



FRANCE: Bordeaux

STAFF TRAINING

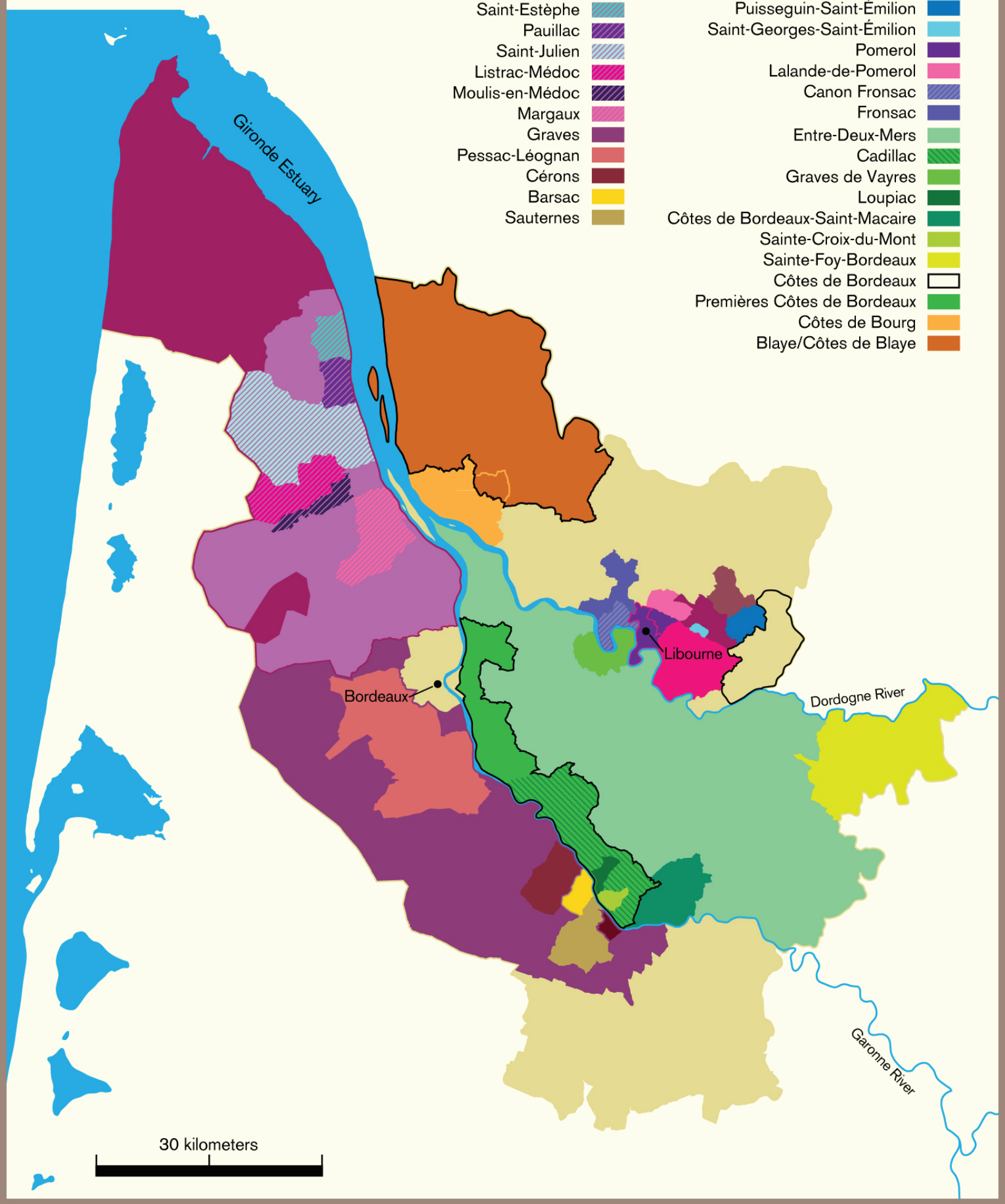
The origins of the world's modern fine wine market lie in southwestern France's Gironde *département*, not far from the Atlantic Ocean. The Bordeaux wine region takes its name from a city on the Garonne River, which established itself as a major medieval port and a hub of the wine trade. Dutch merchant fleets carried Bordeaux wines across Europe in the middle of the last millennium, and the English have long exhibited great thirst for claret—the red wines of Bordeaux.

