



Sauternes and Barsac : The Classified Great Growths

BY CLAUDE PEYROUTET

Sauternes, the highly prestigious sweet white wine, is produced 40 km upstream of Bordeaux in a region nestling between the left bank of the Garonne river and the immense Landes forest. This noble area of about 2,200 hectares is divided among the villages of Sauternes, Bommès, Fargues, Preignac and Barsac. Although they can all properly claim the famous Sauternes appellation, producers in Barsac can choose between the Sauternes A.O.C. and its sister appellation, Barsac A.O.C., which controls production in a very similar manner.

«Often imitated, the quintessential character of these wines can never be rivalled. Winegrowers, who produce incredibly low yields, are proud of their region's special identity, even if this means paying a heavy tribute to the capricious microclimate which is responsible for the famous noble rot. The 26 Sauternes and Barsac great growths, as classified at the 1855 Universal Exhibition in Paris, are the region's finest wines. For 140 years their successive owners, conscious of their responsibilities, have skilfully perfected these legendary, yet unpredictable elixirs. Their fine qualities may be appreciated unaccompanied, or with food, producing some of the most surprising combinations.»

Sauternes soil : the contribution of geology

Sauternes was predestined to be a wine-producing area. This can partly be explained by the geological composition of the two, very different areas which make up the region. On the right bank of the Ciron river, a tributary of the Garonne, the villages of Preignac, Fargues, Sauternes and Bommès, which constitute the Sauternes appellation, lie on an east-facing plateau. The substratum of this plateau is shell limestone, marl or argillaceous sand, all dating from the tertiary era. During the quaternary ice ages, this substratum was covered with enormous layers of gravel carried by the Garonne river or rather the Garonnes, since over the years the river has successively occupied several beds, moving from west to east. Recent scientific findings have indicated that the Garonne used to be a network of meandering channels, hence the creation of the vast fluvial terraces on the rectilinear banks and the deposits on the concave sides of the river or along the river bed. As the climate warmed, the glaciers melted and the sea level rose, slowing down the current of the river and allowing alluviae to settle. When the next ice age arrived, the sea level fell, the river flowed more rapidly and fresh new beds were uncovered. This explains the layering of the terraces and their geological complexity. The highest and oldest terraces lie to the west, the lowest to the east.

«The Garonne and its tributaries transported moraine from the Pyrenees and Massif Central to build up the layers, several metres thick, of Sauternes gravel. The biggest rocks that can be found, admittedly quite rare, are up to one metre long. Geologists suggest that they were carried along frozen within enormous slabs of ice. In general, this gravel is formed of ovoid pebbles of varying sizes – from one to several centimetres - mixed with a limestone or argillaceous matrix, or more often sand. White and pink quartz, black Lydiens and green sandstone from the Pyrenean mountain range, conglomerate from the Albigeois and even basalt and volcanic rock from the Montagne Noire can all be found. The (rock) solid proof of the variety of soil in the region can be seen in the surprising mineralogical collection at Château de Rayne-Vigneau.»

«Erosion has gradually transformed the gravel into gently sloping hillsides, 15 to 60 metres high, which are very characteristic of the Sauternes landscape. Well-drained by the Ciron and local streams, the white, pebbly soil absorbs sunshine.

A further advantage of the soil is that the danger of frost-damage is reduced since the heat accumulated by pebbles during the day is released at night. The roots of the vine pass through the top layers of soil in search of water and nutritive salts. They may reach down as much as 10 metres, to the first porous or impermeable layers. The plant discovers a stable environment at this level, protected from excessive rainfall, droughts caused by occasional very harsh summers and even from variations in the concentration of organic fertilizers.»

