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## Introduction

I first arrived in Bordeaux in 1990 in a Citroën 2CV car from England. Bordeaux was not what it is today and nor was I, a timid fresh-faced girl just out of my studies. I cried almost the whole way down as I added distance between me and everything familiar in England.

I rolled into the rundown Quai de Bacalan, a part of the wine merchant area of Bordeaux by the Garonne River, which was shared, when dusk fell, by the 'ladies of the night'. With my rudimentary French, wine studies fresh in my mind, I was to be a '*stagiaire*' at one of Bordeaux's historic wine merchants (*négociants*) that lined the quayside of the Garonne.

I was eager to see for myself what I had learned from the pages of wine books and through tasting the wines of Bordeaux in England. Now was my chance to see where and how it happened in real life. I was to be based at the well-known wine '*négociants*', Maison Sichel for a few months before returning to the British wine trade. This merchant house, with classic Margaux wines such as Palmer and Angludet in its portfolio, had

built a reputation for innovation under the charismatic Peter Sichel. I was not to know, nearly 30 years later how this moment would impact the rest of my life.

Today, this '*quartier*' is the location of the ultra-modern interactive wine museum, *La Cité du Vin* and state-of-the-art electric trams trace the quayside. Bordeaux has taken its international position as the capital of wine. Vinexpo, the largest wine trade fair in the world takes place in Bordeaux every two years, welcoming 50,000 visitors.

When I first arrived, the Garonne River, which modelled this city's story, was confined behind a barbed wire fence and the old hangar warehouses blocked the view of this majestic curved body of water. It is this crescent-moon shape that gives Bordeaux its name of '*Port*

*de la Lune*'. Since Alain Juppé became mayor in 1995, Bordeaux has undergone a transformation. Today, it is what it should be. Its 18<sup>th</sup> century buildings have been sandblasted to reveal their creamy beauty and cycle paths and cafés line the riverside. Many streets are pedestrianised and since 2007, Bordeaux has been one of UNESCO's World Heritage sites.

It is not only the city that has undergone a change. Over the decades, Bordeaux has slowly unveiled to the world a 'behind the

scenes' view of where some of most famous wines in the world are made. Before, the Bordeaux wine region restricted access to the world's wine buyers only. Today it has finally opened wide its cellar doors to those that actually drink their wines.

It was my old boss Peter Sichel's father, Allan, a few years ago, who I think best summed up for me what is remarkable about this region's wines (in a charming if somewhat old fashioned way). "Without being, by any means,

the least alcoholic of wines, it is possibly the least heady. If it is a feminine characteristic to whisper rather than shout, to be subtle in expression rather than blatant, to reject with age the pleasant flamboyant characteristics of youth in favour of more tranquil, deeper, more expressive qualities of maturity, then again claret is a feminine wine". (Allan Sichel, *The Penguin Book of Wines*, 1965).







Légende.

Some may say that Bordeaux is *'passé'*, and that there are many newer exciting wines to discover from more exotic places. It is true, what I love about wine is its glorious variety. The wines of Bordeaux, however, hold a dear place in my heart and on my palate. They are some of the most elegant, fresh and balanced wines in the world. With their relatively high levels of acidity, there is always a freshness in these wines. This makes them suited to accompanying food. They don't give you a headache even when you have a glass or two too many, being relatively low in alcohol. Global warming has increased the levels slightly but this has so far helped Bordeaux to get better ripeness every year. In Bordeaux, both the skins and the pulp are ripe at around the same time, so there is no need to wait as in some regions.

Bordeaux is encountering a period of dynamism and precision in vine-growing and winemaking never seen before in both the large famous properties and the smaller, family-run châteaux.

The wines are getting better at every price level and at the same time more natural - truer expressions of their individual terroir. There is a return to an understanding at the

grass roots level of grape growing, and that is the soil, the vine's environment. Let's hope that it is not too late.

Bordeaux is well known for its very top wines that today are outside most people's reach. These are the Grand Cru Classé and they number only 200 amongst the thousands of smaller châteaux.

It is a big wine region and so it produces a big quantity of cheap, quaffing wine too. I would dare to say it is in-between these two that one finds the real treasure in Bordeaux. I have tried to detail how to find these in this book.

Inputs in the vineyard and the cellar are being checked and minimised where possible. Many have stopped the use of herbicide completely and are looking to minimise the use of sulphites during winemaking. There is today widespread experimentation of making and ageing in clay and terracotta amphorae and larger oak barrels.

The vast majority of wine producers in Bordeaux today are still the smaller independent producers, who I call 'SIPs'. Their vineyards have been family-run for genera-



Légende.

tions. These are the winemakers, the ones with soil on their shoes, who are making the authentic good value wines of Bordeaux today. They are the fabric of the real Bordeaux. Numbering over 44,000 in the early 1960s, today only 7,000 remain. Their number is dwindling while the average size of their properties increases - from 2.5 ha (6 ac) to 16 ha (40 ac). As they struggle to make their subtle wines stand out in the sea of good wines around the world, bigger companies and institutions are buying them out. This is not helped by the heavy inheritance tax in France (around 44% of the current value of the land) which makes it increasingly difficult to 'keep it in the family'.

