

# BC GUILD OF WINE JUDGES

November 2025

## CLASS E1 - Dry Red Bordeaux Style

Presented by Stephen Small (Mainland Chapter)

### AFTER READING THESE NOTES YOU SHOULD KNOW:

1. The Description and Technical Characteristics of the E1 Bordeaux Class
2. A brief History of the Bordeaux wine region
3. The influence of Bordeaux wines and winemaking
4. The primary geographic features and climate influence in Bordeaux wine production.
5. The difference between Bordeaux's Right and Left Banks
6. The grapes varieties of Bordeaux style blends
7. Typical descriptors and styles of Bordeaux wines

### BCAWA DEFINITION OF CLASS E1 - Dry Red Bordeaux Style

**Varietal** wines in this class are those that contain at least 85% of any one of the following five varieties: Cabernet Franc, Carménère, Malbec, Merlot, or Petit Verdot.

Note that any other grape variety or varieties may be used in the remaining 15%.

Note that varietal Cabernet Sauvignon wines belong only in Class E7.

**Blended** wines in this class must contain at least 85% of any two or more of the following six varieties: Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon, Carménère, Malbec, Merlot, or Petit Verdot.

Note that any other grape variety or varieties may be used in the remaining 15%.

Note that Cabernet Sauvignon is permitted in this class as a component of a blend.

Theoretically, a wine with 84% Cabernet Sauvignon and 16% other Bordeaux varieties would belong in this class, but the best wines will usually be those in which no single variety monopolizes the blend and in which the several varieties have combined to produce elegant complexity.

### Technical Characteristics: (insert all the relevant info below)

Ingredients: Grapes

Alcohol: 11% - 16%

Colour: Medium red to garnet

Sugar: 0.0% - 1%

Specific Gravity: 0.990 – .994

Acidity: 5.0g/L – 7.0g/L

pH: 3.4 – 4.0

Tannin: May be somewhat astringent.

## **HISTORY:**

Bordeaux, France's most famous wine region, lies in the southwest near the Atlantic. With over 10,000 châteaux across seven AOCs, it produces some of the world's most renowned and costly wines. The Bordeaux wine trade has a history of nearly two thousand years.

### **Roman Origins and Medieval Expansion**

Grape growing began in Bordeaux in the 1st century during Roman times. The region's oldest wine guild was founded in 1199. The wine industry expanded after Eleanor of Aquitaine married Henry II of England in 1152, bringing Bordeaux under English rule for nearly 300 years. This led to strong trade ties with England, where Bordeaux along with Port became virtually synonymous with red wine.

### **17th Century Growth and Innovation**

The 17th century marked a period of significant prosperity and transformation for Bordeaux, driven by the arrival of new trading partners such as the Dutch, the Hanseatic League, and the Bretons. Among these, Dutch merchants played a crucial role in shaping the region's viticultural landscape. One of their most notable contributions was the draining of the Médoc marshlands, an ambitious endeavour that resulted in the creation of new vineyard sites, ultimately expanding Bordeaux's wine-producing capacity.

In addition to their impact on the land, the Dutch influenced Bordeaux's wine production methods. As both traders and buyers, they helped steer local producers toward crafting fine wines that would become highly sought after across Europe. Their commitment to quality and innovation extended to the introduction of new techniques, such as sterilizing barrels with sulphur. This practice was particularly important, as it improved the conservation and transportation of Bordeaux wines, allowing them to reach distant markets in excellent condition and further enhancing the region's reputation.

### **19th Century: Classification and Scientific Discoveries**

The 19th century brought a pivotal moment in Bordeaux's history with the establishment of its famous classification system. In 1855, for the Paris Exposition under Napoleon III, Bordeaux wines underwent a formal ranking process. This classification organized the châteaux of the Médoc into a tiered system of "growths" or crus, a hierarchy that remains influential today. The ranking was determined by the historical market price each château's wines commanded and resulted in the classification of 61 red wine châteaux, ranging from First to Fifth Growths.

The commercial and public success of the 1855 Médoc classification inspired subsequent ranking systems for other Bordeaux regions. In 1932, the Cru Bourgeois classification was introduced for Médoc estates that had been omitted from the original 1855 list. Additional systems followed, including the Graves classification in 1959 and the Saint-Émilion classification in 1955—the latter being the sole classification system implemented on Bordeaux's Right Bank. Despite various attempts, major revisions to the original 1855 classification have largely been unsuccessful, with the notable exception of Château Mouton Rothschild, which was promoted from Second to First Growth in 1973.