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Twin appellations

SAUTERNES

A.O.C. DATE

September 30, 1936

WINE TYPE

Sweet, white

GRAPE VARIETIES

Sémillon, Sauvignon Blanc, Muscadelle

VILLAGES

Communes de Sauternes, Bommès, Fargues, Preignac, Barsac

AREA UNDER VINE

1.550 ha

AUTHORISED YIELD

25 hl/ha

GRAPE HARVESTING

Grapes affected by «noble rot » are selectively picked

MUSTS

At least 221 g of natural sugar per litre

WINE

Minimum total alcohol content: 13 %, of which 12.5 % must be from the grappes

PRODUCTION

33,000 hl per year

BARSAC

A.O.C. DATE

September 30, 1936

WINE TYPE

Sweet, white

GRAPE VARIETIES

Sémillon, Sauvignon Blanc, Muscadelle

VILLAGES

Barsac

AREA UNDER VINE

600 ha

AUTHORISED YIELD

25 hl/ha

GRAPE HARVESTING

Récolte par tries de raisins « pourris nobles »

MUSTS

At least 221 g of natural sugar per litre

WINE

Minimum total alcohol content: 13 %, of which 12.5 % must be from the grappes

PRODUCTION

15,000 hl per year

Wine-growers in Barsac can choose between the A.O.C. Barsac and the A.O.C. Sauternes.

«At Barsac, on the left bank of the Ciron, the situation is very different. Here the soils are equally well-suited to the vine but for other reasons. The substratum is a platform of asteriated (Karstified) limestone and thus permeable and highly fissured. Gravel deposits were followed by wind-blown sand which built up at the beginning of the quaternary era. Both of these were carried away by erosion, leaving only small numbers of large pebbles in the vineyards. The red soil, dotted with these pebbles, is characteristic of the appellation and is due to the coarse and slightly argillaceous sand which strong winds blew here towards the end of the Mindelian ice age. The result is a thin layer of soil, 40 to 50 cm thick, through which the roots grow in order to find their way into fissures in the limestone bedrock. This unique pedological feature explains why there is a separate A.O.C. for Barsac.»

You have only to look around as you travel through the Sauternes Region's five villages to appreciate the fact that the best locations, where the soil is thin and well drained, belong to the great growths. The sunny slopes of Sauternes' gravel hillsides and Barsac's brick red soil lying on fissured limestone provide the essential mineralogical foundations for the creation of great wines.

Grapes : a trio of white varieties

Glaciers, howling blizzards, the Garonne and even the Ciron (which now has a more southerly course), have all done a good job. However without man's contribution, his desire to establish vineyards and his choice of the appropriate white wine grapes, this gifted countryside would have remained desolate or wild.

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The Semillon grape probably originated in Sauternes. It has been grown in the Bordeaux wine region for at least 4 centuries. Semillon's high resistance to mildew and oidium enabled it to survive and take the place of Sauvignon Blanc when these diseases almost destroyed the vineyard from 1851 to 1885. It is without doubt the foremost variety used in the Sauternes great growth vineyards, accounting for over 80 % of total vines, and up to 100 % at some châteaux. This variety's fine qualities develop perfectly in Sauternes and Barsac. Since its buds do not all burst at the same time, it has a better chance of resisting spring frosts. When ripe, its beautiful cylindrical bunches of white grapes tinged with gold offer up their thick skins to the famous botrytis, the tiny fungus that is indispensable in producing the «noble rot». Their juice has an outstanding aromatic finesse, and a delicate musky taste. Specialists claim they can even detect hints of apricot, orange or smokiness at this preliminary stage, which are signs of the superb wine to follow.

Sauvignon Blanc is an ideal complementary variety. Responsible for the famous dry white wines of Pouilly, Sancerre and Graves, it is also highly appreciated in Sauternes. In order to avoid unpleasant weather in April, its buds come out lazily at a fairly late date, only to bloom and ripen before the Semillon. Its small, conical bunches of oval, golden-yellow, thick-skinned grapes are then attacked by botrytis. The tender sweet and delicately musky pulp (with a high level of acidity) is an excellent indication of the wines to follow. These reasons more than justify the proportion of Sauvignon Blanc used (up to 20%) by the great growths.