Bordeaux today is justly famous for its top red and sweet white wines, and mature vintages from fabled estates have long been the backbone of serious collectors' cellars and auction house offerings. But Bordeaux offers more than wine for the wealthy. In flush vintages, Bordeaux makes almost a billion bottles of wine, in every style—red, dry and sweet white, rosé and sparkling. Bordeaux is the largest region of AOP production in France, encompassing more than fifty individual wine appellations and nearly 120,000 hectares of vineyards. With so much focus on the high end, it's easy to miss a vast amount of affordable wines produced in the region.



Château Margaux

- | | | | |
|-----------------|--|---------------------------------|--|
| Bordeaux | | Saint-Émilion | |
| Médoc | | Lussac-Saint-Émilion | |
| Haut-Médoc | | Montagne-Saint-Émilion | |
| Saint-Estèphe | | Puisseguin-Saint-Émilion | |
| Pauillac | | Saint-Georges-Saint-Émilion | |
| Saint-Julien | | Pomerol | |
| Listrac-Médoc | | Lalande-de-Pomerol | |
| Moulis-en-Médoc | | Canon Fronsac | |
| Margaux | | Fronsac | |
| Graves | | Entre-Deux-Mers | |
| Pessac-Léognan | | Cadillac | |
| Cérons | | Graves de Vayres | |
| Barsac | | Loupiac | |
| Sauternes | | Côtes de Bordeaux-Saint-Macaire | |
| | | Sainte-Croix-du-Mont | |
| | | Sainte-Foy-Bordeaux | |
| | | Côtes de Bordeaux | |
| | | Premières Côtes de Bordeaux | |
| | | Côtes de Bourg | |
| | | Blaye/Côtes de Blaye | |





Climate

Two rivers, the Garonne and the Dordogne, converge into the Gironde, a 50-mile-long, widening estuary that flows northward into the Atlantic Ocean. Bordeaux's wine regions line the banks of these rivers and estuary. Bordeaux's climate, moderated by its waterways and proximity to the coast, is mild, humid and maritime—summers are warm but can be wet. Winter's bite is blunted, but the threat of rainfall during June flowering and the September-October harvest is a frequent concern.

The Bordeaux Grape Family

Red Grapes

Cabernet Sauvignon
Merlot
Cabernet Franc
Petite Verdot
Malbec
Carmenère

White Grapes

Sauvignon Blanc
Sémillon
Muscadelle

When sommeliers speak of a "Bordeaux family" of grapes, it's not just for ease of classification—many really are related! Cabernet Franc and Sauvignon Blanc are the genetic parents of Cabernet Sauvignon. Cabernet Franc is a parent of Merlot, and Malbec and Merlot are genetic half-siblings, with a common mother, the very rare Magdeleine Noire des Charentes. Consequently, some produce wines with similar characteristics. Green notes—bell pepper, grass, sage—are common throughout, particularly when grown in moderate climates like Bordeaux. Petit Verdot and Muscadelle are the outliers, without direct genetic relationship to the others.



Merlot grapes



Bordeaux is a blend

Red Bordeaux wines are frequently blends of two, three or more varieties. The traditional recipe for Left Bank wines calls for a Cabernet Sauvignon-dominant blend, with lesser amounts of Merlot and/or Cabernet Franc. A small percentage of Petit Verdot may be added for exotic seasoning. On the Right Bank, Merlot and Cabernet Franc are the dominant grapes, as growers historically had difficulty ripening Cabernet Sauvignon in its colder clay soils. Malbec and Carmenère are rare in modern Bordeaux.

- **Cabernet Sauvignon:** Power, Austerity, Deep Color, High Tannin, Black Fruit
- **Merlot:** Plushness, Texture, Higher Alcohol, Blue and Red Fruit
- **Cabernet Franc:** Fragrance, Black and Red Fruit, Freshness
- **Petit Verdot:** Floral perfume, Deep Color, High Tannin

White Bordeaux wines are typically blends of Sémillon and Sauvignon Blanc, although some producers use a touch of Muscadelle as well. Sémillon dominates sweet wine blends, while Sauvignon Blanc is usually the dominant grape in dry wines. Muscadelle is aromatic, but unrelated to the Muscat family.

