



GCC 1855 HISTORY

BY DEWEY MARKHAM JR

Writer of « 1855 – a History of the Bordeaux Classification »

The history of Bordeaux may be read in the pages of its classification. More than just a hierarchy of wine-producing estates, the list speaks volumes about the origins of the region, the wine trade that makes it function, and, of course, the châteaux themselves.

Bordeaux's geographical location shaped its commercial destiny from its earliest days. Situated on the banks of the Garonne river, the city was founded as a Roman outpost where wines from inland regions upriver were loaded onto ships headed back to Italy.

Later, when vines were planted around the city and the area became a major wine producer in its own right, the region's production followed the same ocean-bound route to its markets overseas. This was especially necessary since domestic sales for these wines faced a significant problem. The French customers for wines of this caliber were to be found among the nobility at court in Paris; however, Bordeaux's distance from the capital was a major handicap in their acceptance, since it meant that numerous taxes and tariffs were placed on the wines as they made their way north. Vineyard areas closer to Paris, such as Burgundy and Champagne, tended to be more popular because fewer charges were imposed on them, resulting in a relatively lower price.

Given the international nature of its market, by the seventeenth century there were two main buyers for Bordeaux's wines: the Dutch and the British. Each customer was fundamentally important, albeit in very different ways, in shaping the character and quality of the wine we enjoy today.

The Dutch sought out the cheapest wines they could obtain, with quality being a secondary consideration. Since their purchases were destined to be shipped to Dutch colonies throughout the world, whatever finesse a better-quality wine might have possessed would have long disappeared by the time it reached its destination. To help preserve the wines during their long voyages, Dutch merchants developed a number of techniques to give them greater potential for successful aging. For example, burning sulfur in a barrel before filling it with wine enabled the contents to arrive in a more drinkable condition. (Of course, it would be several centuries before Louis Pasteur's discovery of bacteria as the agents for the wine's spoilage. The Dutch had no way of knowing that sulfur acted as an antibacterial agent—all they knew was that the wine benefited from this treatment.) Thanks to such methods, the Dutch gradually transformed Bordeaux from a wine to be drunk quickly to one that was capable of a marked improvement with age.

Bordeaux's other major customer was substantially different in its orientation. The British put their purchases on ships that made a relatively short voyage north, where they drank all the wine themselves. Accordingly, their main priority was better quality, and the vogue for these wines among the upper-middle class became so great that a continually increasing demand inexorably drove prices ever higher. In the 1640s, it was sufficient for these wine drinkers merely to ask their merchants for a wine from the Médoc region to be assured of obtaining something of superior quality, and price lists from this period show that Bordeaux's production was classified according to such large, regional divisions. However, with the passage of time, customers' requests became more and more focused, homing in on particular communes that had developed commercial reputations for better wine-making techniques. By the middle of the seventeenth century, contemporary price lists show that Bordeaux wines had become identified not just as Graves, for instance, but also as Pessac.

As the decades passed, British wine drinkers became more precise in designating the origins of their wines, and from the commune level attention shifted to individual producers who had developed a particular reputation which set them apart from their neighbors in the same locality. This process is generally acknowledged to have begun with a commercial initiative by Arnaud de Pontac, the owner of Haut-Brion. During the rebuilding of London in the wake of the Great Fire of 1666, de Pontac sent his son to the English capital to establish a tavern known as the Pontac's Head that would serve as a showcase for the wine from his estate. The tavern—and the wine—became quite fashionable with

GCC 1855 HISTORY

London's middle class, and the identity of a wine's producer began to gain greater significance when making a purchase. By the end of the seventeenth century it was no longer sufficient to ask for a Pessac; now drinkers instructed their merchants to acquire Haut-Brion.

Haut-Brion was not the only property that benefited from this early "brand awareness" among British wine drinkers. Three other properties had also carved out a distinct identity for themselves in wine drinkers' consciousness: Margaux, in the commune of the same name, and Latour and Lafite, situated in Pauillac.

Because the quality of the wine from these four producers gave them unparalleled name recognition, demand for them was higher than for any other wine, and this demand caused their prices to achieve a level unmatched by any other property in Bordeaux. Together, Haut-Brion, Margaux, Latour, and Lafite were grouped in their own commercial category, which came to be known as the "first growths."

By the middle of the eighteenth century other producers, who saw the financial rewards that such efforts at quality brought, also sought to make wines that would be worthy of note among the higher-paying British wine drinkers. A group of properties succeeded in creating a similar recognition for themselves in the marketplace, albeit without ever achieving the very highest prices that the four first growths had managed to win. These properties, whose wines were closely grouped together in price, became known as "second growths."