Muscadelle has made a big comeback. Despite the fact that it surely originates in the Bordeaux region, it was not well liked at one time, and indeed it almost disappeared due to its congenital weaknesses. Although its late budding protects it from the last of the spring frosts, it has very poor resistance to oidium and grey rot. When the large, pyramid-shaped bunches of grapes do manage to escape these diseases, the superb, white flecked berries are attacked readily by the noble rot and produce a juice that is very sweet and slightly musky, with a hint of muscat. This variety is well worthy of its part in the alchemy that creates truly great sweet wines. Only very low percentages of Muscadelle are used, 2 to 5 % in most cases and indeed eight great growth châteaux do not use it at all. However with the development of more resistant clones this variety is making a strong recovery.

The choice and proportion of grape varieties is important in determining the character of the each great growth, in combination with natural factors such as soil structure and texture, as well as unpredictable climatic conditions.

A versatile fungus : botrytis cinerea

«The Sauternes appellation reaps all the benefits of the mild Aquitaine climate : wet, temperate winters and rainy, warm springs. These conditions encourage early bud break, but unfortunately exacerbate the damage caused by late frosts. Moderately warm summers ensure steady ripening, which is particularly favourable for white wines since it prevents the development of excess sugar and the resulting lack of acidity. Winegrowers are forever wary of the dangers of hail and violent storms which can destroy an entire harvest.»

«No sooner are concerns over spring and summer weather forgotten, than autumn arrives with its own particular, capricious characteristics. This magical season can make, or break, the vintage and is the time when the appellation's microclimate makes all the difference.»

«Early morning mists occur from the end of September onwards, creeping up from the Garonne, and its colder tributary the Eiron. Walled in by the pine forest on one side, they cover the vineyards and create the right conditions for the development of botrytis cinerea, a microscopic fungus which grows on the grapes. By the end of the morning, the gentle heat of the rising sun disperses the mist, leaving a clear blue sky. The botrytis has just enough time to attack and perforate the skin, leaving the pulp untouched. The magical phenomenon of noble rot has occurred, a peculiar fungoid growth which absorbs water from within the berries to produce extraordinary must concentrations. The rot is first seen as brown spots, which steadily extend to cover the grapes. As the rot progresses the grapes become “fully 3 rotten”, start to shrivel and take on a crushed appearance, at which point they are described as “roti” (nobly rotted!). The moment has come for the harvest.»

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«Since the ripening process is a function of grape variety, exposure, position of the berries in the bunch, etc., it is virtually always irregular. For this reason, the grapes are not all harvested at the same time, but are selectively picked as part of a process involving a series of separate harvests. Vines are continually inspected and only those bunches of grapes, portions of bunches or individual grapes which are sufficiently “rotten” are picked. Picking normally starts around the beginning of October, and can continue until November or even December in extreme cases. In general, great growth châteaux go through the vines five or six times, although nine or ten times is not uncommon in certain years. Only experienced, meticulous grape pickers from the region are entrusted with the selection process. They advance slowly and knowingly along the vine rows, carefully snipping with their highly sharpened secateurs as though practising some ancient religious ritual which forbids loud noises or sudden gestures. The use of a mechanical harvester in Sauternes would be impossible. No machine or robot could replace the trained eye and judgement of these pickers.»

«There are years when it is impossible to produce a genuine sweet wine since botrytis does not develop or does so to a limited extent. Excessive rain over long periods can destroy a harvest since the botrytis' chemical reactions are modified and only grey rot occurs. The risk involved in the production of these great wines is thus very high. Prices, often considered too high by uninformed consumers, reflect both this risk factor and the high labour costs. A good indication of the restrictions imposed by this selectivity is that although yields are limited to 25 hl/ha in the appellation, the great growths actually harvest between 10 and 15 hl/ha.»

A versatile fungus : botrytiscinerea

«In Sauternes and Barsac, grapes are only picked when they are rotten. Yes that's right, rotten. But not any old mould will do, it has to be a «noble rot». The berries turn purple, become wrinkled and dry out. The grapes are covered with a whitish down, which is why the name «botrytis cinerea» (literally «ashy grape») has been given to the microscopic fungus responsible for this strange phenomenon.»

«Two essential conditions are required in order to enable this unpredictable fungus to attack the grape skins : the grapes must have reached perfect ripeness, and the atmospheric conditions must alternate daily from misty mornings to sunny afternoons.»

