



Losing its bottle

Much has been said about the decline of the French wine trade, and now the great region of Bordeaux is feeling the pinch. Guy Boursot takes a look

Bordeaux, covering more than 600,000 acres, has been for years arguably the world's largest quality wine-producing region, producing a variety of red and white wines. As the vine thrives between 30 and 55 degrees of latitude, Bordeaux at 45 degrees is in the perfect location for a wide variety of wine styles, and the area also benefits from its temperate maritime climate, located close to the Bay of Biscay.

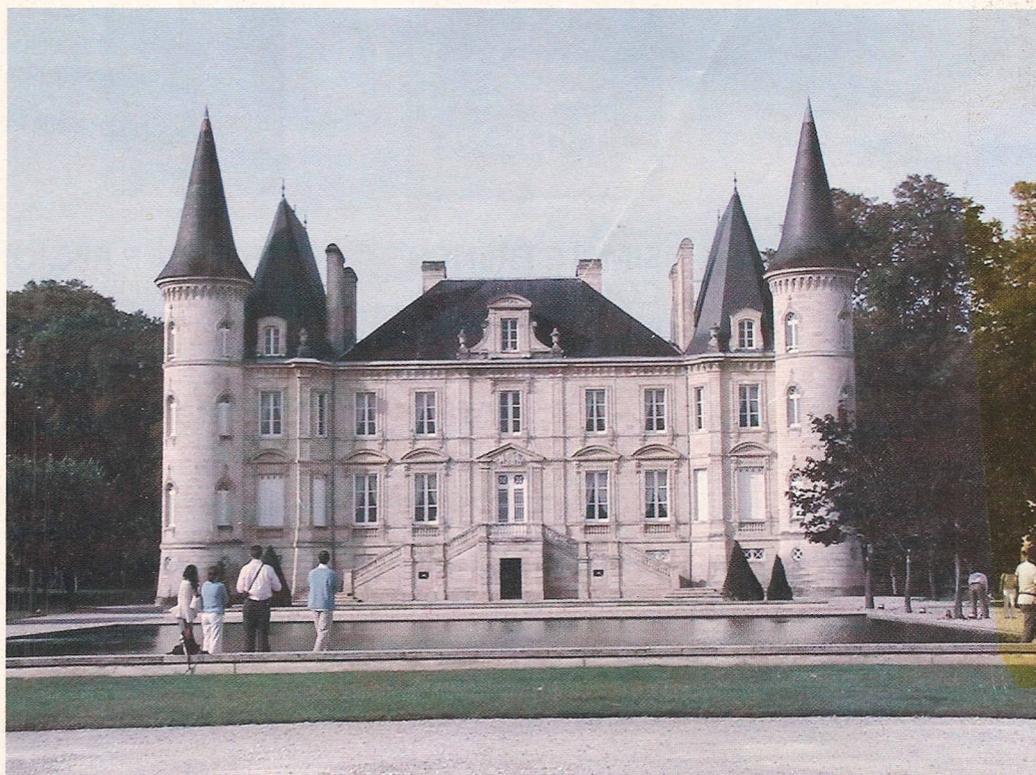
"Claret" is the Englishman's word for the red wine of Bordeaux. The wine is infinitely variable in style, from the softer easy drinking wines of the communes of St-Émilion and Graves, through to the fuller-bodied and more complex wines from Margaux, Pauillac and St-Estèphe. The chief reason for this diversity is the differing proportions of the grape varieties used: the two most important being the Cabernet Sauvignon, which produces body and the preservative tannin, and the early maturing Merlot, which produces juice with soft, fruity flavours. These grapes, with up to three others, are grown in the same vineyard, made separately and blended together in the spring following the vintage.

CRUS CONTROL

The classification system of the wines of the Médoc is complex to an outsider's mind. It was established in 1855, when the top 200 properties were graded into five classes (*crus*) according to the prices that their wines had achieved over the previous 10 years. This system has not been touched since then, with the sole exception of the elevation in 1972 of Château Mouton-Rothschild to a First Growth. While this system may seem archaic, by and large the system still holds good and is a reasonable barometer of quality and price.

However, I should point out that this system applies only to the properties on the Médoc peninsula, so such inland areas as St-Émilion and Graves have their own systems whereas Pomerol has none!

The *cru* system relates to the land rather than the wines, but the resulting wines are



entitled to apply the words *Cru Classé* to the labels of their prime wines – although paradoxically in the commercial world of wine-selling, the labels never state which class they belong to!

SWEET TREATS

Bordeaux is also famed for its dessert wines, primarily from the areas of Sauternes and Barsac. Here Sauvignon, Sémillon and to a lesser extent Muscadelle grapes combine to create lusciously sweet wines. The best is Château d'Yquem, which is fabulously expensive, even before it is ready for drinking! It is difficult and expensive to produce good quality sweet wine. Bordeaux is in a good location to experience the damp autumn conditions needed to encourage botrytis, the fungal growth that attacks and shrivels grapes, leaving a concentration of sugar and undiluted fruit. The best wines also retain the resulting slight taste of botrytis or "noble rot".

The UK has traditionally been the largest market for Bordeaux wine, but we are now

Château Pichon, one of Bordeaux's finest châteaux

hearing a lot about the dire state of the Bordeaux market: around 400 of the total of 12,000 châteaux are on the point of financial ruin. Put simply, the domestic market is, at best, stagnant and a fruitier style of wine is more popular.

THE WINE DECLINE

The great wines will always succeed but the problems lie with the many 'ordinary' wine producers, who have traded for too long with indifferent wine at inflated prices: there is no going back. The market needs to be thinned out to survive.

For the first time, this April half a million hectolitres of *Appellation Contrôlée* Bordeaux wine were allowed to be sent off for distillation with European grants. The trouble is that only 20 percent of this excess stock has been sent, as many farmers feel that they don't toil in the vineyards all year just to pour away their precious liquids. With another bumper harvest expected this year, the problems are simply being bottled up. **fm**

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