

An overview of Bordeaux history

56 BC Crassus conquers the Bituriges: Burdigala (Bordeaux) becomes Roman. According to the historian Strabo there is virtually no home-grown wine, with the drink instead being imported from Iberia and southern Italy.

71 BC Pliny visits Bordeaux - the city is entirely surrounded by vines.

400 AD The teacher and rhetorician Ausonius describes Bordeaux as 'characterised by rivers and vines'.

1154 Bordeaux comes under English rule. Wine becomes the city's most important export product and ensures the wealth of its inhabitants.

1214 The inhabitants of Bordeaux persuade King John of England to abolish all export taxes on wine. The ports of Bordeaux become the world's most important wine ports at this time.

1241 Henri III Plantagenet extends the privileges of Bordeaux citizens. Wines from other regions can only enter the city after 25 December, and thus cannot be shipped. This privilege continues (with a few interruptions) under successive French kings until being finally abolished in 1776 by Turgot, the first French liberal.

1303 Bordeaux exports 102,724 tonneaux (one tonneau = four barriques = 900 litres = 1,200 modern bottles) of wine, or 924,518 hl, around the equivalent of Switzerland's entire current annual production or around 120 million bottles! 1550 Jean de Pontac builds a 'Maison Noble' amid his vines to the south of the city of Bordeaux, which becomes a centre and symbol of winemaking, and thus invents the wine chateau.

1660 François-Auguste de Pontac opens a tavern in London. It serves a wine called Ho Bryan, which unlike the light red 'clarets' is dark in colour and has a 'most particular taste', as Samuel Pepys wrote three years previously in his famous diary. New French Claret is now in fashion.

1724 Boucher, the King's governor, bemoans the Bordeaux aristocracy's planting fever, and in 1725 forbids the planting of any new vineyards - a ban which stands for thirty years but is effectively ignored.

1755 Three-quarters of the income from Bordeaux's 70 top families comes from the sale of their own wine.

1787 Future American President Thomas Jefferson travels to Bordeaux and records his impressions in a diary. Some of the estates he names and admires include Lafite, Margaux, Latour, Haut-Brion and Yquem.

1855 Based on previous rankings and on the prices fetched by wines, the Bordeaux chamber of commerce establishes the first official, state-sanctioned

classification of Bordeaux wines to coincide with the Universal Exposition in Paris. It divides 88 estates from Haut-Médoc and Sauternes plus Haut-Brion from Graves into categories, ranging from 1^{ère} to 5^{ème} Cru Classé.

1860 The agronomist Jules Guyot introduces the pruning method that is named after him, requiring vines to be grown on wires. This modern vine technique is hereafter used throughout the Gironde. Alexis Millardet and Ulysse Gayon invent 'Bouillie Bordelaise' (three parts copper sulphate to one part caustic lime) as a way of combating downy and powdery mildew, which had been damaging crops for a decade.

1863 Phylloxera comes to Bordeaux and gradually attacks all of the vineyards across Europe. Only the richest estates have the means to combat the pest successfully.

1922 Twenty-year-old Philippe de Rothschild takes the reins of Mouton and revolutionises the Bordeaux wine world. He initiates bottling at the producing estate ('mise en bouteille au château'), and (re-)introduces so-called second wines and artist-designed labels.

1946 This year marks the birth of modern oenology: laboratory chemist Emile Peynaud submits his thesis and becomes a professor at the Faculty of Oenology. He revolutionises both the art of winemaking and the language of wine.

1956 The beginning of modern winemaking on the right bank: frost destroys a significant proportion of the vines in this area. The vineyards are restructured and Merlot thus becomes the main variety in this part of the Bordeaux wine-growing region.

1973 Minister of Agriculture Jacques Chirac signs the only change to the 1855 classification: Mouton-Rothschild becomes a Premier Cru Classé.

1983 American wine critic Robert Parker declares 1982 to be the vintage of the century, and thus triggers a wine boom surpassing any other. The prices of Grands Crus quadruple: whilst the merchants are initially the first to profit, estates make record profits in vintages such as 1989, 1995, 2000, 2005 and 2009.