«Cracks and tiny holes in the skins dehydrate the grapes through evaporation and the juice concentrates to such an extent that it is virtually transformed into a delicious golden syrup. Since the botrytis consumes more acid than sugar, the concentration of sugar predominates producing a sweeter must. At the same time, the fungus synthesizes glycerol, which guarantees that the wine will be mellow and unctuous. However not all the chemical reactions are favourable. The partial fixing of nitrogenous substances and the natural production of an antibiotic botryticine inhibits the action of yeast during fermentation. Moreover, botrytis cinerea is annoyingly inconsistent, rarely attacking the entire harvest, and developing through the bunch one grape at a time, obliging pickers to perform a series of harvests, each time selecting those bunches or grapes which are ideally «rotted».»

«Rain at this critical time can be catastrophic for the vintage since water can be absorbed freely by the grapes, thus reducing sugar content. Winegrowers pray for the rain to stop and for the sun to return. If the prayers are in vain, the vintage may be completely lost. The rot turns grey and the grapes burst. In years such as these, one can only hope to salvage slim pickings after having gone through the vineyards once or twice, for wine worthy of the 1855 classification.»

Secrets of wine making : rigour and dedication

«The low yields which automatically result from high sugar concentrations and intense aromas are partly due to the action of botrytis, which is capable of reducing a potential harvest of 40 hl/ha to just 18 hl/ha. Furthermore, the effects of botrytis would be wasted on characterless, poor quality grapes which result from the application of intensive production techniques. The wisdom and expertise of winegrowers have led to the introduction of winegrowing methods designed to produce low, high-qua-

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lity yields. The average vineyard density is 6,500 to 7,500 vines per hectare. Organic fertilisers are used sparingly, and only to ensure that the natural balance of the humus is maintained. The most important technique is to prune back the vines severely, in order to respect the tradition that has been handed down over the centuries: one to three glasses of Sauternes per vine. The Sauvignon Blanc variety is often pruned using the Guyot single method (five or six fruit buds), whilst traditional Sauternes pruning is by far the most widespread for Semillon and Muscadelle. A goblet shape is formed by three canes trained on an equal level. Each cane has one spur pruned back to two or three buds, in order to obtain just six to eight bunches of grapes.»

«The same exacting standards and dedication are also applied to winemaking procedures. From the harvest right through to bottling, Sauternes winemakers show a real passion for their profession. This involves making difficult choices or even innovative experimentation conducted in light of experience gleaned from both ancient traditions and the latest discoveries in oenology. The principle behind this delicate, highly-individual science is that prevention is better than cure. In some châteaux, the wine is made in batches, each batch representing one day's harvest. Elsewhere the old tradition is continued of separating outstanding musts with a potential of 22 to 24 degrees for a special reserve. Other estates harvest the Sauvignon Blanc as soon as it is ripe, to retain its aromatic finesse and acidity in order to produce fresher more vigorous wines, whilst producers of heady, more full-bodied Sauternes wait for the maximum amount of noble rot to set in. It goes without saying that no estate mixes grape varieties before fermentation. The blending process comes much later.»

«Although a small number of great growth estates gently crush the grapes in order to obtain more colour and to add complexity to the wine, in general this method is not used due to the risk of oxidation. Direct or indirect pressing requires great care and careful adjustment, irrespective of whether the traditional vertical basket press, the horizontal basket press or the pneumatic press is used. The first pressing, which provides three quarters of the must, has an excellent flavour although the two subsequent pressings have a higher sugar content. Operating gently and slowly, with great respect for the grapes, the pressings produce the real quintessence of fine wine grapes with a well-balanced, slightly sweet taste, full of sugars. Fermentation will only start after a long, overnight cold-racking of the must.»

«The fermentation process can now begin, using natural local yeasts, in small temperature-controlled stainless steel tanks or barrels.»

The wine is carefully monitored at all stages. Craftsmanship, experience and technology are intimately involved.

