



THE 1ER GRAND CRU CLASSÉ (B) WINES OF
ST EMILION
A TASTING AT ROBERSON WINE

THURSDAY NOVEMBER 20TH 2008

ST EMILION THE PLACE

ST EMILION

The beautiful town and UNESCO world heritage site of St Emilion gives its name to one of the wine world's most lauded (set of) appellations.

Situated on the right bank of the Dordogne River, the town is located high on an escarpment overlooking the river to the south, Pomerol to the west and the Cotes and other satellite appellations (Lussac-St-Emilion and Cotes de Castillon etc) on the plains to the north. This large area is fascinatingly diverse, both in terms of the terroir and the quality of the wines produced across the commune. Merlot is the common denominator for the vast majority of estates, with the variety thriving in the clay rich soils of the region. Cabernet Franc also fares very well and tends to overshadow its more illustrious offspring, Cabernet Sauvignon, which is more at home on the other side of the river.

St Emilion has been something of a battleground for the terroir debate over recent years. It is a commune that is blessed with a number of distinct soil types and topographies, but was also the birthplace of 'les Garagistes', a movement that used tiny yields, modern winemaking techniques and lots of new oak to produce wines of class and concentration from unheralded vineyard sites.

While the debate still rages on the importance of terroir, it is seen by many to be far from coincidental that the top performing estates are situated in the prime locations.

The most important soils in St Emilion are clay, gravel, limestone and sand. Different sections of this large area are dominated by one or more of these soils, but it is the clay-rich limestone soils of the plateau and the gravelly soils on the Pomerol border that are considered the best terroirs.

This has resulted in the formation of two sections within the group of leading properties. Cheval Blanc and Figeac are the best known on the mounds of gravelly soil by the Pomerol border, with Ausone, Angelus and many others on the limestone plateau surrounding the town.

ST EMILION CLASSIFICATION

1996 CLASSIFICATION OF ST EMILION

Premier Grand Cru Classé (A)

Château Ausone
Château Cheval Blanc

Premier Grand Cru Classé (B)

Château La Gaffeliere
Château Magdelaine
Château Angelus
Château Beausejor-Becot
Château Belair
Château Canon
Château Figeac
Clos Fourtet
Château Pavie
Château Trotte vielle
Château Beausejour-Duffau

Not content with the hoopla caused by the garagistes, producers in St Emilion have been fighting tooth and nail for the last couple of years over their classification.

Unlike the 1855 classification of the Medoc which has seen only one significant change in over 150 years (the promotion of Mouton), St Emilion's is revised every decade and promotions or demotions are *de rigueur*. The classification takes in all of the properties that have the right to use Grand Cru Classé on their label, either as one of the elite 'Premier Grand Cru Classé' (A or B) estates, or the slightly more modest 'Grand Cru Classé'. The category of plain old Grand Cru is outside of the classification, and is where you will find most of the Garagistes.

In 2006 the revision of the classification resulted in eleven properties being relegated (out of the classé system entirely) and eight being promoted, including two being made Premier Grand Cru Classé (B) (Pavie-Maquin and Troplong-Mondot). The furore that ensued involved a lawsuit that initially resulted in the entire classification being suspended. Then the system was restored to its 1996 settings (bad news for the promoted estates) until 2009 when a final decision is due to be made.

ST EMILION FLIGHT ONE

1996

Unlike the '98 vintage where the Merlots benefited from the weather and growing conditions more than the Cabernets, in 1996 the story was reversed.

Frosts at the start of the year delayed the bud-break, which coupled with pre-harvest rain in September led to a shorter than desired growing season for Merlot. After the Merlot had been harvested the rain subsided and October was warm and dry allowing the later-picked Cabernets to gain good ripeness. So while the Medoc produced some of its best wines for many years, things were slightly trickier in St Emilion. The top estates produced wines of quality and class, although lacking a little of the concentration found in 1995 or 1998.

CHÂTEAU MAGDELAINE

11ha - Merlot (95%) / Cabernet Franc (5%)

The illustrious Moueix stable includes Petrus, Trotanoy and La Fleur Petrus as well as many other leading Pomerol estates. One of their earlier purchases (1952), Magdalaine, remains their solitary estate in St Emilion and is considered to be one of the very best in the commune. For the first two hundred years the chateau remained in the hands of the Chatonnet family and the reputation was already well established when JP Moueix purchased it.

Magdalaine has the highest proportion of Merlot of all the Premier Grand Cru Classé properties and was made by Jean-Claude Berrouet (winemaker at Petrus) until his retirement in 2007. It also happens to be the only one of the leading estates in St Emilion to be farmed used a horse drawn plough!

	Available	Retail price	Tasting price
1996 Magdelaine	10	£55.95	Btl: £50.36 Case: £47.56

CHÂTEAU LA GAFFELIÈRE

22ha - Merlot (80%) / Cabernet Franc (10%) / Cabernet Sauvignon (10%)

Once part of the same estate as Canon La Gaffeliere, this used to be one of St Emilion's very best estates. Today it is often thought to be trading on past glories, although big investment since the turn of the millennium has seen an improvement over the last few years. Stephane Derenoncourt is now the consultant after a flirtation with Michel Rolland during the 1990s.