Outside investors in certain prestigious areas such as the limestone plateau of Saint Emilion or the appellation of Margaux have driven prices up out of the range of local producers.

Many of the region's most authentic wines are not seen outside of France. This is due to the way that wines have been sold in Bordeaux in the past and today the vast majority are still sold by Bordeaux's powerful wine merchants on the world's markets. If your wine does not interest them (and today smaller producers



are not their focus) – you are a 'small fish in a big pond' tapping at doors of wine buyers who are already out to lunch by these wine merchants. It makes easier work for wine buyers to buy a number of wines from these middle men than deal with a number of smaller producers directly.

Who knows what the future holds? Perhaps if more wine drinkers knew more about these SIPs, these brave passionate people, it might make a difference – this is one of the reasons for writing this book.

Here are some stories of what I have learnt over the past 30 years and answers to the most frequently asked questions by visitors to the region. I hope that this book will bring Bordeaux alive for you and give you some tips on how to discover great value in Bordeaux today.



This book is best enjoyed with a glass of claret in your hand (with moderation of course) to help understand the richness of what this region has to offer, Sip by Sip. Just remember every SIP tells a story. Take the time to listen and the wine will recount its own. Santé!

Nicolle Croft







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## What is Bordeaux?

Bordeaux is a city and a port in the south-west of France. Bord'eau means 'on the edge of the water' being near to the Atlantic Ocean and on the banks of the wide Garonne River.

Many visitors to Bordeaux city expect a quaint wine town like Beaune in Burgundy. They find instead a thriving city with traffic problems comparable to Paris or Marseille. Bordeaux is beautiful though, a 'model of 18<sup>th</sup> century architecture' with its grand buildings and wide streets. An efficient electric tram makes it easy to get around its relaxed city centre full of café terraces and restaurants.

Bordeaux is also a wine. Wine has been shipped from Bordeaux's port via its rivers out to the Atlantic throughout its history. It has been the city's lifeline. Bordeaux's red wines are made from a **blend** of richly flavoured grape varieties, mainly Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. Bordeaux wines require patience.

Bordeaux is also one of the world's most famous and France's **largest** quality wine-growing region. With 110,600 ha (271,000

ac) planted to vines, it is four times the size of Burgundy.

Its vast area has many different soils, which suit different grape varieties and styles of wines. While Bordeaux is dominated by black grape varieties, there are also some excellent dry white and sweet wines. It even has light-coloured rosé, a darker rosé called 'clairet' and sparkling wine known as 'crémant', made using the traditional champagne method. For dining, Bordeaux offers a style of wine to match every course, from 'apéritif' to dessert.

Bordeaux has no fewer than

7,000 wine producing properties or **châteaux** as they are called in this region. Some are grand and impressive, others are more like simple farmhouses. There are about 650 that are considered subjectively as 'the best' or the '**classified**' properties - the '**grand cru classé**'.



A strawberry grown in the cool climate of England has more complex fruit aromas and balance than a strawberry ripened faster in the heat of Spain for example.

**BORDEAUX KEY FIGURES**  
7,000  
châteaux. 60 appellations. 300 wine merchants. 110,600 ha (271,000 ac). Average vineyard size of 16 ha (40 ac). 88% of vineyards are red and 12% white. Produces 25% of France's appellation wines.





## Bordeaux

### What makes it special?

The world's vineyards are grown in two bands that stretch around the earth's girth - between the 30<sup>th</sup> and 50<sup>th</sup> degrees latitude in the northern and southern hemispheres. Here, there is enough sunshine to ripen the grapes but it is cool enough for them to retain some freshness from their acidity. The growing season of the grapes is long and cool, producing complex fruit aromas.

Bordeaux is '**on the edge**' of this band. Located on the 45<sup>th</sup> latitude, the conditions are further tempered by its proximity to the Atlantic Ocean some 70 km (45 miles) from the city.

The waters of the **Atlantic Ocean** are cold but the **warm Gulf Stream** from the Caribbean helps to ripen the grapes. Overall, Bordeaux has a **moderate maritime climate**. Its average growing season temperature is between 16.5° and 18.5°C (61-65°F). It is wet, with mild winters, prone to frost in the spring and can have long sunny autumns. Its proximity to the sea means weather conditions are changeable. The sea can be cruel, bringing elec-

trical storms, rain, wind and even hail at any time of the year.

### Vintage Variation

In Bordeaux the climate is not the same each year and so different styles of wine are produced depending on the year. You need to 'know your vintages' when selecting Bordeaux wines. Vintages seem to turn in planetary cycles; years ending in tens or fives tend to be excellent, sixes or nines not bad, better than threes, fours or sevens.

The best years are generally the ones with sunny, dry summers resulting in riper fruit. These wines are fuller bodied, richer, with more structure and tannins, so they need at least 10 to 15 years of ageing (depending on the vintage and the wine) before drinking. They tend to be more expensive.

In less sunny years, grapes tend to be less ripe, wines are fresher and juicier, better for earlier drinking - something to open while we are waiting for the best vintages to be ready! They are not only lighter in

