

TRAVEL FOCUS

Beautiful Bordeaux

I've liked wine since my parents allowed eight-year-old me an inch of the lovely stuff, suitably watered-down, with dinner.

by Verne Maree





After growing up with mostly very dry South African whites, I later got to know all the popular varietals of new-world wines. But the regional wines of France, the ancient centre of the wine world, have remained something of a mystery to me.

So when Frantz Dumay of the Singapore office of Diageo, a leading global distributor of alcoholic beverages, invited me and husband Roy to do a wine course at Chateau Magnol in Bordeaux, we were thrilled. Finally, the veil was to be lifted for us on at least one of the wine regions of France.

We pulled up the gravelled driveway as the sun was setting on a mid-September afternoon. Heavy purple bunches hung low on the vines that began where the rolling lawns ended, fattening and ripening in a vintage-saving warm and sunny spell at the end of what had been a chilly summer.

Chateau Magnol is a vineyard, a wine school, and the headquarters of French wine merchants Barton & Guestier. Even the pictures on the website www.barton-guestier.com didn't prepare us for the grace and beauty of the place, or the warmth and sincere charm of the people who run it. Course leader Solange Galan is a mine of information and a wonderful teacher with a great sense of humour.

Over pre-dinner aperitifs we met our fellow students, a mixed bunch that included four bubbly women from Haiti, another from Miami, a couple of restaurateurs from Ireland, the American buyer of beverages for all the US armed forces and embassies in Europe, and a Belgian couple – both retired teachers – who had won the course in a charity raffle.

Later, we were joined for a birthday dinner by a group of about 20 Spaniards staying at a nearby hotel. *"Les Espagnoles font beaucoup de bruit*,"* confided Antoine, the Belgian, who spoke no English – we got by using a mixture of his bad French (mine is worse) and Afrikaans, which is very close to Flemish. But the wonderful meal and wines worked their magic, and Pedro the birthday boy, overcome by sentiment, wiped the tears from his eyes while the assembled company sang 'Happy Birthday' to him in several languages.

**Spaniards make a lot of noise.*



The French Paradox

Frederic has been the chef at Chateau Magnol for more than 20 years. Over the course of three delicious lunches and four outstanding dinners, we fell in love with this famed *saucissier*, whose feather-light sauces complement rather than overpower his magnificently varied dishes.

That first night, dinner consisted of an excellent pâté of salmon with prawns, followed by confit of duck – the most tender, delicious bird you can imagine – with polenta, a beautiful cheeseboard and chocolate cake. This four-course style of menu was followed every night; lunch each day was a hearty dish such as fillet in gorgonzola sauce, or baked halibut with ratatouille, and then cheese with a fresh, green salad and – inevitably – a ravishing dessert.

You've probably heard of the 'French paradox': it asks why French women don't get fat despite a diet laden with saturated fat in the form of butter, croissants, chocolate (at breakfast, for crying out loud!), pastries, *foie gras* and cream-based sauces, not to mention crusty white bread. There's an explanation for this phenomenon (you can Google it), but despite my being one-eighth French, the French paradox does not work for me. Had I stayed at the Chateau much longer, they would have had to hoist my massive *corps* onto the harvest-truck and trundle me out of town.

Wine Course

The course itself was a delightful mixture of structured talks and wine-tasting sessions in the sunny wine-tasting room next to the chateau, experiences in and around the chateau's own vineyards, and trips to other chateaux in the Bordeaux region.

Chateau Magnol is at the southernmost tip of the Haut Médoc area of Bordeaux; it produces a Bordeaux that is about half Cabernet Sauvignon, half Merlot. Apparently, the trend to easier-drinking wines means that Bordeaux is producing increasingly more of the smoother, lighter Merlot and less of the more robust, longer-lived Cabernet Sauvignon.

On our first morning after breakfast we strolled down the wide marble steps behind the chateau and into the vineyards to taste and compare ripe Merlot grapes (larger, juicier, thinner of skin) with Cabernet Sauvignon (smaller, with thicker skin). Solange explained the concept of *terroir* – the combination of soil, subsoil, climate and microclimate that determines the type of grape that is ideally suited to a particular area, which can be as small as a vineyard or as large as an entire country. Even one plot can be different from the one next to it.

Above:
Gorgeous Chateau Magnol,
home of Barton &
Guestier wines
Below:
Wine course leader
Solange Galan





No irrigation is allowed for AOC (Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée) wines, according to Solange. "We're not very nice people here in France – the vines have to suffer in order to produce the best wine! Their roots have to go down 10-to-15 metres to get the nutrition they need." The vines are strictly pruned, too; five buds are left on each of the two branches so that each vine ideally produces ten bunches of grapes.