«In general, fermentation lasts from two to four weeks and represents another critical stage in the production of Sauternes wines. Difficulties are caused by low must concentrations; the price to be paid for the advantages offered by the noble rot. Problems are encountered in terms of deficient quantities of nitrogenous substances, low yeast populations following racking of the must and the presence of botryticine, an antibiotic. Fermentation calls for maintaining a temperature of between 20 and 22°C. In theory, it will stop naturally when the yeast produces an alcohol concentration sufficient to inhibit its own action or kill itself. One of the cruel laws of nature! The ideal concentration is 13.5 to 14 % of acquired, i.e. real alcohol, and from 3.5 to 4 % of potential alcohol, in the form of unfermented sugar»

«The ageing process for great growth wines is very long eighteen months to two years in most cases, and sometimes up to three years. The wine truly develops its character during this period. The wine is aged either in small vats or in barrel, frequently new split-oak barrels. Understandably, each château has its own technique. For example, new oak may be used for one third of the harvest, two-year old barrels for the second third, and four-year old wood for the final third. The desired effect is the special interaction between wine and oak. The wine takes tannin from the oak as well as a range of aromas: from vanilla to liquorice, and from cloves to carnations. Numerous tastings are required to learn the art of blending, and sometimes to decide whether or not the «1855 great growth» label should be given to a wine which does not seem to have sufficient potential. Another aspect of the ageing process involves topping up the barrels regularly to compensate for the air gap left by evaporating wine. This operation is quite important since contact with air can badly oxidise the precious nectar. It is also necessary to rack the wine by decanting from one barrel to another. Fining and, sometimes, careful filtration are required before bottling. Visitors are always surprised to see this process carried out so calmly and carefully, with a respect normally only accorded to the production of a work of art.»

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Sauternes origins : history or legend ?

«In a great growth cellar, breathing in the heady aromas, gazing at row upon row of impeccably aligned barrels, how many enthralled visitors have asked the cellar master the same question: «»how long have such wines been made ?»»»

«The cellar master will smile, seemingly embarrassed, and will say that nobody really knows for sure, but will always give in and tell two of the popular stories, both a little apocryphal. The first is said to have taken place in 1836. The Bordeaux wine dealer Focke, of German descent, apparently waited until the end of the long autumn rains before starting to pick at his Château, La Tour Blanche in Bommès. When the sun finally returned, the bunches of grapes dried, and the noble rot developed. The beautifully sweet wine was a great success. Luck, and possibly vague memories of the late harvest methods used on the banks of the Rhine, had been the determining factors. The second story is also based on supposed serendipity. In 1847, the Marquis de Lur-Saluces, who owned Château d'Yquem, was delayed during a trip back from Russia. Having left specific instructions that harvesting should not begin before his return, not surprisingly the noble rot was well-developed when picking finally started. The wine produced in this outstanding vintage was highly acclaimed.»

«Historians provide more complex explanations, though they do not go out of their way to refute these two anecdotes. In particular, they agree that from the end of the 16th century, Dutch merchants, who dominated maritime trade at that time, were very fond of white wines. Low grade dry wines used as a base wine for making brandy and other sweeter wines, were unashamedly «»adulterated»». The Dutch added sugar, alcohol, syrup and marinated plants in order to satisfy their Scandinavian customers, who preferred sweeter drinks. In the 17th century, the Dutch presence was very strong in Bordeaux and its surrounding vineyards. It has been clearly shown that they influenced winegrowers in the Barsac area to make white wines with residual sugar but that they did not yet know of the noble rot phenomenon. This district, which corresponds fairly closely to the current Sauternes and Barsac appellations, became widely known. As early as 1613, the Barsac nobility compiled documents relating to «»practices and privileges»» for this growth. In 1647, the Bordeaux Jurade (city aldermen) and Dutch traders drew up a wine tariff schedule which placed wines from what is now the Sauternes appellation in the second grade, at 13 to 16 euro, immediately after the red palus (from the alluvial plain) wines (at 14,5 to 16 euros). Interestingly, texts written in 1666 give concise details of the late harvesting techniques used in the Bergerac and Sauternes appellations. But had they been affected by botrytis ?»