1991 Former bank clerk, innkeeper and wine merchant Jean-Luc Thunevin acquires a small, unfavourably located plot in Saint-Emilion, creates a brand called Château Valandraud, and thus invents 'garage wine', triggering a veritable wine revolution in the area and influencing developments over the next few years.

Bordeaux geography

Bordeaux covers around 120,000 hectares of vines in the département of Gironde. The Garonne and the Dordogne rivers split the region into the left bank of the Garonne (Médoc, Graves, Sauternes) and the right bank of the Dordogne (Saint-Emilion, Pomerol and Fronsac).

Médoc / Haut Médoc

16,300 hectares of vines | 1,400 chateaus | 150 million bottles a year

A headland stretching for almost a hundred kilometres between the Atlantic to the west, and the Gironde Estuary, where the Garonne and Dordogne rivers meet, to the east. In terms of wine style, a distinction can be drawn between the southernmost part of the Médoc (the Haut Médoc) with its seven village appellations and the northern part, the Médoc proper. Unlike the villages, which have very uniform terroirs, the soils of the larger area are heterogeneous. Gently undulating knolls of coarse gravel alternate with sand, clay and limestone soils. The two main Bordeaux varieties of Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot are almost equally well represented and produce wines ranging in style from tart to elegant.

Margaux

1,400 hectares of vines | 90 producers | 10 million bottles a year

The southernmost village appellation (and therefore the closest to the city) bears the name of a single village but in fact covers five: Margaux, Arsac, Cantenac, Labarde and Soussans. The soils consist of deep, well-draining gravel mixed with sand and clay. Cabernet Sauvignon (which makes up the majority of vineyards) does particularly well on the characteristic gravel hilltops whilst Merlot prefers clayey plots. The best examples of Margaux wine can be recognised by their exceptionally refined tannins, which turn out to be delicate and fresh rather than compact and angular. The raspberry aroma found in young wines here often reveals a perfect level of ripeness.

Moulis

600 hectares of vines | 40 producers | 4 million bottles a year

Moulis sits between Margaux and Listrac in the centre of the Médoc. Terroir-wise Moulis is a compendium of almost the entire Haut-Médoc, containing examples of almost all of the peninsula's different soil types: gravel, sand, limestone and clay. The range of wines is similarly extensive, made from around 50% Cabernet Sauvignon with Merlot, a little Petit Verdot and Cabernet Franc. The best examples are well balanced and smooth.



Saint-Julien

920 hectares of vines | 26 producers | 6.5 million bottles a year

A substantial proportion of Saint-Julien's vineyards are to be found alongside the Gironde estuary and in the middle of Haut-Médoc - so it is no surprise that the appellation (in which the majority of wines come from classified estates) is regularly described as the most reliable and consistent in the Médoc region. The appellation covers a gravel-rich area 5 kilometres long and 3.5 kilometres wide. Saint-Julien has by far the most uniform terroir in the Médoc. The proportion of Cabernet Sauvignon used here is similar to in Pauillac. The juicy, elegant, exceptionally sensual and smoothly ample qualities of Saint-Julien wines make them some of the most popular and well loved of any produced in the Médoc.

Pauillac

1,200 hectares of vines | 110 producers | 9 million bottles a year

Pauillac with its tiny harbour is the most important location in Haut-Médoc. It is surrounded by the world-famous sites of three Premiers Crus, a handful of 'super seconds' and a number of ambitious estates following close behind. The extremely lean, deep gravel soils in the form of flat hilltops mixed with a little clay and sand on the fringes, around two thirds of which are planted with Cabernet Sauvignon, produce wines offering density, structure, sophistication and power.

Saint-Estèphe

1,200 hectares of vines | 150 producers | 10 million bottles a year

Saint-Estèphe is the most northerly village appellation in the Médoc. It contains only five classified but around 40 unclassified estates, which also produce excellent wines in good years. Saint-Estèphe is a goldmine for treasure seekers