TERROIR OF ST EMILION
St Emilion is one of the wine world’s most famous names and a town of enough historic importance that it has been named a UNESCO world heritage site. This comes as no surprise to those that have strolled along its medieval streets or snapped photos of the Roman monuments that litter the town. Wine has always been an important fixture around St Emilion, since the production boom of the 17th century when the Dutch in particular were instrumental in trading the wines of the surrounding countryside. In 1936 St Emilion was given full appellation status and in 1955 a system of cru classé properties was instituted that has since been the cause of much political and legal wrangling over the frequent promotions and demotions that have taken place within it.

Merlot is the dominant grape variety in this part of Bordeaux, with Cabernet Franc playing the support role. Cabernet Sauvignon plays a lesser role in St Emilion, which is due in large part to the terroir. The clay rich soils and lack of gravel make Sauvignon a difficult cultivar in much of the region, although there are specific places (most notably the Figeac plateau) where this is not the case and Sauvignon can thrive in the gravelly soils. Before phylloxera it was Cabernet Franc that dominated (called Bouchet by the locals) and it still plays an important role today, bringing the Cabernet structure to a blend without the ripening difficulties that Sauvignon has in the St Emilion soil and climate.

One of the fascinating things about St Emilion is that it is home to a cornucopia of small winemaking estates. Unlike the Medoc, where most properties are large by French standards, in St Emilion over half of the 840 properties in the appellation are smaller than 5 hectares. This has been brought into focus over the past couple of decades by the rise (and to a certain extent, fall) of the ‘Garagiste’ - a small plot of land vinified in a garage but to an expensive recipe that includes tiny yields and lots of new oak barrels. The lack of large estates (only 16 are 30ha or bigger) makes it a very interesting area to delve deeper into, especially because of the big differences in terroir that are found across what is quite a large viticultural area (5400ha under vine).
St Emilion is perhaps the most diverse of Bordeaux's top appellations in terms of terroir. The variety is evident in soil type, temperature, rainfall and aspect giving very distinctive microclimates - for better or worse - to many of the commune's properties. The town itself (population 2000) is perched at about 100m elevation on a plateau overlooking a valley that slopes down to the Dordogne River.

As per the map on the opposite page, we will address each section separately.

**St Martin Plateau**
The sections highlighted in orange, red, green and blue form part of the St Emilion plateau, which stretches further to the east than you can see on the map and can be sub-divided into a number of distinct sections. To the immediate north, south and west of the town is the St Martin Plateau where many of the region's best estates are located. This is a particularly diverse area and many properties have vineyards that are spread across different parts of the plateau.

The top of the plateau (highlighted in green) has a very deep limestone subsoil. In some examples (Canon and Ausone are particularly good ones) there are vast expanses of limestone caves and quarries underground where many properties store their barrels during élevage. The limestone here is hard but friable and on top of it sits clay rich calcareous soils of various depth depending on where you are. In fact, despite being a plateau there are various undulations and shifts of vineyard aspect, so things change from estate to estate but the limestone base is a constant on the plateau.

Average temperature here is higher than elsewhere in St Emilion thanks to the proximity to the town. This may sound like a minor factor, but even on the plateau there can be weeks between the harvest dates of those close to the conurbation and others further away thanks to the differences in ripening patterns. As you move away from the town but stay on the plateau it can get markedly cooler as the vines are more exposed to the elements.

The blue section on the map is the high slopes that come down from the plateau. There is a lot of limestone under the soil here too, but it is softer on the slopes. The clay content in the soil is very high here, as it is on the adjoining sections of the plateau. On the lower slopes (shaded in orange) the soils turn much more sandy and the limestone disappears. These soils are less effective for making top class wines and cabernet Franc in particular doesn’t like it here. The wine tend to be lighter and lack the complexity of those found further up the slope and on the plateau.

**St Christophe Plateau**
Further west from the town is the St Christophe section of the plateau. The western part of this section (highlighted in red) has high loam content in the soils along with plenty of clay, although the soils get sandier as you move towards Cotes de Castillon on the eastern border. This section of the plateau has historically lacked any top estates but Tertre-Roteboeuf has emerged in recent years to challenge the misconception that this part of the appellation yields heavy wines that lack the acidity and balance to age for many years. However, as you move towards St Etienne de Lisse, things gets colder and sandier still, rendering the terroir unsuitable for producing top quality wine.

**Valley**
The big yellow section of the map relates to the fluvial and aeolian sands of the valley, which undulates and encompasses a few different terroirs - none of which are considered to give top class wines. There are many decent estates here but none that could be said to be in the top drawer, although in recent years there have been big improvements at places like Grand Mayne. The valley continues right down to the river and the closer one gets the more chance there is that you will encounter AOP Bordeaux vineyards rather than St Emilion. Jean-Luc Thunevin has made many good wines using fruit from the valley but even he admits that there is no way to produce something as good as the estates on the higher slopes and plateaus.

