

ROBERSON WINE FINE WINE TASTINGS

PICHON vs PICHON
THE BARON AND THE COMTESSE

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PICHON vs PICHON THE HISTORY

Chateau Pichon Longueville Comtesse de Lalande

Chateau Longueville au Baron de Pichon-Longueville

The commune of Pauillac is perhaps Bordeaux's most important. It is home to three of the Haut-Medoc's five 1er Cru Classé properties, two of the 'super-seconds' and a clutch of estates that out perform their positions in the 1855 hierarchy - Lynch-Bages, Grand-Puy-Lacoste and new star on the block Pontet-Canet, to name just three. The appellation's two 2ième Cru Classé properties are the Pichons Baron de Longueville and Comtesse de Lalande. Once part of the same great estate, these two rivals now sit across the D2 highway from each other.

The original Pichon-Longueville wine estate was formed in the mid 1600s, when Jacques de Pichon-Longueville married Therese de Rauzan. She brought an exceptional dowry to the marriage in the shape of 40 prime parcels of vineyard in the southern part of Pauillac. Over the years there would be a number of additions to the total hectareage (including some exchanges of land with neighbouring Château Latour) and the Pichon estate became known for producing some of the region's finest wines, fetching prices similar to those at Mouton.

Jacques' grandson was the Baron Joseph de Pichon-Longueville, who ran the estate up until his death in 1850. It was at this point that the property was divided, in accordance with Napoleonic inheritance laws, between his five children. In what seems like a battle of the sexes, the Baron's two sons combined their shares to form Pichon-Baron, and the three daughters used their shares to create Pichon-Lalande. Joseph was in his nineties when he died and his passing was followed swiftly by the death of his eldest son, so by the time the inheritance arrangements were all said and done it was the second son (Raoul) who inherited both the barony and the newly formed Pichon-Baron.

Baron Joseph de Pichon Longueville

The two separate estates continued to make one wine until Raoul's death in 1861. He had inherited the winemaking facilities as part of the deal and it made sense for the family to continue as before, operating as one estate although the vines were now split in terms of ownership and two chateaux had been built across the road from each other. With Raoul gone, it was decided that the properties would formally split - Lalande under the sole charge of Comtesse Virginie de Lalande (one of her sisters was dead, the other departed for a nunnery), while Raoul's cousin (of the same name) assumed ownership of Pichon-Baron.

The next century saw the wines at Lalande assume the upper hand, and the estate remained in the family until 1926 when the financial pressures of the First World War forced the Lalandes to sell to the Mialhe family. This situation was mirrored across the road, where Baron was sold to the Boutellier family of Chateau Lanessan in 1933. It wasn't until 1987 that there would be another change of ownership at Pichon-Baron, when the AXA insurance group stepped in to halt the unfortunate decline that had come about due to a succession of estate managers that weren't up to the task. Jean-Michel Cazes (of Lynch-Bages fame) took the reigns, acquiring some new vineyard parcels in addition to renovating the chateau and winery while putting an end to the shoddy practices that had led to the slump in quality. Since 2000 the role of estate manager has been fulfilled by Christian Seely.

Things had been slightly more stable at Lalande, but in 1978, following a few years of acrimony, the Mialhe family's co-ownership broke down and the indomitable May-Eliane de Lencquesaing inherited most of the shares, buying out the rest to take control of the estate. May-Eliane presided over a very successful period at Pichon-Lalande but, again, in-fighting and arguments led to a break down behind the scenes which resulted in the sale of the property to the Louis Roederer Group in 2007.



The two Pichons share some of the best terroir in Bordeaux, with the majority of the vineyard plots located in the south of Pauillac close to the border with St Julien. There are a couple more parcels than those highlighted on the map, including 9ha of land that is actually in St Julien, but is granted dispensation to form part of the blend for Pichon-Lalande's Pauillac Grand Vin. Pichon-Baron have a couple of parcels to the west, close to Chateau Batailley, but the vast majority of Pichon vineyards (both Baron and Lalande) are situated in the St Lambert zone of the commune, to the south of a village called Daubos.

As you can see from the map, Latour is the next door neighbour so the vineyard land is pretty special. In actual fact, many experts are known to believe that Baron has the superior vineyards to Lalande, although until very recently it was considered to produce the inferior wine. It is interesting to see that there are vintages where critical opinion comes down quite definitely in favour of one property over another, calling '95 a Lalande year, or '90 a Baron year for example.