During this period, Bordeaux also saw significant advancements in the science of winemaking and viticulture. In 1860, French botanist Pierre Marie Alexis Millardet discovered the 'Bordeaux Mixture', a combination of copper sulphate and quicklime. This fungicide proved highly effective in combating downy mildew, powdery mildew, and other vineyard fungal threats. Its use became widespread and remains an important tool for vineyard management around the world today.

### **20th Century Modernization**

The 20th century was a period of both significant growth and formidable challenges for Bordeaux. The region's vineyards, like many in Europe, faced the devastating effects of phylloxera in the late nineteenth century. This crisis was followed by the upheavals of two world wars and the economic hardships of the Great Depression, all of which deeply impacted the wine industry.

Despite these difficulties, Bordeaux emerged with renewed vigour in the post-World War II era. Advances in winemaking techniques, coupled with a focus on quality and modernization, propelled Bordeaux into a new phase of development. These innovations not only improved the wines produced but also expanded Bordeaux's international reputation and reach, securing its place as a leading force in the global wine trade.

## **21st Century: Globalization and Climate Adaptation**

Bordeaux continues to uphold its position as one of the world's preeminent wine regions, yet it faces increasing competition from New World producers and shifts in consumer preferences. The region's trade strategies have expanded to focus on emerging markets in Asia—most notably China—while still maintaining strong ties with traditional European and North American customers. The widespread cultivation of Bordeaux grape varieties has had a transformative impact on global viticulture, serving as the basis for many of the world's premium wines.

The expertise of influential French “Flying winemakers,” such as Michel Rolland, has further extended Bordeaux's influence internationally. Rolland's laboratory in Pomerol services around 700 clients, including vineyard proprietors and wine merchants from across the globe, shaping winemaking practices well beyond the region itself.

In response to the challenges posed by climate change, Bordeaux has taken proactive steps to safeguard its future. In June 2019, France's national appellation body, INAO, approved six new grape varieties to help local producers adapt to changing environmental conditions. The four newly authorized red varieties—Arinarnoa, Castets, Marselan, and Touriga Nacional—are subject to strict regulations: they may only be planted on up to 5% of a grower's vineyard area and can comprise no more than 10% of the final blend for either red or white wines. These measures reflect Bordeaux's commitment to innovation and resilience in the face of global climate challenges.

## **The Bordeaux Blend Template**

Bordeaux set itself apart in the world of wine with its tradition of blending complementary grape varieties, rather than relying solely on single-varietal expressions as practised in regions like Burgundy with Pinot Noir. The hallmark of Bordeaux winemaking is its classic blend, which brings together Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot as the primary components. To further enhance complexity, balance, and aging potential, winemakers may also incorporate Cabernet Franc, Petit Verdot, and Malbec into their blends.

The impact of Bordeaux on the global wine industry is evident in the widespread adoption of its grape varieties. Winemakers across new wine regions have embraced Bordeaux grapes—particularly Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot—as foundational varietals. These grapes are not only central to blends inspired by Bordeaux, but also feature prominently as stand-alone varietal wines, making them some of the most recognized and appreciated choices among wine enthusiasts worldwide.

