at different times, too. If something happens to the late-ripening Cabernet Franc, the early-ripening Merlot can compensate.

THE HIERARCHY

Wine has been made in Bordeaux since the time of the Romans, although it was an exclusively domestic product for the first 1,000-plus years, until Henry II of England married Eleanor of Aquitaine and exports of Bordeaux to England began. Then, in the 17th century, the French king hired Dutch engineers to drain the Médoc region on Bordeaux's Left Bank, revealing a large swath of what turned out to be extremely desirable vineyard land. It was promptly planted with vineyards and peopled by aristocrats who built many of the chateaux that still stand today.

The most critical date in Bordeaux history, however, is 1855: It marks the start of a real wine hierarchy—and arguably the birth of the wine snob. This was the year the Bordeaux Classification went into effect, creating the five "classes" of chateaux that inform wine pricing and valuation to this day.

writers. He has also emerged as one of the freshest voices in the wine-writing field. His monthly wine columns for House & Garden magazine are collected in two books, "Bacchus and Me" and "A Hedonist in the Cellar." In 2006, he was the recipient of the James Beard Foundation's M.F.K. Fisher Distinguished Writing Award. A collection of his short stories, "How It Ended," was published in 2009.

About Lettie Teague

Before joining The Wall Street Journal in 2010, Lettie Teague was the executive wine editor at Food & Wine magazine, where she wrote the monthly column Wine Matters. She received the James Beard Foundation's M.F.K. Fisher Distinguished Writing Award in 2003 and won a 2005 James Beard Award for magazine columns. She is the author of "Educating Peter: How Anybody Can Become an (Almost) Instant Wine Expert," published by Scribner in 2007, and the illustrator and co-author of "Fear of Wine: An Introductory Guide to the Grape," published by Bantam in 1995.

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The classification came about thanks to Napoleon III, who ordered a group of wine brokers to come up with a list of the best Bordeaux in time for the Paris Exposition, a sort of national trade fair. The brokers compiled a list of 62 chateaux that they ranked from first through fifth growths, or "cru classes," according to reputation and price. Although the list was intended to be temporary, it took hold and remains virtually unchanged, save for the late inclusion of Château Cantemerle and the elevation of Château Mouton-Rothschild from a second to first growth.

The wines the brokers selected were all reds from the Left Bank. The great sweet wines of Sauternes and Barsac were allotted two ranking classes, but all of the wines of Pomerol and St.-Émilion on the Right Bank were left out. (The Left Bank, it seemed, had all the political clout.) It took St.-Émilion producers 100 years to come up with a ranking system of their own; in their system, unlike the 1855 classification, all the wines are re-reviewed every 10 years and possibly promoted or demoted. Meanwhile, in Pomerol, home of the great Château Pétrus, there is still no classification system at all.

The hierarchy of the original classification system—however imperfect or incomplete—gave Bordeaux a measurable sort of prestige, not to mention marketing power, that no other regional system has managed to duplicate. I've met many producers, from California to Germany, who have told me their goal is to make "a first growth"—never mind how far geographically, or spiritually, they happened to be from Bordeaux.

THE BIG NAMES

Certain Bordeaux chateaux function as a sort of luxury shorthand. There are the five designated as first growths—Château Latour, Château Lafite, Château Margaux, Château Mouton and Château Haut-Brion—as well as a handful of others that are just as avidly sought-after and exorbitantly priced, including Château Pétrus, Château Cheval Blanc and Château Lafleur (although there are many more). These command most of the attention in the auction market today, and are largely responsible for the image of Bordeaux as a wine that is forbiddingly unapproachable in its youth—and just as forbiddingly priced.

EVERYBODY ELSE

There is a great deal more to Bordeaux than the big chateaux; in fact, many more properties are humble than haute. And while the quality over the years has been spotty at these lesser-known properties, it is, in many cases, much improved. Thanks to better weather and improved winemaking techniques, there are much better wines at the bottom rung now. But competition in this market is fierce, and consumers—as well as retailers and sommeliers—have been slow to take notice. Owners of small chateaux rarely travel to the U.S. to promote their wines, and affordable Bordeaux are often lost amid all the cheaply priced Chilean Cabernet and Australian Shiraz.

THE GOOD NEWS

After a string of less than stellar vintages—2006, 2007 and 2008—Bordeaux was given the gift of the terrific 2009 vintage. This may be the year on which smaller chateaux, as well as the big names, stake their reputations, not to mention their fiscal hopes. These wines are just beginning to arrive in the market, and I was able to taste several 2009 wines in the past several weeks. In the lush 2009 Château Lamothe-Vincent ($15) and the exuberant Peyraud ($13), a Merlot-based wine from the humble Côtes du Blaye, I found two appealing 2009s that are easy to drink and easy to afford. Bordeaux superstar Denis Dubourdieu, a consultant to great properties like Cheval Blanc, also makes a good cheap bottle in both red and white. His white Bordeaux, the 2010 Chateau Reynon Sauvignon Blanc ($10) is a lively, bright and refreshing wine, and his 2009 Clos Floridene red ($24) is ripe and juicy.

WHAT'S NEXT

While the famous chateaux continue to command thousand-dollar price tags, the small producers continue to flail in a very large global pool. A more concerted outreach to retailers and sommeliers, who may have abandoned Bordeaux in search of edgier wines, could help. Roger Dagorn, wine director of New York's Porter House restaurant, thought that Bordeaux producers might try pitching their wines to the growing crowd of wine lovers rebelling against high-alcohol wines. "For people who are tired of tasting California wines with a lot of power and alcohol, the wines of Bordeaux provide more finesse," he said. (Though perhaps there aren't that many Porter House diners who are particularly tired,

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since 8½ pages of the restaurant's list are allotted to California reds and 1½ pages to the wines of Bordeaux.)

Another idea on the table: sending consumers on a blind date with Bordeaux. This fall, Le Conseil Interprofessionnel du Vin de Bordeaux, the Bordeaux promotional organization, is offering "Matchmaking Parties," pairing consumers with inexpensive Bordeaux based on their wine preferences. No word as to whether or not a successful match means bottle and drinker will go home together.

From Bordeaux, Four Affordable Reds and One White.

The red wines of Bordeaux receive the lion's share of the attention, but the whites can be quite worthy. The Croix de Carbonnieux is a particularly good case in point. Made in the Pessac-Léognan district of Bordeaux (once part of Graves) this bright, clean white is marked by a zesty acidity and a penetrating minerality. It's the "second wine" of the prestigious Château Carbonnieux.

2009 La Croix de Carbonnieux, $28

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