- **Sauvignon Blanc:** Grassiness, High Acidity
- **Sémillon:** Texture and Weight
- **Muscadelle:** Floral Intensity, Fruitiness

The Regions of Bordeaux

Bordeaux's various appellations are grouped into **four** major regions: the Left Bank, the Right Bank, Entre-Deux-Mers, and Côtes de Bordeaux.

The basic appellation for the entire region is Bordeaux AOP. Bordeaux AOP wines that do not indicate a smaller zone of production (Côtes de Bordeaux, Pauillac, Haut-Médoc, etc.) may theoretically contain grapes grown in any or all of these areas. Bordeaux AOP wines may be red, dry white, sweet white, or rosé. Sparkling wines made by the traditional method may be produced from Bordeaux varieties throughout the region, and labeled as Crémant de Bordeaux.

Superior?

Is Bordeaux *supérieur* really superior? Not necessarily! This appellation, introduced in 1943, requires slightly reduced maximum yields and a higher minimum level of ripeness at harvest. This was an important signifier of quality decades ago, but in the modern era *supérieur* levels of alcohol are easy to achieve. White wines labeled *supérieur* will be off-dry to semi-sweet.



The Left Bank: Médoc

The Médoc, a triangular peninsula between the Gironde Estuary and the Atlantic Ocean, is located north of the city of Bordeaux. It is the region's most renowned red wine district today, but it was forest and saltmarsh in the early 17th century. Dutch tradesmen and engineers arrived to drain the marshes, revealing great beds of gravel that would become the preeminent home for Cabernet Sauvignon in France, and the world. Soon, aristocratic and grandiose châteaux—manor houses—rose up in the Médoc, each with its own vineyard. The greatest châteaux became emblems of fine wine—the first true “brands” of the wine world.

The Médoc is sheltered from harsh Atlantic gales by a band of coastal forest, and its most famous wine appellations are located directly on the Gironde. The Haut-Médoc (“upper” Médoc) is its premier southern subregion, home to the deepest and most well-drained gravel soils in Bordeaux. The following four village appellations are within the Haut-Médoc and are benchmark appellations for Cabernet Sauvignon-based blends in Bordeaux.

Saint-Estèphe AOP:

Tannic, austere, and rugged

Saint-Julien AOP:

Balanced and restrained

Pauillac AOP:

Aristocratic, powerful, and long-lived

Margaux AOP:

Exotic, perfumed, and silky

Remember: while the Médoc is an entire geographic area, bottles labeled as Médoc AOP are everyday wines, usually sourced from vineyards that do not qualify for one of the superior village or regional appellations within it. This is Cabernet country, but wines labeled Médoc AOP (or Haut-Médoc AOP) typically include a sizeable percentage of Merlot—the grape may make up half the blend.

Bordeaux and Oak

Aging wine in 225-liter oak barrels—*barriques*—is a routine practice in Bordeaux. Larger proportions of new barrels are typically employed for the more prestigious wines—whether red or white, dry or sweet—lending aromas of vanilla, toasted cedar, and spice.





The Left Bank: Graves

Fanning southward from the city of Bordeaux, the Graves region lines the western (left) bank of the Garonne. As its name indicates, Graves has gravelly soils suitable for Cabernet Sauvignon, particularly in the northern part of the region. However, there is more clay and sand than in the Haut-Médoc, and more Merlot in its vineyards. Classic Graves red blends are often evenly split between the two grapes, and good Graves reds are generally lighter, less tannic, and more elegant than the top wines of the Médoc.

The best properties are located in northern Graves—some sit amidst the suburbs of Bordeaux itself! And the best red and dry white wines are typically labeled as Pessac-Léognan AOP, signifying northern Graves, rather than Graves AOP. With a few exceptions, Pessac-Léognan reds often play second fiddle to the great Médoc reds, but without doubt the appellation produces the top dry whites in Bordeaux. Classically aged in oak, these wines are creamy, herbal and textural; they are a luxurious step up in body and richness from sharper styles of Sauvignon Blanc common in the Loire Valley.

At Graves' far southern end, near the confluence of the Ciron and Garonne Rivers, are two important destinations for sweet white wines, Sauternes and Barsac.





The Right Bank

The Right Bank is an informal name for the appellations lining the eastern banks of the Gironde and its tributary, the Dordogne River. Here Merlot and Cabernet Franc take center stage. The region's premier red wine appellations are Pomerol and Saint-Émilion.