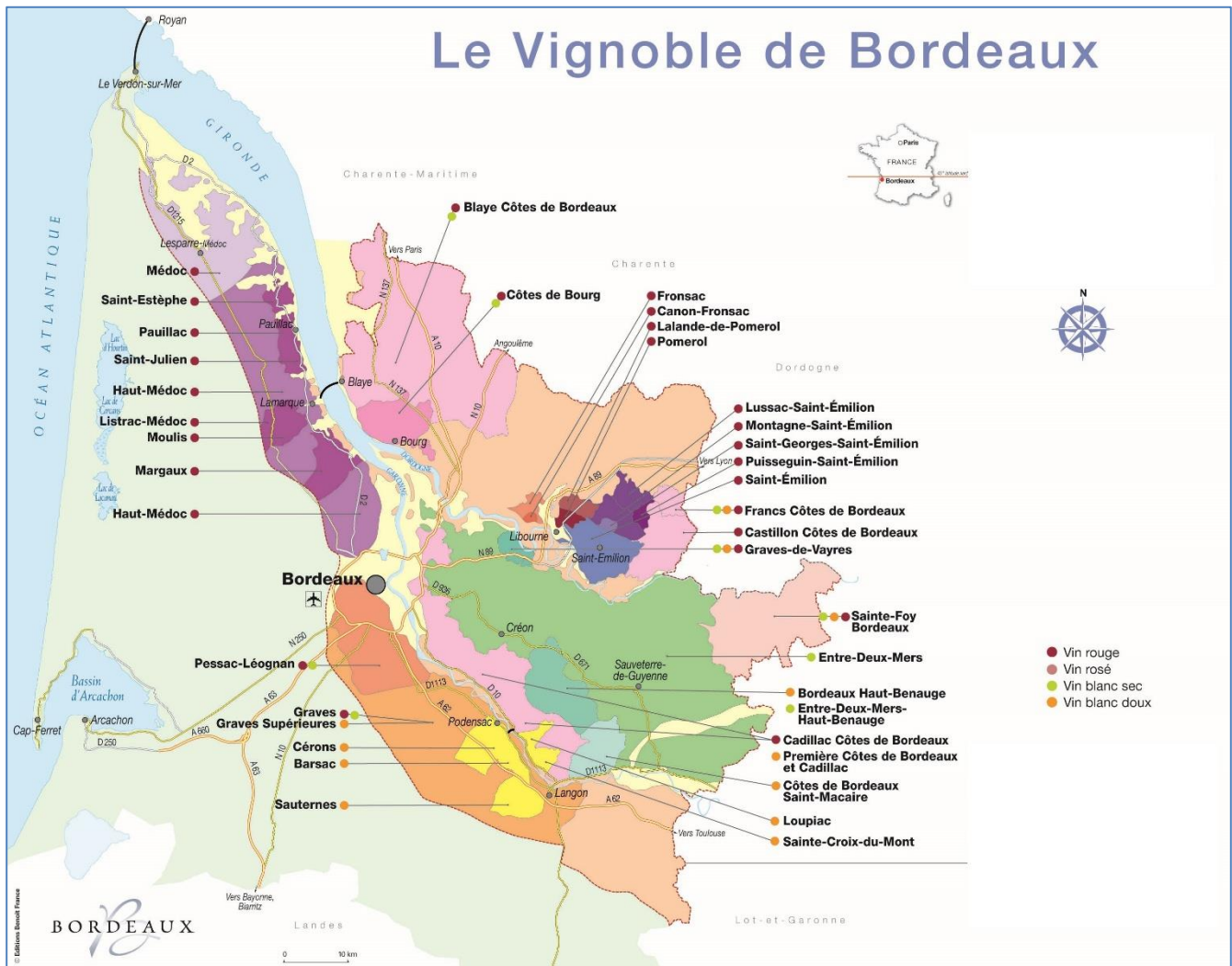
## **GEOGRAPHY & CLIMATE:**

The Bordeaux region is uniquely positioned, straddling the 45th parallel. The vineyards surround the city of Bordeaux, which is located on the western side of the Garonne River and is recognized as “the Left Bank.” Close to the city, the Dordogne River converges with the Garonne, forming the Gironde estuary. This estuary is a long and expansive body of water that eventually flows into the Bay of Biscay, part of the North Atlantic Ocean. The area north and east of the Dordogne River is known as “the Right Bank,” while the triangular-shaped Entre-Deux-Mers region lies between the two rivers.

Bordeaux's climate is heavily influenced by its proximity to the Atlantic Ocean, which is warmed by the Gulf Stream. This results in a temperate climate marked by high humidity in the summer it produces wines distinguished more by subtlety than by power. The mild maritime climate offers protection for the

vines against winter freezing and spring frosts, and it lengthens the growing season in comparison to the more continental climate found further inland.

The region's most renowned vineyards are situated on relatively flat, well-drained gravel soils in the Médoc (northwest of Bordeaux) and Graves (southwest of the city). On the Right Bank, certain areas such as St-Emilion feature limestone terrain, while Pomerol is notable for its soils composed of layers of clay intermixed with gravel. These soil variations influence grape selection: Cabernet Sauvignon, which thrives in well-drained soils, is predominant in the Médoc and Graves, whereas Merlot, favouring clay-influenced soils, is more commonly used in the wines of St-Emilion and Pomerol.