**Figeac - Pomerol Plateau**
The purple section of the map is the areas that make up the Figeac Plateau. This gravelly terroir runs into neighbouring Pomerol and is perfect for cultivating the Cabernet varieties. At Figeac and Cheval Blanc the terroir is manifested in gravel mounds, similar to those that line the banks of the Gironde in the Haut-Medoc's finest vineyards. Drainage here is superb, as is aspect and the temperature is warmer than much of the appellation. While there are some of the old Figeac properties that have some vines in this sector (and La Dominique too), the majority of the land is occupied by Figeac and Cheval Blanc and their wines are distinct from the rest of the top estates.
Chateau l’Arrosée
9 hectares (60% Merlot, 20% Cabernet Franc, 20% Cabernet Sauvignon)

According to local sources, Arrosée’s wines used to be amongst the finest in the St Emilion appellation. It would be a stretch to make that assertion today, but since the estate was purchased by the Caille family in 2002 there has certainly been an upturn in quality and this 9ha estate. The winery is located near the co-operative and their vines in this section of the appellation are planted on the sandy soils of the lower slopes. They also have some vines further up the slope towards Chateau Magdelaine, on more clay rich limestone soils.

Since the Caille family arrived there have been a lot of quality minded developments at Arrosée, including the introduction of a second wine (Chateau l’Armont), strict selection following the harvest and 100% new oak barrels for the 16-18 months of maturation.

Clos l’Oratoire
10 hectares (90% Merlot, 5% Cabernet Franc, 5% Cabernet Sauvignon)

This property is part of the same stable as Canon La Gaffeliere and Peyreau since 1991, owned by the Count Stephen Von Nieeperg. The wines are actually vinified at Peyreau and, until the 1960s, the fruit from the clos went into the Peyreau wine. Once the separation had taken place and the quality of wine from the clos was recognised, it was promoted (as an individual entity) to Grand Cru Classé while Peyreau remained a simple Grand Cru. The vines are planted on the slope down from the plateau, with some parcels in the more clay rich soils of higher up the slope but much of it on the sandy soils of the valley floor. In cooler years it can be difficult to achieve full and even ripening of all the fruit, especially for the vines that are north facing or at the foot of the slope. However, in warm vintages the wine retains a mineral streak that gives it great freshness and no little elegance.

The wines follow the same production methods as those at Canon La Gaffeliere (Stephane Derenoncourt is the consultant at both properties), which is to say rigourous sorting, destemming, fermentation in wooden vats with pigeage before 18 months elevage in 80% new oak.

Chateau la Dominique
23 hectares (86% Merlot, 12% Cabernet Franc, 2% Cabernet Sauvignon)

With a next door neighbour like Cheval Blanc you would think La Dominique would have more of a reputation than it does today, but things were different back in the 1800s when the estate was founded by a merchant that had made his fortune in the Caribbean and returned home to by a Bordeaux chateau and called it after the island where he made all of his money. By the end of the 19th century La Dominique was highly regarded and even exchanged a number of vineyard parcels with Cheval Blanc in order to make both estates easier to work.

Of the 23 hectares that constitute the estate, only 18 of them are classified (as Grand Cru Classé) and the best parcels are those that run alongside the Cheval Blanc vineyards and l’Evangile (across the border in Pomerol). These sites (about 25% of the estate) are on the famous gravel soils of the Figeac plateau, but the rest of the vineyards sit on sandy soils that are far less propitious.

Michel Rolland was the consultant here for many years, but since 2006 Jean-Luc Thunevin has managed the property and uses high temperature fermentation, micro-oxygenation and elevage in 70% new oak with regular batonnage.

Chateau Yon Figeac
25 hectares (85% Merlot, 10% Cabernet Franc, 5% Petit Verdot)

There are many properties in St Emilion that used to form part of the original Figeac estate, but despite its name, Yon Figeac is not one of them. The vineyards are is one block right in the middle of the valley, sitting on aleolian sandy soils that are not renowned for yielding the appellations best wines and this is reflected by the lack of interest from the critics. If you are a Grand Cru Classé property and Robert Parker doesn’t bother scoring your wines then something is awry!

Vinification follows conventional lines at Yon Figeac, except that they use 400 litre barrels for elevage, 30% of which are new.
Chateau Tetre Rôteboeuf
6 hectares (85% Merlot, 15% Cabernet Franc)

 Owned, run and made famous by the skill of Francois Mitjaville, Tetre-Rôteboeuf had been in the family for years before Francois decided to give up the corporate life and become a winemaker. He trained at Figeac before transforming what was then known as Chateau de Tetre (rather than Margaux's Du Tertre) into one of Bordeaux most sought after cult wine estates.

Mitjaville is a dedicated viticulturalist, training his vines in high trellised low cordons, which is in stark contrast to the sea of Guyot rained vines everywhere else and is intended to maximise ripeness by keeping his fruit close to the heat emanating from the earth. He keeps yields very low in his amphitheatre of vines, exposed south or south-east on the loamy clay soils of the St Christophe plateau. The wines are fermented (high temperatures) in concrete tanks and Francois uses micro-oxygenation, before they spend the next 18 months in 100% new oak.