Pomerol AOP: Wines from this small appellation exemplify French Merlot. The wines are often lush and lavishly oaked, with flavors of plum and chocolate. Traditional producers make wines with a harder edge, but overall these are among Bordeaux's richest, plumpest, and most extravagant wines.

Saint-Émilion AOP: Merlot and Cabernet Franc are both suited to the limestone, clay, and gravel soils of Saint-Émilion. Merlot is predominant, but Cabernet Franc may account for almost half the blend in some very good wines. Its spine firms up the sweetness of Merlot. Saint-Émilion is a much larger appellation than Pomerol and offers a wider range of quality and style, from inexpensive, rustic and leathery to lavishly oaked, modern and ripe. Overall, the wines are a bit more rigid and less fat than in Pomerol, but more mellow and round than Left Bank wines.

Côtes de Bordeaux

In Bordeaux, most vineyards sit atop gentle grades rather than severe slopes, but in the inland *côtes* (hills) the landscape becomes more dramatic. Several smaller, historic appellations line the eastern edge of Bordeaux amid its *côtes*, including Bourg AOP and Côtes de Bordeaux AOP itself. The latter comprises four areas along the region's periphery and the eastern banks of the Gironde and the Garonne. Individual bottles may carry the name of one of its composite regions: Francs, Cadillac, Castillon, or Blaye.

Most Côtes de Bordeaux wines are Merlot-based reds. They often don't require much cellaring to show their best, although there are some ambitious producers in these second-tier areas that really perform above their station!

Entre-Deux-Mers

The "land between two seas," Entre-Deux-Mers is an appellation for dry white wines located between the Garonne and Dordogne Rivers. This is a large region producing steely, crisp Sauvignon Blanc wines that often have more in common with Loire Valley examples than the richer, oak-aged wines of the Graves.



Sauternes and Barsac

Bordeaux's World Class Dessert Wines

The wines of Sauternes and Barsac are some of the world's most expensive, ageworthy, and acclaimed dessert wines. Sémillon is the dominant grape in the sweet wines of these regions, supported by Sauvignon Blanc and Muscadelle. In warm, humid, late summer afternoons the *Botrytis cinerea* ("noble rot") mold attacks the thin-skinned grapes, dehydrating them. The process naturally concentrates sugars and adds flavors of honey, dried apricot and saffron to the finished wine. However, it does not affect bunches evenly—vigilant Sauternes producers must send picking teams on multiple passes through the vineyard. The laborious harvests and miniscule yields result in very expensive wines.

Good Sauternes has a golden hue that deepens with age; the wine is full-bodied, with thick viscosity and a wealth of ripe and tropical fruit notes that grow savory over time. The top châteaux typically age these wines in a high percentage of new oak barrels—the flavors of botrytis mingle with the sweet spices and vanilla tones of oak in the wine. This ultimate luxury wine is a great pairing at the end of a meal with fall fruit desserts and flavors of honey, dried figs, gingerbread, hazelnut, and graham cracker. Plus, it's a classic pairing for both blue cheese and foie gras!

Less expensive—but less luxurious—dessert wines are made in neighboring appellations like Cérons and Loupiac. These typically show less botrytis and oak character, and are simpler and fruitier on the palate.



Botrytis cinerea on Semillon grapes in Sauternes



Bordeaux Classifications

Bordeaux is famous for its many quality château classifications. Unlike most other *grand cru* systems in France, in which vineyards or villages are classified according to their relative potential, Bordeaux has several means of classifying châteaux for the actual quality of their wines.

Bordeaux's most famous, enduring, and debated classification dates to 1855. Napoléon III commissioned a ranking of Bordeaux's top châteaux in advance of the Universal Exposition in Paris, a cultural celebration that would draw tourists from across Europe and the globe. Bordeaux's merchants assembled the rankings by price, and classified dry red wines of the Médoc—and one from Graves—in five *crus*, while making a separate list of sweet white wines. Four "first growths" were born—Châteaux Lafite-Rothschild, Latour, Margaux, and Haut-Brion—and one Sauternes wine, Château d'Yquem, was accorded honor as *premier cru supérieur*, a wine without equal. The 1855 classification is still in place today, and only one significant change has occurred in over 150 years: in 1973 Château Mouton-Rothschild ascended from second growth to first. Reimagining the classification today is a popular sport amongst wine writers, as there are over- and underperformers in most *crus*. The reputations (and prices) of all five first growths remain high. Châteaux at lower tiers that consistently produce superb wines are termed "super seconds."