«At the end of the 17th century, about two thirds of what are now the great growths of Sauternes had either already developed or were in the process of creating their vineyards. Large-scale investments were made at these estates by local nobility. The movement continued into the 18th century, even if around 1740, wine from the region was still worth less than a quarter of that produced in the northern Graves. However the sweet wines of Barsac and Sauternes were decidedly in a different class from the wines produced in the Entre-Deux-Mers, which were bought by the Dutch at half the price. Although the main winegrowing area ran parallel to the Garonne at the beginning of the 18th century, by 1770-1810 it had extended away from the river bank to include the gravelly hillsides of Bommès and Sauternes. The role of the Sauvage d'Yquem family (later called Lur-Saluces) owners of Châteaux d'Yquem, Saint Cricq, Filhot and Coutet was very important in terms of choosing vineyard sites, introducing the finest white grape varieties and perfecting the techniques for selecting only the most overripe, botrytised grapes. In 1787, Thomas Jefferson, future president of the United States of America, was captivated by the wines of the region when he visited Bordeaux. On returning to America, he placed an order with the United States consul in Bordeaux for 85 cases of 12 bottles, including Sauternes wine «»to be procured from the Count of Lur-Saluces»». Jefferson included the sweet wines of Barsac, Preignac and Sauternes in his own personal classification of the great wines of Europe. As early as 1741, the Intendant of Guyenne described the manner in which these wines were harvested, stating that the owners waited «»until the grapes were almost rotten»» and added that picking “was carried out several times to give a sweeter wine”. This provides very early confirmation of the presence of the noble rot and the use of selective harvesting.»

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The 1855 classification

«The concept of «cru» (growth) in Bordeaux dates back to the second half of the 17th century. A few truly great wines were already being produced at this time from specific «appellations» by owners who took special pride in the quality of their products. This was especially so for red wine, and the famous quartet of Haut-Brion, Latour, Margaux and Lafite. At the same time, in Sauternes, the large estates began to receive recognition in France and abroad. This was only a just reward for the unique expertise they had developed in the production of botrytised sweet white wines. The French Revolution and the growth of the Empire was disastrous for the Bordeaux wine trade and wine exports in general. Fortunately, the Sauternes appellation had been so well established that it recovered rapidly under the calming influence of the July monarchy : the Sauternes vineyards were planted and replanted, selective harvesting became more widespread and new export markets opened up. Germans, Dutch and Belgians started to take an interest in the great sweet white wines of Bordeaux, following in the steps of the English and Russians, who refused to accept anything but the best.»

«In many regions, a «growth» can include land belonging to several owners, and can even be located in two or three villages. In Bordeaux however this word strictly refers to a single wineproducing estate, within one A.O.C., which sells wine produced on part or all of the château land. In Bordeaux, the term «château» has become a synonym for growth, even if the château itself is a fairly modest building. In Sauternes, virtually all estates do, in fact, possess their own château (in the architectural sense of the term), and cellars, both old and ultra-modern, are at the same time functional and esthetically appealing.»

«The meaning and value of the term «growth» was already well established in the 1850's. Since the wines produced by Yquem, Coutet or Filhot were much appreciated by winebrokers, these superb wines were very quickly in great demand, not only to supply the rich Parisian market but also the royal courts and palaces of central and eastern Europe, where the dynamic Marquis de Lur-Saluces had made them very fashionable. The extent of their success was such that the price per barrel doubled in twenty years. It was a prosperous time due, if you remember to Focke the winemercant and the Marquis de Lur-Saluces who had a stroke of luck when... but that's another story.»