Around a dozen vineyards were generally acknowledged as being in this category. However, a number of additional properties were beginning to break free from their communal anonymity, although they had not yet achieved the clear commercial identity of the four first growths or the group of second growths which followed them.

By the time Thomas Jefferson arrived in Bordeaux in the spring of 1787, this system had evolved to encompass a well-defined third growth level. Their commercial success encouraged the identification of yet another series of wines as a category only slightly inferior to the third growths. Price lists from the 1820s show that this trend continued with the establishment of a fourth-growth level. By the early 1850s, there were five well-defined classes in this commercial hierarchy, comprising some sixty wine producers.

Because the quality of the wine from these four producers gave them unparalleled name recognition, demand for them was higher than for any other wine, and this demand caused their prices to achieve a level unmatched by any other property in Bordeaux. Together, Haut-Brion, Margaux, Latour, and Lafite were grouped in their own commercial category, which came to be known as the "first growths."

When one considers that the position of an estate in these lists was related to the price of its bottles on the market. This kind of disparity between the initial ranking of an estate in the classification, and its actual situation thereafter, became more and more common in the first half of the 19th century, and this process continues today: some wines classified in a given category end up selling at the price of wines in a higher category.

Thus it was that the structure of this commercial ranking system took form, developing from the top down and continually evolving as conditions at the individual properties and in the Bordeaux marketplace changed. In the early 1600s, the wines most in demand were from the Graves, but as the century progressed and the Médoc developed its vocation as a top-quality region, its wines developed a greater following—and their prices rose accordingly. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the Médoc wines commanded prices so high that Haut-Brion remained the only wine that could match them, and thus became the sole Graves property worthy of inclusion in the upper ranks of this hierarchy; none of Bordeaux's other red wine regions produced anything that could match these prices.

The classification was a cornerstone of the local wine trade, and everyone involved—merchants, proprietors, and brokers—knew where each property was situated within it. This familiarity with the established pecking order was reinforced by the wide distribution that the classification came to enjoy. From its primary use among initiates of the Bordeaux wine trade, the classification found ever-wider exposure throughout the nineteenth century in a great variety of venues. Wine books destined for wine drinkers were becoming more common in the early 1800s, and the list was often incorporated in the text, in books like *Topographie de tous les vignobles connus*, by André Jullien in 1816; *The History of Ancient and Modern Wines*, by Alexander Henderson in 1824; and *A History and Description of*

GCC 1855 HISTORY

Modern Wines, by Cyrus Redding in 1833. The classification also demonstrated its utility in helping to shape public policy: it was included in a British Parliamentary report “On the Commercial Relations between France and Great Britain” drawn up in 1835, and in a survey commissioned by the French Minister of Agriculture and Commerce entitled “Vine Growing, Evaluation of the Produce for 1847 and 1848.”

The evolving list even made appearances in a growing number of tourist guidebooks for visitors to the region, such as *Le guide de l'étranger*, which went through several editions beginning in 1825, as well as an 1846 work entitled *Bordeaux: Its Wines, and the Claret Country* by Charles Cocks (which eventually became *Bordeaux et ses vins*, the “bible” of Bordeaux). With each new appearance in print of the wine trade’s classification, proprietors, brokers, and merchants all saw how the price structure of the marketplace currently stood, and consumers gradually developed an increased appreciation of the idea of quality in Bordeaux wine.

As personally satisfying as it was for producers to see their properties achieve classed-growth status, there was a more practical aspect to this system for the Bordeaux wine trade. Each spring when a new vintage was ready for sale, buyers and sellers alike were faced with the task of determining a just price for the wines on offer. As the principal industry in France’s biggest department, the wine trade was a large, complex enterprise whose very existence depended on its smooth operation. With thousands of producers offering wines for sale to hundreds of merchants, the entire system would have collapsed if buyers had to begin arranging prices from scratch each year. The classification was a well-refined tool which served to streamline the process.

Based firmly on a property’s track record of sales prices over an extended period of time, the classification offered a shortcut in commercial negotiations, a starting point from which an appropriate final price for a wine could be determined efficiently. If a property had traditionally sold its wines at the third-growth level, for example, and others in this class were getting a hundred francs per bottle, both the proprietor and the potential customer knew that a price of around a hundred francs was a fair estimation of the wine’s commercial value, and negotiations could begin with that as a point of departure.

It was (and still is) habitual for proprietors to hold back the release of their new vintage until they were able to see the level of acceptance or resistance which that initial asking price met with in the marketplace. There was no fixed order of precedence in the declaration of prices, and the system enabled the Bordeaux marketplace to develop the level of efficiency that was essential for the world’s largest fine wine region to operate smoothly.