Chateau Pavie
42 hectares (60% Merlot, 30% Cabernet Franc, 10% Cabernet Sauvignon)

In recent years Chateau Pavie has been the subject of lots of debate and disagreement between some of the world's leading wine commentators. Robert Parker, who never liked the Pavie wines before Gerard Perse took over the estate for the 1998 vintage, has eulogised about the wines since then and handed out two 100 points and a host of other big scores over the past decade. On the other hand, Jancis Robinson and Michael Broadbent have complained that Pavie is no longer a St Emilion wine, but one that tastes closer to Port in some vintages!

Regardless of your opinion on Pavie - pre or post Perse - it is a large property than embraces a couple of different terroirs. Most of the vines sit on clay rich soils with limestone sub soil, on the south facing slopes coming down from the plateau. There are a few parcels on gravel soils and even some parcels as far over as the Troplong-Mondot on the plateau. Pavie actually expanded in 2001, when he incorporated the neighbouring 'La Cluserie' and 6.5 hectares of Pavie-Decesse (the other 3.5ha were refused and remain bottled under the Decesse name).

Yields are tiny at Pavie (less than half of what they were pre-Perse) and the juice is heavily extracted using pigeage and pumping over. The wines spend 24 months in 100% new oak barrels and the wine is bottled unfined and unfiltered. Michel Rolland works alongside Perse as consultant, but Perse is a strong character with his own ideas and the Pavie wines are very much of his creation.

Clos St Martin
1.3 hectares (70% Merlot, 20% Cabernet Franc, 10% Cabernet Sauvignon)

St Emilion's smallest Grand Cru Classé property is a single parcel of vines that sits next to Canon on a south-west facing slope of clay and limestone soils. The Reiffers family have owned it since 1850 and nowadays the wine is made by Sophie Fourcade (part of the family) in conjunction with her consultant.....you guessed it, Michel Rolland! The wine is made to his standard recipe - cold soak, micro-oxygenation, malo in barrel, 100% new oak for 20 months. Just 500 cases are produced.
Chateau Ausone
7 hectares (55% Merlot, 45% Cabernet Franc)
Named for the Roman poet Ausonius who, according to local legend, built his villa on the same site, Chateau Ausone is owned by Alain Vauthier and is a Premier Grand Cru Classé (A) - the highest accolade afforded to a St Emilion estate. There was a long custody battle between two sides of the same family to see who would run the Ausone estate and this was only properly resolved in 1995 when the Vauthiers took complete charge. Since then the property has gone from strength to strength and the wines now sit alongside the other of Bordeaux’s first growth from either bank of the river. The restoration of former glories has been reflected in the dramatic incline seen in the scores given to the wine since the ’98 vintage. Ausone sits in a prime segment of the limestone plateau, with shallow clay soils and a vineyard that forms an amphitheatre. Vauthier is an obsessive viticulturalist - which you can afford to be on a small vineyard that gives such great fruit. Once the harvest is done the fruit is sorted and then cold soaked for up to six days. Fermentation is done in open top wooden vats and after malo in barrel the wine is assembled and then put into 100% new oak for up to 21 months.

Chateau Figeac
40 hectares (35% Cabernet Franc, 35% Cabernet Sauvignon, 30% Merlot)
Figeac used to be a 200ha, but it has been sub-divided many times hence why so many other properties have Figeac in their name. At one point, parts of La Conseillante were in the Figeac estate and, most famously, Cheval Blanc was born in 1838 when two of the estate’s five gravel mounds and their surrounding vines were sold. These gravel mounds are unique and absolutely perfect for the Cabernet varieties as they have no clay content. It is thanks to this terroir that Figeac features a far higher portion of Sauvignon than is usually found in St Emilion and the wine has often been labelled the “Medoc lover’s St Emilion”. In recent years owner Thierry Manoncourt has applied to have Figeac elevated to Premier Grand Cru Classé, but after being denied by the authorities at the last reclassification, he was told that the issue was his wine sold at a far lower price than Cheval Blanc! Figeac undergoes wild yeast fermentation in wood and steel vats, with pigeage to aid extraction. The juice is matured in 100% new oak for 16-18 months.

Chateau Cheval Blanc
37 hectares (58% Cabernet Franc, 42% Merlot)
As mentioned above, Cheval Blanc was originally part of the Figeac estate, but was sold in the 1830s and has since established itself as the most revered property in the appellation and one of only two Premier Grand Cru Classés (with Ausone). The vineyards run right up to the border with Pomerol and the terroir is said to bear a closer resemblance to Trotencoy than any estate in St Emilion. That said, it shares some of the distinctive gravel mounds with Figeac that make much of the property Cabernet terroir rather than Merlot. This section of the property is planted on deep gravel, but there is also gravel terroir on clay subsoil that is better suited to Merlot. Finally, there are some vineyards on the sandy soils of the valley. The micro-climate is warmer than elsewhere, which means that the Merlot is ripe and rich. The Cabernet Franc comes to full ripeness but has more acidity and a fresher structure so it always dominates the blend of the Grand Vin. The fruit is destemmed and goes through two selections (before and after), before fermentation in steel and concrete tank. Malo is done in barrel and then the wine is blended before it goes through 14 months elevage in 100% new oak.