**REGIONS / COUNTRIES WHERE GROWN:**

**Global Proliferation of Bordeaux Varieties**

Bordeaux is fundamentally a French wine region, but its influence has extended across the globe. Winemakers worldwide have adopted the classic Bordeaux grape varieties as they pursue the production of fine wines in diverse climates and soils. Today, Bordeaux varieties are cultivated in nearly every wine-producing nation.

## **Cabernet Sauvignon**

Cabernet Sauvignon stands as Bordeaux's flagship grape and has arguably become the world's most esteemed red wine grape. Its remarkable ability to express a sense of place—while still retaining its core characteristics—combined with its outstanding capacity for aging and adaptability to various climates, has established it as the benchmark for quality red wine in regions such as Napa Valley, Coonawarra, Chile's Maipo Valley, and South Africa's Stellenbosch, among many others.

## **Merlot**

Merlot's softer tannins and fruit-forward profile have made it indispensable both as a blending partner and as a varietal wine. Its renowned success in regions like Pomerol has inspired premium Merlot production globally, while its approachable nature has played a key role in introducing consumers to the world of fine wine.

## **Cabernet Franc**

Cabernet Franc, one of the parent grapes of Cabernet Sauvignon (alongside Sauvignon Blanc), is gaining prominence as a varietal wine, particularly from cool climate regions such as Ontario, New York State, and British Columbia.

## **Malbec**

Malbec, though traditionally a minor blending component in Bordeaux, has become synonymous with Argentinian red wine. Varietally labelled Malbecs are also produced in Chile, California, Washington, and British Columbia.

## **Petit Verdot**

Petit Verdot is rarely bottled as a single varietal wine, but it is used in small quantities by winemakers seeking to replicate the complexity of traditional Bordeaux blends. It provides colour and structure as a minor blending component.

## **Carménère**

Carménère, largely abandoned in Bordeaux, has found renewed significance in Chile, where it is now celebrated for its richness and elegance.

## **Variations in Style**

The distinct styles of Bordeaux wines are largely influenced by the grape varieties that dominate their blends. On the Left Bank, wines are typically based on Cabernet Sauvignon. These wines are known for their firm structure, pronounced mineral character, and higher tannin levels. Flavour profiles commonly include cassis and cedar, giving the wines a robust and structured presence.

In contrast, the Right Bank produces Merlot-based wines that tend to have a rounder texture and a plusher mouthfeel. The influence of clay-limestone soils is evident, contributing to notes of black fruit, plum, and truffle. These wines are generally softer and lower in tannin, which allows them to be enjoyed at a younger age compared to the more muscular and tannic wines of the Left Bank.

Bordeaux reds are celebrated for their restraint and complexity. Rather than overt fruitiness or sweetness, they offer a savoury impression and a sense of dryness pairing well with robust foods.

These wines often reveal the unique characteristics of their terroir and vintage, displaying authenticity rather than obvious winemaking manipulation. At their best, Bordeaux wines achieve an architectural balance—structured, harmonious, and crafted for longevity.

Globally, this classic Bordeaux style is most evident in wines aimed at the fine wine market, particularly those made in the tradition of the renowned châteaux of Bordeaux. Examples include 'Meritage' wines from California and premium bottlings from producers in Chile and Australia who seek to emulate the classic Bordeaux blend.

In contrast, some wines made from Bordeaux grape varieties, especially in the New World, present a more fruit-forward, rich, and opulent style. These wines may be more extracted and often show significant influence from new oak and residual sugar. Such expressions are more common outside Bordeaux and are a departure from the region's traditional style.

### **The Character of Bordeaux Red Blends**

A Bordeaux red blend is, at its core, a study in balance. The wine brings together several classic grape varieties, each contributing distinct qualities to the final blend. Cabernet Sauvignon provides firm tannins, blackcurrant fruit, and significant aging potential. In contrast, Merlot lends a plush texture, softer tannins, and flavours of plum and cherry, adding body and approachability. Cabernet Franc is valued for its aromatic lift and herbal notes, while Petit Verdot offers additional colour, tannin, and spice. Malbec, though used less frequently, contributes dark fruit character and mid-palate depth.

### **Fruit Profile**

The primary fruit characteristics of Bordeaux reds showcase blackcurrant, black cherry, plum, and blackberry. These fruit notes often present a savoury edge, steering clear of overt sweetness. As the wines mature, secondary aromas emerge, including cedar, tobacco, graphite (reminiscent of pencil lead), leather, and dried herbs. With further aging, tertiary complexity develops forest floor, truffle, cigar box, and evolving fruit expressions that shift from fresh to dried or stewed. A hallmark of Bordeaux, especially in wines from the Médoc, is a mineral, gravelly earthiness that sets them apart from more fruit-driven New World styles.