Perhaps the most famous event in La Gaffeliere's recent history happened in 2003 when during a party to celebrate the end of the Vinexpo exhibition (featuring all the luminaries of the wine world) a storm hit the estate. Trees started falling and the marquee crashed to the ground. Canapés were flying and the guests had to flee down into the cellar to avoid the carnage!

	Available	Retail price	Tasting price
1996 La Gaffeliere	10	£43.95	Btl: £39.56 Case: £37.36

ST EMILION FLIGHT TWO

1998

This proved to be a sensational year for wines from the right-bank, with St Emilion and Pomerol recording their best performance for many years. The story was not the same for the Cabernet dominated wines over the river, as heavy rains in the second half of October ruined much of the good work done by a very hot August and September. The Merlot had been picked before the rains came, and the fruit was superb.

The top St Emilion estates produced wines of wonderful richness and concentration that promise many years of improvement in the cellar although, as usual, they are attractive relatively early.

CHÂTEAU BÉLAIR

12.5ha - Merlot (80%) / Cabernet Franc (20%)

Bélaïr is one of St Emilion's oldest estates and during the 19th century was considered to be one of Bordeaux's finest. In terms of location, Bélaïr is perfectly placed on the plateau (with some vines also on the slopes) and is surrounded by Château Ausone, Château Canon, Château Magdelaine and Château La Gafelière.

Today's winemaker is the highly rated Pascal Delbeck, who claims to have been the first man in all of Bordeaux to introduce a vibrating sorting table - an idea he admits to stealing from DRC in Burgundy.

The wines are classic St Emilion, some would even say 'old school'. Full and elegant but never overbearing with Delbeck always careful not to let the grapes get *too* ripe.

	Available	Retail price	Tasting price
1998 Belair	1	£45.95	Btl: £41.36 Case: £39.06

CHÂTEAU BEAUSÉJOUR-BÉCOT

16.5ha - Merlot (70%) / Cabernet Franc (24%) / Cabernet Sauvignon (6%)

This part of the Beausejour estate has been in the hands of the Bécot family since 1969 and in 1979 it swallowed two other vineyard parcels that were owned by the family; 'Trois Moulins' and 'Château La Carte'. Unfortunately this wasn't met with approval by the authorities, who demoted Beausejour-Bécot from the classification. The situation was rectified in 1996 when the revision of the classification saw its status restored. Michel Rolland is now the consultant here (as he is at the other Beausejour property) and the team have developed a single vineyard plot of Merlot next-door to the estate into a garagiste style cuvee 'La Gomerie'.

	Available	Retail price	Tasting price
1998 Beausejour-Becot	1	£81.95	Btl: £73.76 Case: £69.66

ST EMILION FLIGHT TWO

CLOS FOURTET

22ha - Merlot (80%) / Cabernet Franc (10%) / Cabernet Sauvignon (10%)

Since being bought by the Cuvelier family this estate has maintained the high standards that St Emilion fans have come to expect from one of the commune's top performers.

Cuvelier purchased Clos Fourtet from Lucien Lurton, who was given the estate in exchange for the Lurton family share of Château Margaux (40%) in 1949.

Two thirds of the vines were replanted in 2001, reducing the average age of the vineyard substantially. Although many people felt it would take some time for the wines to get back to where they were, it appears that the property is going from strength to strength. The 2005 Clos Fourtet considered by some to be the best wine this estate has ever produced.

	Available	Retail price	Tasting price
1998 Clos Fourtet	1	£71.95	Btl: £64.76 Case: £61.16

CHÂTEAU CANON

12.5ha - Merlot (75%) / Cabernet Franc (25%)

Canon was originally part of Château St Martin, the estate farmed by the monks of St Martin which included the two Beausejour properties. After passing through the hands of a number of different owners the chateau now belongs to Chanel, and is managed by John Kolasa (ex-manager of Château Latour). Kolasa has been responsible for the revolution at Rauzan-Segla (also part of Chanel's portfolio) and Canon has benefited from his expertise with (according to some critics) a noticeable upturn in quality over the last decade.

Canon was a property beset with problems during the 80s and 90s, and when it was purchased by Chanel in 1996 the entire stock of barrels in the chai had to be incinerated in an effort to tackle a TCA contamination in the cellar. A major replanting effort in the vineyards was required to eliminate viruses, with a third of the entire vineyard area having to be ripped up. In addition to this, subsidence in the quarries beneath the property threatened the complete collapse of the entire estate!

All these problems have now been addressed (including underground pillars to combat the subsidence) and the estate is definitely one on the up.

	Available	Retail price	Tasting price
1998 Canon	10	£71.95	Btl: £64.76 Case: £61.16

ST EMILION FLIGHT THREE

CHÂTEAU FIGEAC

40ha - Cabernet Franc (35%) / Cabernet Sauvignon (35%) / Merlot (30%)

Not many estates in Bordeaux can trace their history back as far as Chateau Figeac. The current property is on the site of a Gallo-Roman villa dating back to the 2nd century that was built by Figeacus.