Having resigned ourselves that we'd come a bit too soon to see the harvest, imagine our joy to see the mechanical harvester – a peculiar H-shaped machine that straddles the row, shakes each vine and literally sucks the grapes off the bunches – begin its journey down the first row of ripe Merlot! And at the end, we saw the juicy load tipped onto a conveyor belt at the nearby technical facility for the start of the vinification process.

A healthy crop can be harvested by machine, but where there is disease, sound bunches must be picked by hand. If necessary, wine-school students from the nearby village of Blanquefort are brought in to help.



Teaching and Tasting

The tasting-room had a U-shaped counter-top with plumbed-in spitting-basins and a row of glasses for each student.

With the aid of a PowerPoint presentation and large maps on the wall behind her, the extremely knowledgeable Solange Galan gradually introduced us to the world of French wine.

As a warm-up, she got us to sniff two sets of four vials of randomly selected smells associated with white and red wine and then asked us to identify each scent. Of the whites, I managed to identify only honey – the others were grapefruit, pineapple and pear. Of the reds, I correctly called only the pepper – the others were strawberry, blackcurrant and vanilla. Roy got all the reds right, and was rather annoyingly pleased with himself.

According to Solange, becoming a good wine-taster requires three things: practice, memory and concentration. She tells us there are sommeliers who can, in a blind tasting, identify a Chateaux Margaux 1960; it is their memory that enables them to do this – they tasted that particular vintage once before and can remember it. Unfortunately, she says, most of us don't exercise our memories. To develop a good memory for wines is a difficult and complex process, a personal journey that is worth undertaking.

The purpose of tasting a wine is to define it. "As a taster," says Solange, "whether or not you like the wine is not at all interesting. There are 13 of us in this room, each with our own taste. To taste professionally, you need to put aside your personal likes and dislikes."

Did You Know?

The best times of the day to taste wine are 11am and 6pm. That's when your taste-buds are most receptive. Ideally, the room you taste in should be quiet, white and lit by daylight; there should be no extraneous smells. Tulip-shaped glasses are recommended as they hold in the aromas.



How to Taste

So, it's 11am, and the taste buds are quivering with expectation and primed to go! I wonder about the protocol: do I spit or swallow? It turns out that – as in the only other activity where this question applies – this is a matter of personal choice.

Stage One involves the sense of sight: the colour of the wine tells you a lot about it, for instance its age and origin. A deep, intense purple could indicate a Bordeaux containing Cabernet Sauvignon; a lighter red might be Pinot Noir, or the Gamay grapes in a Beaujolais. The colour of a newer red is generally intense garnet; it gradually loses colour and becomes browner, or more brick-coloured, as it ages. It's the opposite for whites, which gain colour over the years.

Stage Two involves the sense of smell: you give the wine a good swirl to release its aromas, bury your nose in the glass and give it a sniff. According to Solange, a tasting-portion is one-third of the glass; at a meal, glasses should be filled to halfway.

There are three categories of aroma: primary, secondary and tertiary. Primary aromas are typical of the vine variety: Merlot is associated with redcurrants, Cabernet Sauvignon with blackcurrant and black pepper, Chardonnay with rose and golden delicious apples, Sauvignon Blanc with grapefruit and other citrus fruit, Syrah (or Shiraz) with black cherry, violet and peppery notes.

Secondary aromas are fleeting, usually unpleasant smells that disappear after a few months. They include yeast, beer, nail polish, soap and other odours associated with fermentation. Tertiary aromas come from the ageing process, and are found especially in wines that have been aged in oak barrels. Solange describes these as *le bouquet du vin*, saying they include the spicy notes of black pepper and cinnamon, wood, coffee, tobacco, toasted bread and vanilla; and in older wines, horsiness, leather, and even cat pee – but it's more polite to refer to this last-mentioned aroma as 'boxwood'.

Stage Three is the actual tasting, when the wine hits your tongue. Useful terms include:

The 'attack' – how the alcohol feels on the tip of your tongue;

The 'evolution' – how it develops on your middle palate;

The 'aftertaste' – the last-perceived aroma;

The 'length' – how long the taste remains in your mouth after the wine has left it: up to three seconds is short, five-to-six seconds is medium, and eight or more is long. The longer, the better.