Saint-Émilion ranks its top producers as either *grand cru classé* or as *premier grand cru classé*; unlike the 1855 classification this is re-evaluated about once a decade and is based on reputation and a tasting of the wines. (New evaluations are, as may be expected, the subject of frequent lawsuits from devalued châteaux.) Graves has its own list of *grand cru classé* red and white wines. Pomerol is the only top appellation that lacks a classification system.

Grand Vin & Second Wines

In modern Bordeaux, an estate produces a single *grand vin*—a château's signature wine—but it may also produce a number of other wines. Almost all classified estates in the Médoc and Graves produce "second wines," released at lower prices than *grands vins*. A second wine may be the product of young vines, or of fruit deemed unfit for the *grand vin*. Whole vineyard parcels may be planted solely to produce a second wine. Second wines are generally more approachable, and even on the Left Bank they often contain more Merlot than a *grand vin*.

A *grand vin* is almost always labeled traditionally, under the picture and name of the producing château. Second wines often have more fanciful names, sometimes paying homage to historical figures or famous landmarks important to the château.



Bordeaux Vintages

It pays to know a little about Bordeaux vintages—wine-savvy guests have likely read a few vintage reports and seen the latest “vintage of the century” headlines. Top recent vintages (think 2005, 2009 or 2010) are usually the product of warm growing seasons, with ripe and powerful wines. These vintages offer more appeal to fans of California Cabernet and Merlot looking to experience a European wine. For more classically styled wines (and better bargains), look to the cooler years!

2000	●	\$\$\$
2001	●	\$\$
2002	●	\$
2003	●	\$\$
2004	●	\$\$
2005	●	\$\$\$\$
2006	●	\$\$
2007	●	\$
2008	●	\$\$
2009	●	\$\$\$\$
2010	●	\$\$\$\$
2011	●	\$\$
2012	●	\$\$



Château Lafite



Saint-Estéphe



Selling Bordeaux

Make no mistake, the most prestigious Bordeaux wines are expensive! Prices for top estates have been sky-high in recent years on the strength of several highly applauded vintages and the evolving Asian market. Lafite-Rothschild, Latour, and d'Yquem are trophy wines, not likely to be included in a sommelier's opening tableside salvo. But there are good Bordeaux wines at every price point.

Bordeaux has a long association with the culture of fine dining. Serving red Bordeaux with beef and the red wine-based Bordelaise sauce is an obvious pairing, but consider it with duck as well. With age, its flavors harmonize with mushrooms and truffles. Dry white Bordeaux is underutilized at the table—try it in place of Chardonnay with a rich poultry or fish course accented with strong herbs. And sell that glass of Sauternes with an appropriate foie gras starter, strong cheese course, or dessert! It's a little sip of luxury for the guest, and the simple act of regular suggestion will net sales.

Bordeaux provides a great gateway to the Old World for the California Cabernet, Merlot, or Sauvignon Blanc drinker. You can keep the guest in his or her comfort zone while still offering a new experience, an earthier style of wine. Fans of rich and generous Napa Valley Merlot may find something to love in Pomerol, while Entre-Deux-Mers can be a good transition, in style and price, from New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc. For young Cabernet Sauvignon fans, sell a ripe Left Bank Bordeaux of similar age, when the wine is still dominated by tannin and oak. Red Bordeaux lists are an area wherein a restaurant can assemble some mature wines relatively easily—this can drive high-end sales, but remember that fans of young American Cabernet might not be the right market for old Bordeaux.

The region has so much storied history, and its name is instantly recognizable—you just have to understand what you are selling. Learn the story and profile of your product! Wine-savvy guests may already understand classic appellation profiles for Bordeaux—take a little time to learn how *your* Pauillac aligns with or veers from the classic Pauillac profile. While most sommeliers memorize Bordeaux classifications, to sell classified wines it is less important to know whether the wine is a third growth or a fifth growth, and more important to know if it's a fifth growth drinking like a third.

Review Questions

1. Name the three most important red grape varieties in Bordeaux.
2. What soil in Bordeaux is most suitable for Cabernet Sauvignon?
3. What is *Botrytis cinerea*?
4. In what year were the wines of the Médoc first classified?
5. What is the primary grape in Sauternes?
6. Where in Bordeaux is Pauillac located?