In 1855, a Universal Exhibition was planned for Paris, and goods from all over France—and the world—were shipped to the French capital for display. Wine was sent from Bordeaux in a collection organized by the city’s Chamber of Commerce. However, the organizers faced a tricky problem: only six bottles of each wine were to be sent to Paris, a quantity sufficient merely for the display and for a private tasting by a panel of judges. The thousands of ordinary visitors to the Exhibition would not have the opportunity of tasting the wines to develop an appreciation of the different qualities possessed by Bordeaux’s wines. All that would be evident to these masses would be the rather ordinary sight of a uniform collection of bottles lined up on the shelves of a display case. To render the presentation more interesting and to better communicate the idea of superior quality represented by Bordeaux’s best production, a wine map of the region was commissioned to accompany the display. As part of this map, a roster of the finest wines from Bordeaux was included, and the Chamber of Commerce asked the Union of Brokers to furnish a list of the properties that were worthy of such status.

«The brokers were the ideal choice for the job, since among the three main actors in the Bordeaux wine trade—producers, brokers, and merchants—they were the only ones with a comprehensive view of the entire commercial picture. The proprietors knew their wines better than anyone, but their appreciation of the larger picture beyond their vineyards was less authoritative. The merchants had a good understanding of the market for Bordeaux’s wines, but commanded a lesser knowledge of conditions at the properties. Only the brokers had a first-hand knowledge of production, developed through their scheduled visits to the vineyards throughout the year, and a well-developed sense of a wine’s commercial prospects, thanks to their greater proximity to the marketplace.

«

GCC 1855 HISTORY

Thus it was that on April 5th, 1855, the Chamber of Commerce addressed a letter to the Brokers' Union requesting a "list of all the red classed growths in the department, as exact and complete as possible, specifying to which of the five classes each of them belongs and in which commune they are located." Due to the impending debut of the Universal Exhibition, which was less than a month away, a tight deadline was imposed. The brokers had all the necessary sources on hand to supply the list of the best wines in such a short time.

On April 18, they produced the list, which has become known as the "1855 classification." One hundred and fifty years after its drafting it remains one of the most authoritative references in the world of wine.

A property's inclusion on the list did not result merely from furnishing the Chamber of Commerce with wine to send to Paris; indeed, most of those on the list did not bother to send samples. (A close look at the original document shows that the word point—meaning "none"—is written across the names of those properties that did not offer wine for display at the Universal Exhibition.)

A property's inclusion in this hierarchy was also not a result of making a superior wine in 1854 and getting an abnormally high price that year—and, consequently a place in the classification in 1855—followed by a return to inferior quality in succeeding vintages. The ranking system of Bordeaux's wines was based not on one year's results, nor even a half-dozen or so vintages; it was a long-term track record that earned a property its berth in the classification. If there was a sole reason why the properties appearing on the 1855 classification were included, it was simply because they deserved to be there. Their superiority was established by a consistent level of exceptional quality over an extended period of time that left no doubt as to their fundamental capacity for producing great wine.

With time this brokers' list achieved an authority and a longevity that the more ephemeral versions prior to 1855 had never achieved. Throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, this classification became the accepted, authoritative source for understanding the notion of quality at the top end of Bordeaux's production. However, it must not be thought that this status as a reference for wine drinkers prevented the trade from continually reevaluating the just price for a property's wines, based on its current performance. The genius of the 1855 classification is that it has never hindered the continuing functioning of the wine trade in its task of ensuring that the quality of a wine finds its commensurate recompense in the marketplace. Thus, even though the brokers' classification has experienced only two official changes since its transcription in April 1855—the promotion of Mouton Rothschild in June 1973, and the inclusion of Cantemerle among the fifth growths on September 16, 1855—the quality of a property's wine has always encouraged mobility in its current price, earning it an appropriate position above or below its "official" 1855 ranking.

The brokers' judgments from 1855 remain remarkably accurate; however, no one would argue that their classification continues to present the same precise picture of the wines' relative quality as it did one hundred and fifty vintages ago. Today, the classification's greatest role is as a promotional tool, not only for the properties it includes, but for the greater Bordeaux area. No other wine region possesses a similar system for ranking its wines with a renown equal to that enjoyed by Bordeaux's classification.

Thus, this old list compiled by the brokers remains a driving force for the entire Bordeaux region, as new markets, such as North America in the middle of the 20th century and Asia a few decades later, have discovered the quality of its wines and the pleasure of tasting them.

On the hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the 1855 classification, it is evident that the world of wine is richer for the existence of this testament to the outstanding quality of which the Bordeaux region is capable. The list itself and the names inscribed upon it have achieved a double existence that speaks to both our spirits and bodies: a mythic status that speaks to the possibility of achieving perfection in an imperfect world, and a tangible expression in the form of the wines themselves, which offer so much pleasure to oenophiles everywhere.