### **Tannin Structure and Texture**

Tannins are foundational to the identity of Bordeaux reds. In their youth, these wines often exhibit firm, sometimes austere tannins that can feel grippy or drying on the palate. This tannic structure is intentional, serving as the backbone that allows the wine to age gracefully. Over time, the tannins soften and integrate, resulting in a texture that becomes increasingly velvety and refined. Bordeaux reds typically have a medium to full body and moderate alcohol content (usually between 12.5% and 14%), which distinguishes them from some of the more powerful New World counterparts.

### **Acidity and Freshness**

Vibrant acidity is a defining trait of good Bordeaux. This acidity offers freshness and makes the wines notably food friendly. It is also crucial for aging potential, ensuring the wine remains lively and avoids becoming heavy or monotonous. The bright acidity brings lift and balance to the interplay of tannin and concentrated fruit.

### **Oak Influence**

French oak barrel aging, typically for 12 to 24 months, is standard practice for Bordeaux reds. This process imparts subtle notes of vanilla, toast, and delicate baking spices. The best examples display oak that is thoroughly integrated serving as a supportive framework for the wine's character rather than dominating it. Ideally, the oak enhances the expression of both terroir and fruit, never masking them.

### **Evolution with Age**

Bordeaux reds are crafted with longevity in mind. When young, they can be tight, tannic, and closed, demanding patience from the drinker. With maturation, the wines undergo a transformation: primary fruit flavours fade, making way for secondary and tertiary nuances; tannins soften; and all the elements come into harmonious balance. This evolution is central to what defines the Bordeaux style.

## **FOOD PAIRING:**

Typically, Bordeaux Dry Red wine is served at 16C to 18C (60F to 65F). Serving too warm can accentuate the alcohol, while too cold can make the tannins harsher and mute the wine's flavors.

For very old Bordeaux, decanting for too long can lead to the wine losing its subtlety, so decant right before serving.

When pairing food and Bordeaux, aim to match the weight and intensity of the dish with the wine. A robust Left Bank Bordeaux with high tannins and acidity will pair better with richer, more intense dishes like steak or lamb, while a softer Right Bank Bordeaux may pair well with lighter meat dishes or mushroom-based dishes.

Sauces with rich, savory flavors like red wine reduction or peppercorn sauce often complement Bordeaux's structure. Avoid pairing Bordeaux with overly spicy or acidic dishes, which can clash with the wine's tannins and flavors.

## **THE FLIGHT:**

The goal in selecting the wines for this flight was to present the individual varietals of the Bordeaux grapes as well as more traditional blends. As you work through the flight consider not only the quality of the wine in front of you but also ask does it exhibit the characteristics of a fine blend or a single varietal? The flight includes wines from a few of the many countries where these grapes are grown both in the new world and the old.

## **LIST OF REFERENCES:**

### Books:

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*The Oxford Companion to Wine*, Jancis Robinson, Oxford University Press, 2006  
*Knowing and Making Wine*, Emile Peynaud, John Wiley & Sons, 1984  
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*The World Atlas of Wine*, Hugh Johnson, Mitchel Beasley 1983

### Websites:

<https://www.bordeaux.com/us/>  
<https://winefolly.com/>  
<https://www.decanter.com>  
<https://www.worldofvino.com/>  
<https://www.isvv.u-bordeaux.fr/en/>

## **SUMMARY:**

The Dry Red Bordeaux Style class is unique within the BCGWJ judging as it is the only category that explicitly references a traditional old world wine region. This distinction highlights the enduring influence and prestige of Bordeaux wines in the global winemaking community. The grape varieties native to Bordeaux, such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, and Malbec, have been cultivated in wine regions around the world, reflecting the impact of Bordeaux's winemaking legacy.

In the English-speaking world, Bordeaux is widely regarded as the benchmark for fine wine. Renowned estates like Chateau Lafite, Chateau Haut Brion, and Chateau Mouton Rothschild have inspired generations of winemakers, writers, and enthusiasts. Their contributions have played a pivotal role in spreading Bordeaux grape varieties far beyond the southwest corner of France, shaping the character and quality of wines produced globally.