Crus Classés de Sauternes & Barsac en 1855

by Claude PEYROUTET

Sauternes, the highly prestigious sweet white wine, is produced 40 km upstream of Bordeaux in a region nestled 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, Bommes, 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. The 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 that 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 responsabilities, have perfected skilfully these legendary, yet unpredictable elixirs. Their fine qualities may be appreciated unaccompanied, or with food, producing some of the most surprising combinations. Getting to know the great growth wines of a region is always fascinating. All châteaux are subject to the same restrictions governing their production, yet each one is different due to its geographical location as well as the viticultural and oenological choices made by the winemaker. These estates are waiting to welcome you if you are tempted to visit this delightful region on a beautiful day rich with the coppery hues of late autumn. You will discover a lovely countryside of gravel and red earth, smalI meandering roads and stately châteaux.

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 Bommes. When the sun finally returned, the bunches of grapes dried, and the noble rot developed. The beautiful 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 Chateau 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 clearly has been 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 privilèges » 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 84 to 105 francs, immediately after the red palus (from the alluvial plain) wines (at 95 to 105 francs). 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 either already had 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 gravely hillsides of Bommes and Sauternes. The role of the Sauvage d'Yquem family (later called Lur-Saluces) owners of Chateaux Yquem, Saint Cricq, Filhot and Coutet was very important in terms of chosing vineyard sites, in- troducing 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 wi-nes of Europe. As

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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.

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 Bommes, 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 quatenary 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 centimeters - 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.

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.

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 chateaux. 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 ofacidity) 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 mode a big a 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.

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Secrets of winemaking rigour and dedication

The low yields result automatically from high sugar concentrations, and intense aromas are due partly 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 that 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-quality 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 pruning 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. These techniques produce wines that are very different from those of estates with abundant yields of 80 to 100 hl/ha and who make dull, neutral Semillion wines almost totally devoid of aromas or taste.

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 conducting 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 freating. In some châteaux, the wine is made in batches, each batch representing one day's harvest. Elsewhere the old tradition is continued by 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, well-balanced, slightly sweet taste, full of sugars. Fermentation will only start after a long, overnight cold-racking of the must, to eliminate organic debris, pips and skin.

«Noble rot»: a combination of mist and sunshine

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 forever are wary of the dangers of hail and violent storms that can destroy an entire harvest.
No sooner are concerns over spring and summer weather forgotten, that 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 Ciron. 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 fungus growth that absorbs water from within the berries to produce extraordinary must concentrations. The rot is first seen as brown spots, which extend steadily to cover the grapes. As the rot progresses the grapes become « fully 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.

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 harvested not all at the same time, but are picked selectively as part of a process involving a series of separate harvests. Vines are inspected continually and only those bunches of grapes, portions of bunches or individual grapes which are « rotten » sufficiently 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,

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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 secators 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.