«In 1855, during the Second Empire, France hosted the Universal Exhibition in Paris. Each region was asked to exhibit typical examples of their produce. The historical context was exactly right for the Bordeaux Chamber of Commerce to ask the Winebrokers' Union to draw up a classification of the greatest wines. The role of a winebroker was, as it is today, to visit the vineyards, taste wine, and help establish fair prices. They were, and continue to be, considered as honest, unbiased professionals, who were, moreover, officially designated members of the legal profession. In the preamble to the classification that they put forward, they confirmed that they were "privy to all possible information". They made use of numerous archives dating from the preceding decades in addition to their own, amazingly detailed, tasting notes. Obviously aware of the responsibility that had been entrusted to them, they carefully hinted that their list might "not be well received by all" and that all they had done was to "submit work for a closer examination" by the Bordeaux Chamber of Commerce. Only growths from the Médoc and one estate from the Graves, Château Haut-Brion, were classified among red wines. These were divided into five categories. For white wines, only the Sauternes and Barsac appellations were considered. Château d'Yquem was singled out as a unique «premier cru supérieur», and in an outstanding category of its own. It was followed by nine first growths and eleven second growths. The classification process therefore seems to have been somewhat stricter in Sauternes: two categories instead of five.»

«This famous classification was actually based on several earlier, less formal classifications, which had been validated by the price scale operating at the time. The 1855 classification did not make any waves or cause any major disagreements since winebrokers were simply acknowledging those châteaux who truly merited recognition.»

«The great growths of Sauternes and Barsac were able to take advantage of the publicity brought by the new classification. In 1859, the Russian Tsar's brother, the Grand Duke Constantine, paid 3.050 euro per barrel for 1847 Yquem. This was an incredible price: four or five times higher than Latour or Margaux! Over the following two decades, Sauternes growths were often sold at higher prices than Médoc second growths, and even the first growths on several occasions. Their fame was thus established and this prosperity, shared by the entire appellation, explains the return to Sauternes of the region's old

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aristocratic families: the Pontac, Sigalas, Rolland and many others.»

«Following the outbreak of phylloxera, which spread less quickly in Sauternes than elsewhere in Bordeaux, the classified great growths once again enjoyed several years of record sales. The taste for semi-sweet and sweet wines greatly increased between the two wars, and these wines did their best to survive the 1929 depression. However, in the early 1950's the future started to look much more gloomy, with a worrying loss of interest for white wines and a craze for red wines. The sixties were difficult years, both in terms of the weather and the fortunes of the appellation, with the majority of financial investments being put on hold. The revival came in the 1980's, with a very good '83 vintage and an excellent '86, comparable to the magnificent 1937. This comeback can partially be explained by fresh interest shown in great Sauternes wines by the national, and particularly the international press, and by new consumer trends. However the real, fundamental reason for this recovery was the tenacious and sometimes exhausting resistance of most of the great growths, and the purchase of several others by men who were totally committed to restoring their new vineyards. The lesson to be drawn from this is quite clear: the 1855 classification, which came many years before the introduction of the «appellation contrôlée» system, instilled a spirit of responsibility which was handed down from generation to generation, and which will soon have lasted for a hundred and fifty years. «Fail not the honour awarded to us» would seem to be an appropriate motto for the 26 châteaux which constitute the Sauternes and Barsac Union of Classified Growths, which accounts for more than 45% of the area under vine and 70% of the turnover in the two appellations.»

Great growths, great dishes : Epicure and combinations

«Of course a Sauternes or Barsac great growth can be tasted on its own. Their character and opulence are such that they do not necessarily require any accompaniment. Such pleasures have been enjoyed for a long time by our northern neighbours, at the end of a cold winter's afternoon in England, Sweden or Germany - as well as in the summer under the arbour or in the summerhouse.»

«Certain critics grumble that this is the only way to appreciate these great sweet wines: their extreme sweetness makes them incompatible with most food combinations. Nowadays, these dubious beliefs, which seem like unfounded prejudice, have been demolished by a number of faithful wine lovers and creative chefs. They do not advocate just any old combination but have carried out research into blends, using the principles of taste physiology, and following a study of exotic culinary traditions which, for centuries, have combined spices and sugars, poultry and sweet wines, cereals and fruits, almonds and bitter oranges. Two principal types of association stand out based on contrast; where the opposing ingredients of a dish and a wine mingle in a dialectic of pleasure, or complementary harmony when ingredients from the same family are brought together sweet plus sweet, fruity plus fruity. In both cases, all of the ingredients are involved in the synergy.»