The property is located over by the Pomerol border, and much of the vineyards are planted on three gravelly mounds that are perfect for cultivating the Cabernet varieties. The terroir here is some of the very best in all of Bordeaux and Cheval Blanc, the most prestigious of St-Emilion properties, was in fact part of the Figeac estate until being sold in 1838.

During the controversy surrounding the 2006 re-classification, Figeac's owner Thierry Manoncourt was told that his application to be promoted to Premier Grand Cru Classé (A) had been rejected solely because his wine didn't sell at the same price as Cheval Blanc or Ausone! Get ready for the price hike soon.....

	Available	Retail price	Tasting price
1998 Figeac	22	£99.95	Btl: £89.96 Case: £84.96

CHÂTEAU PAVIE

42ha - Merlot (60%) / Cabernet Franc (30%) / Cabernet Sauvignon (10%)

This Premier Grand Cru Classé estate and its wines have always been held in high regard, although during recent times few Bordeaux properties have been the subject of as much controversy and debate.

The arrival of new proprietor Gerard Perse in 1998 heralded the dawn of heated arguments, with one camp lauding him as a saviour, and the other damning him for abandoning all that is sacred about Bordeaux.

The previous owner Jean-Paul Valette was renowned for making long-lived wines of poise & elegance, although Mr Perse had altogether different ideas about the style of wine Pavie should produce, and set about a radical program of 'improvements', both in terms of facilities and the approach to winemaking. One of the major developments has been the slashing of yields since Perse's arrival, resulting in wines of far greater concentration (if not elegance) and far higher price tags!

	Available	Retail price	Tasting price
1998 Pavie	22	£117.00	Btl: £105.30 Case: £99.45

CHÂTEAU ANGELUS

23ha - Merlot (50%) / Cabernet Franc (47%) / Cabernet Sauvignon (3%)

Angélus is one of St Emilion's most highly regarded estates (with prices to match) and even the tipple of choice for James Bond on long train journeys. It is interesting to remember that it was only promoted to Premier Grand Cru Classé (B) in 1996, not long after the purchase of some of the Beausejour-Bécot vineyards. Three hectares of the vineyard didn't receive the promotion and these are now eligible for only the second wine of the chateau - Carillon de l'Angélus .

The rapid improvements made at Angélus that resulted in the estate's promotion have continued and now many commentators put it at the front of the queue for further promotion into the elite (A) band of properties. 1998 was the vintage that the De Boüard family decide to drop the 'L' from the name (l'Angelus), although there is no evidence to suggest that this was responsible for a change in the flavour of the wine.

	Available	Retail price	Tasting price
1998 Angelus	1	£165.00	Btl: £148.50 Case: £140.25

ST EMILION FLIGHT FOUR

2000

An excellent vintage for the red wines of Bordeaux, both left and right banks produced wonderful wines in 2000. The long growing season and warm weather in August and September was perfect for ripening the Cabernets (and gave estates that picked late in the Medoc a slight edge in quality overall), but the conditions had meant an excellent Merlot harvest too.

Ripe, juicy and concentrated, the wines were met with a joyous reception from the critics and have continued to develop superbly in their first decade. 2000 is already a somewhat open vintage, although the best examples still have many years in front of them before full maturity.

CHÂTEAU TROTTE VIELLE

10ha – Merlot (50%) / Cabernet Franc (45%) / Cabernet Sauvignon (5%)

Situated to the east of St Emilion town on the limestone plateau and under the same ownership as Lynch-Moussas and Batailley (in Paulliac), this estate could run any other in France close in a battle for the most ridiculous name.

Apparently the Chateau used to be owned by an elderly lady that would run down to the nearby cross-roads every time she heard a coach and horses approaching, so eager was she to get news from the nearby towns.

Her ungainly running style got her the nickname of 'The Old Trotting Lady' – Le Trotte Vielle in French.

This has traditionally been seen as one of the weaker Premier Grand Cru Classé B properties, and rumours were strong that it would be demoted in 2006. They proved to be unfounded however, and additional investment over the past decade in the chateau's facilities seems to have paid dividends.

	Available	Retail price	Tasting price
2000 Trotte-Vielle	1	£67.95	Btl: £61.16 Case: £57.76

CHÂTEAU BEAUSÉJOUR

7.5ha - Merlot (70%) / Cabernet Franc (20%) / Cabernet Sauvignon (10%)

Previously known as Chateau Beausejour-Duffau-Lagarrosse, the name was wisely shortened to Beausejour and was originally part of the same estate as Beausejour-Becot (they were divided in 1869). The chateau is next door to Canon, and both estates were originally planted and farmed by the monks of St Martin.

Of all the St Emilion Premier Grand Cru Classé estates, Beausejour is perhaps the least well known. In wine terms its most famous vintage is the 1990, which über critic Robert Parker gave 100 points to and said that he had mistaken it for Petrus! Why the estate hasn't managed to match this performance before or since is a mystery, but clearly there is potential in this chateau's terroir.

	Available	Retail price	Tasting price
2000 Beausejour	1	£85.95	Btl: £77.36 Case: £73.06