

SWIG: Left Bank Bordeaux tasting

9th January 2020

The left bank of Bordeaux is the land west of the Gironde and Garonne rivers and comprises the Médoc, Graves and Sauternes. The right bank refers to land east of the Dordogne river and includes St Émilion and Pomerol and the villages of Bourg and Blaye as well as many other appellations to the south-east.

The Left Bank and the Médoc

The Médoc communes from north to south are: St Estèphe, Pauillac, St Julien, and Margaux, but grapes are grown in three principal other areas. North of St Estèphe, in the middle between St Julien and Margaux, and south of Margaux. The northern and middle portions are the Haut-Médoc, whilst to the south of Bordeaux the Pessac-Léognan appellation was created in 1987 from the huge Graves area to include the most famous (and best) Châteaux, and extends from urban Bordeaux towards the pine forests of Les Landes. Sauterne and Barsac are south of Bordeaux west of the Garonne are still left bank.

The terroir of the Médoc (the ubiquitous French term describing the unique physical characteristics of a vineyard, the soil, orientation, altitude and micro-climate) changes over the length of the appellation. The left bank is characterised by lots of gravel and its depth varies. Forty years ago the communes of the Médoc were described as being poles on a continuum that gradually changed over its course. In the north, strong tannic foursquare 'masculine' wines, whilst in the south, perfumed less tannic softer and 'feminine'. So St Estèphe was very tannic with dry fruit, while Margaux in the south, softer fruitier and perfumed. Pauillac was fruitier but still quite tannic, while St Julien had a little less tannin but was more perfumed than Pauillac, often with a cigar box / cedar wood aroma.

These differences may not hold as true today, due to a trend attributed to the American critic Robert Parker. In the 1980s Parker helpfully scored wines out of 100, but the wines he reported on tended to be in the range 85-100, so in reality only a 15 point scale. His ratings hugely influenced sales, and famous châteaux found he would give their wines higher initial scores (leading to a buying frenzy) if they were fruity, alcoholic and not closed with mouth-puckering tannins. This supposedly led to a trend to produce not only these sorts of wines in Bordeaux but around the world, the so called international wines.

There are two other important factors that influence a wine's style, apart from the terroir. The *vines* grown - in Margaux there is more merlot in the blend and less cabernet sauvignon. Merlot makes a sweeter softer wine than Cabernet Sauvignon, and of course the *winemaker*, whose judgement influences when to pick, bunch and

grape selection, fermentation policies, use of oak etc.

Judging wine quality

Despite Parker it is impossible to accurately and consistently score a wine out of 20 or 100. Many studies have shown large inconsistencies in test-retest reliability in both scoring and flavour descriptors by 'experts'. Wine is a subjective experience and very personal, and our assessments vary and be influenced by environment, reputation and many other factors. Developing a personal wine vocabulary enables discussion and the exchange of ideas, and tastings allow us to develop our favourites / preferences.

The World of Fine Wine magazine produced a useful descriptive classification¹ and it might be fun for SWIG to vote on which category they think each wine is in. To make it easier to identify I have added 1-5 stars for the top five descriptors. Value for money is critical for most of us and personally I bump up the category / scores of good value wines.

The tasting

We are going to start with a dry white Bordeaux that offers a great and tasty alternative to straight Sauvignon Blanc, then seven reds. We taste the four classical Médoc communes from north to south, then onto a Pessac-Leognan, a Haut Medoc cru classé from Macau a village south of Margaux (Chateau Cantemerle), and the final red is the 4th growth Chateau Beychevelle from 2005 to show some bottle aging.

The tasting is rounded off by a superb Barsac wine from the greatly improved Chateau Doisy Daene, a classified 2nd growth but now making first growth quality.

On the tasting sheet I have listed the commune, year, encepagement, appellation, alcohol content and price.

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¹ ***World of Fine Wine***

50-74 Disagreeable or faulty wine

75-79 Sound but dull or boring wine of no character or appeal

* 80-84 Enjoyable, simple and straightforward wine

** 85-88 Good wine with no outstanding features

*** 89-92 Very good wine with some outstanding features

**** 93-96 Outstanding wine of great beauty and articulacy

***** 97-100 Great wine of spellbinding beauty and resonance, leaving the drinker with a sense of wonder – *I just love this descriptor – very Hugh Johnson!*