

The 1855 classification

by Claude PEYROUTET

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's 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 ultramodern, 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 winemerchant and the Marquis de Lur-Saluces, who had a stroke of luck whenbut 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 local 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 Medoc 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 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. Therefore, the classification process appears 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 20,000 francs 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 aristocratic families: the de Pontac, de Sigalas, de 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 come-back can be explained partially 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 newly acquired 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 that was handed down from generation to generation, more than 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, accounting for more than 45% of the area under vine and 70% of the turnover in the two appellations.