«Starting a meal with melon, for its fruity freshness, is an invitation to open a bottle of a great growth. The fruit brings out the fruit in the wine and the wine is enhanced by its modest partner. The combination is classic and refreshing. With foie gras, the exception seems to prove the rule since, normally, fat needs to be set off by the acidity of a dry white wine. However, whether the liver is served cold or warm, alone or with grapes and apples, it readily accompanies a sweet wine. Therefore the only risk taken is in the formidable addition of fat + fat. The success of this extraordinary combination is due to the subtle presence of the sugar in the wine and the salt in the liver counterbalancing each other. At the same time, the acidity of the wine, which is hardly noticeable but actually very much in evidence, is enhanced by the salt and the fat in the liver. In a way it is a Chinese-style marriage of: salt + sugar + acid +fat! In certain cases, the delicate bitterness of the wine echoes that of the liver, especially if the latter had been left to age slightly.»

«Citing foie gras automatically encourages gourmets. Equally though, try a Sauternes with a quiche, its smoked taste will complement the toasty aromas of the wine, or even with quenelles of pike and a nantua sauce. Very impressive! So long as the ingredients are spicy and part of a refined cuisine (excluding grilled dishes) lobster, crab, crayfish or shrimp can bring out the best in a very old Barsac or Sauternes.»

Sauternes and Barsac : The Classified Great Growths

«Try mussel vol-au-vents, oyster ravioli with curry sauce, scallops with endives, or sweetbreads which several great chefs of the Gironde serve with great growths that have reached a respectable age.»

«The possibilities are endless. In the last decade, both French and international cuisine have revived fish and Sauternes combinations. As long as the former are not fatty, and are cooked in a mousseline, Hollandaise, Normandy, or American sauce, and that the spices are used expertly, these dishes can be excellent. For these delicate combinations, noble fish such as sole, turbot, monkfish and bass are wonderful»

«With poultry, red wine may seem ideal. However, in the Sauternes region, we have known for a long time that a sweet white wine goes very well with a simple roast chicken or a chicken with garlic because, as it caramelizes, it brings out the flavours of the noble rot. Poultry flesh is often lean, despite the richness acquired in the cooking. It therefore goes admirably with a well structured white wine that has a balanced mellowness and an appealing bouquet. This is even more true with Chinese or New Orleans style poultry. On a more sophisticated level, you must try «poularde en vessie», with a slight truffle flavour, or duck with fruits: cherry, peach, grape, or orange. It is delicious. As for duck fillet, the flavours of mushroom, subtle truffles, cream of garlic and foie gras mean that a sweet wine is an ideal accompaniment. Duck fillets may also be prepared with cherries, pears or...Sauternes. Because a white wine calls for a white dish, overcome ridiculous conventions and try dishes proposed by «nouveaux» chefs. Dare to taste a Sauternes or Barsac with some white meat. Pork is fine too, cooked with fruit or an Asiatic recipe: spices, fruits, and sweet-sour flavours prepare your tastebuds for the combination. By analogy in similar circumstances, veal goes well with milder flavours or contrasts. Vegetables also have a role to play. Vegetarian cookery readily involves Sauternes. Courgette and aubergine for example in an almost caramelized dish are really delightful Or combine them with cereals and cheese. Why not try a young sweet wine ?»

«Return to more traditional combinations with blue cheeses such as Bleu d'Auvergne or Roquefort. These cheeses contain the four basic tastes, and blend sumptuously with great growth sweet white wines. Other harmonious associations are forgotten all too often: with Maroilles or Munster cheeses, meat pies or with sheep's cheese from France or elsewhere. A big advantage of drinking Sauternes with cheese is that a bottle opened for this occasion can then be served with the sweet course. Be careful though, not just any dessert will complement a good Sauternes; choose slightly acid fruits, such as strawberries, or mixed fruit salads with red berries, kiwis, oranges, etc. Following the same logic, the great growths go well with all fruit tarts, apple upside-down cake, or "tarte Bourdaloue". Avoid chocolate, although dry pastries, particularly almond combinations can work well. Simpler associations are with pancakes, waffles and French toast.»

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