The 2000 vintage was a stunning success in Bordeaux, producing a high calibre of wines across the board. It didn't always appear that this would be the case however, as the early part of the growing season was marked by cool, difficult weather that ran all the way until the end of June. At that point the Bordelais were preparing themselves for a disappointing vintage, but on July 29th a pocket of high pressure arrived and brought with it glorious sunshine for the whole of August and September. Some of the less propitious vineyards began to suffer from hydric stress, but those sites with a moisture retaining clay base had no such problems and were able to harvest in glorious conditions. 2000 was undoubtedly one of the finest vintages of the past 50 years.

Tasting note: Wine #1

Tasting note: Wine #2

	Available	Retail price	Tasting bottle price
2000 Chateau Pichon-Lalande (13.5%ABV)	4	£220	£198
2000 Chateau Pichon-Baron (13.5%ABV)	1	£110	£99

1996 is an interesting year that produced some very strange weather conditions and some spectacular wines, although the quality was very much reserved for the Cabernet dominated wines of the left-bank. Following a mild winter there was an unusually hot March and April, which when followed by a hot start to June brought about early flowering and promised a relatively early harvest. But then came the rains, and in a big way. August started out normally, but around the middle of the month a deluge started that lasted for weeks (severely damaging the quality of the Merlot harvest), before the heat wave returned in mid-September and allowed the Cabernet Sauvignon to bask in the sunshine all the way to a later than usual harvest.

The result was some disappointing Merlot dominated wines on the right bank, but a number of excellent and densely concentrated wines in the Haut-Medoc.

Tasting note: Wine #3

Tasting note: Wine #4

	Available	Retail price	Tasting bottle price
	1	£210	£189
1996 Chateau Pichon-Baron (13.5%ABV)	2	£135	£121.50

Following the considerable success of the 1989 vintage, the Bordelais were delighted when 1990 proved to be even better. Both banks of the river revelled in the perfect conditions and Robert Parker called it the *"best Bordeaux vintage of modern times"*.

1990 had the hottest July and August since 1961 and despite a relatively wet September the fruit was exceptionally ripe and yields were healthy. While the September rains were torrential in Pessac-Leognan, Pauillac was spared any particularly heavy downpours and in actual fact benefitted from the moisture. Many of the wines produced in '90 have been hailed as some of the best ever from their respective estates - Montrose, Pichon-Baron and Beausejour-Duffau in particular.

Tasting note: Wine #5

Tasting note: Wine #6

	Available	Retail price	Tasting bottle price
	1	£125	£112.50
1990 Chateau Pichon-Baron (13.5%ABV)	1	£310	£279

The '80s was a fantastic decade for Bordeaux, with a string of excellent vintages including '82, '85, '86, '88 and '89. This was a period of awakening for the region that coincided with a lot of estates changing hands and ploughing serious investment into their facilities.

The 1986 vintage was on course to be an excellent one, as conditions had been hot and dry throughout the growing season. In actual fact, some chateaux were starting to worry about heat stress in the vineyards until the rain started in mid-September. Unfortunately, what started out as a bit of refreshment for the parched plants soon became something of an issue as the showers turned in to storms. Once the storms had passed the estate managers faced a dilemma. Harvest now and avoid any further rain, or wait and keep fingers crossed that the sunny conditions returned. Those that waited were rewarded and made some excellent wines but the chateaux that harvested immediately had only swollen and dilute fruit to show for their years work and as such, variability is a serious problem in 1986.

Tasting note: Wine #7

Tasting note: Wine #8

	Available	Retail price	Tasting bottle price
	1	£230	£207
1986 Chateau Pichon-Baron (13.5%ABV)	2	£162	£145.80

At the start of 1982's growing season the excellent weather conditions brought an early and even flowering, giving the growers hope that the crop would be ripe and large (it proved to be the biggest on record up to that point). The good weather persisted as Bordeaux headed from a hot and dry summer in to a cooler but still dry September. When harvesting began midway through the month the chateaux were very happy - must weights were high, ripeness levels superb and the crop was a bumper one. Almost everywhere in the region had benefitted from the excellent conditions, although an exception was the notorious blip in Margaux (the commune rather than the Chateau), where conditions were not quite as optimum as they were throughout the rest of the Haut-Medoc.

The great Emile Peynaud declared that he had never seen "*such a level of richness and quantity together*" and a young wine writer called Robert Parker took the opportunity to make his reputation by singing from the rooftops about a vintage that many other critics thought was too ripe and produced wines that wouldn't age well.

Tasting note: Wine #7

Tasting note: Wine #8

	Available	Retail price	Tasting bottle price
	1	£500	£450
1982 Chateau Pichon-Baron (13.5%ABV)	1	£270	£243