

Wine & a History Lesson

Written by Terry Connor

Tuesday, 23 September 2014 14:21

Okay, folks. It is time for a history lesson, one that will be spread out over several issues. I want to start with the famous 1855 Bordeaux Classification System, brought to us courtesy of Napoleon 111, and presented to the world at the 1855 Exposition Universelle de Paris. The exposition was an event that offered France the opportunity for positive exposure on a very high plain and Napoleon wanted to show the world the best that France had to offer. (The wine classification idea had merit and staying power because here it is 2014 and the classification is still in effect with only two changes made to the original 61 wines.)

We start in the Medoc. This is a winegrowing area that is located north of the city of Bordeaux and on the west side of the Gironde River. In 1855, the wine brokers ranked the top Medoc wine producers according to each chateau's reputation and the average price that each producer was receiving at the time. The final tally was the OFFICIAL Wine Classification of 1855 and here is how it looked. (Remember that the words "cru" and "growth" are interchangeable and signify quality.)

- Premiers Crus (First Growths) 4. This changed to 5 with the addition of Chateau Mouton Rothschild in 1973. Of the original four, Chateau Haut-Brion was from Graves.
- Deuxiemes Crus (Second Growths) 14
- Troisiemes Crus (Third Growths) 14
- Quatriemes Crus (Fourth Growths) 10
- Cinqiemes Crus (Fifth Growths) 18

The next area classified was Sauterne and Barsac. This was the only area outside of Bordeaux to be classified for the 1855 Program. Chateau d'Yquem Sauterne was given its own classification of Premier Cru Superieur Classe. Eleven wines were designated as Premiers Crus Classes, and twelve were designated as Deuxiemes Crus Classes.

Our next area is St-Emilion. In 1954, eleven producers were classified as Premiers Grands Crus Classes and 53 were designated Grands Crus Classes. This classification is updated every 10 years.

The last region affected by the 1855 classification program was Burgundy. Now it becomes tricky as you have to remember a classification change. In Bordeaux the highest designation is Premier Cru. In Burgundy the highest is Grand Cru and the second highest rating is Premier Cru. There are 33 vineyards classified Grands Crus (Great Growth) the highest burgundian

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designation. These wines are so prestigious that only the name of the winery will appear on the label. An example would be Le Chambertin.

Five hundred sixty-two vineyards have been classified as Premier Cru (First Growth). Wines from this designation use both the Winery and the village. An example would be Joseph Drouhin Puligny-Montrachet Folatieres.

A Burgundy village wine is made from grapes grown on the land surrounding the village and a Burgogne is made from grapes grown anywhere in Burgundy. You will see the designations on the labels.

This is all very confusing, but I ask for your patience because I will clear it up in future issues. I will start by discussing the Premiers Crus of Bordeaux and move on from there.

I also want to begin a new feature for each issue by mentioning two or three wine vocabulary terms. This week I want to start with TERROIR. This is a word the French have given to us. Karen MacNeil describes Terroir as the sum entity and effect of a vineyard's soil, slope, orientation to the sun, and elevation, plus every nuance of climate: rainfall, wind velocity, frequency of fog, cumulative hours of sunshine, average high temperature, and average low temperature. Each vineyard is said to have its own Terroir. Imagine! One word can do all that. I can only imagine that terroir was given a great deal of consideration when the Classification of 1855 was formulated.

Another term that relates to the above article is AOC or "Vins D'Appellation D' Origine Controlee. Each wine produced must abide by a strict set of regulations. These regulations go back to 1935 and they cover the Area of Production, the Variety of Grape, the yield per hectare, the Vineyard Practices, The degree of alcohol, Tasting and Analysis, and Varietal Labeling.

WINESPEAK

So, here we are back in 1855. The French established a level of sophistication in the world of wine that must have started out as a logistics nightmare. However the classification system

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worked and it is still in effect. There really is not that much more to say except that there are 61 wines out there waiting for you to taste and evaluate. Enjoy!