French Wine System

In the French system, wines are categorized as follows:

- AOC (there are 57 appellations in Bordeaux alone)
Subject to strict criteria including: restricted area, specific *terroir*, specified grapes, limited yields, vineyard monitoring, particular winemaking methods and final approval by the controlling body.
- Vin de Pays
Come from a specific region, are made from selected grapes and are subject to specified limited yields, minimum and maximum alcohol content, and final approval by the controlling body.
- Vins de Table
No specific area, any variety of grape, limited yields and subject to a minimum and maximum alcohol content.



Traditionally, French wines are named after their place of origin. Custom and legislation have determined what varietals or blends of varietals can claim the name of each area. After long familiarity, careful study or a lot of drinking of the stuff, you get to know how it works: champagne, for example, is sparkling wine made from Pinot Noir grapes in the Champagne region; Bordeaux is a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Cabernet Franc grapes made in the Bordeaux region; Beaujolais is a light red wine made from Gamay grapes in Beaujolais Sauternes is a sweet wine made from Semillon grapes (usually infected with the botrytis fungus) in the Sauternes region, and so on.

So if you don't know the wine geography of France, and you're used to thinking of wine in terms of the grapes from which they are made, you could be forgiven for thinking that Sauternes and Sancerre are varietals rather than place names. Solange tells the story of a new student who vehemently declared to the class that she loved Chablis but couldn't abide Chardonnay; she didn't know that Chablis is made solely from the Chardonnay grape!

While France, Italy and Spain still produce 50 percent of the world's wine, they are having to compete with growing production in the new world. One result of this competition is a French move towards varietals, which are easier for non-French consumers to understand.

The Last Night

The suspense had been building since Day One, with rumours of an exam and a graduation to round off the three days of the course. Being the brown-noser that I am, I read through my notes and memorized as many statistics as I could – only Semillon for Sauternes, more Merlot on the right bank of the Dordogne, the five first-class Grand Cru Chateaux in Médoc, how you make a rosé, and so on.

In the event, there was no test. Before dinner on the last evening, we were taken to a special room, helped into royal blue velvet graduation gowns and silly hats, and led down a stone stairway into an atmospheric cellar to the strains of 'O Fortuna' from *Carmina Burana*. Instead of the Bacchanalian orgy I half-hoped might await us, Solange – also hatted and begowned – presided over a stirring ceremony in which each of us declared lifelong allegiance to the house of Barton & Guestier, was admitted to the fellowship and presented with a diploma and a bottle of Chateau Magnol 2004. We toasted our success with a bottle of something from 1967 – I don't think I've ever drunk anything that old – then went on to share another few venerable vintages. The best was a 40-year-old Sauternes which, though faintly bitter, still had plenty of life in it.

At the end of it all, Roy and I had to wonder what we had done to deserve such an unforgettable experience. And to bring the Chateau vividly to mind, all we have to do is open another bottle of Barton & Guestier ...



Who are Barton & Guestier?

"We're very proud of our roots as the oldest wine merchants in Bordeaux," declares wine course leader Solange Galan.

In 1725, Irishman Thomas Barton arrived in Bordeaux and soon became the richest wine merchant in the city. The company entered a partnership with Daniel Guestier in 1802, sold out in the 1970s to Seagram's – who made the decision to focus on overseas markets – and was bought by giant Diageo in 2001.

Relatively unknown in France, Barton & Guestier produces and exports 14 million bottles to 130 countries in five continents: 41 percent to the US, 20 percent to Canada, 20 percent to Europe, 8 percent to Asia Pacific (that's us), and 6 percent to Central and Latin America.

Though B&G is based at Chateau Magnol, it does not specialize only in Bordeaux wines but in AOC wines from all over France, including the Loire Valley, Burgundy, Beaujolais and the Rhone Valley (where Côte du Rhône and Châteauneuf du Pape come from).

The 17-hectare vineyard at Chateau Magnol is the only one that B&G actually owns; the rest belong to its 150 partners all over France. B&G doesn't buy grapes; it buys wine. But the company's three oenologists do a great deal of travelling, working closely with the growers to decide when to pick the grapes and to determine other details of the vinification process; no other French wine merchants are involved to this degree. And then, each year, the tasting team samples up to 25,000 wines, of which only 800 or so crack the nod. "It's a very strict selection process," says Solange, "and we're drunk almost every day ... but someone's got to do the job."

In response to global demand, B&G is expanding its production of varietals (40 percent); AOCs represent 43 percent, house wines 15 percent and sparkling the final 2 percent.

At our first tasting session, we focused on varietals. We started off with a selection from the regular B&G range: the Chardonnay from Pays D'Oc, the Sauvignon Blanc, the Merlot and the Cabernet Sauvignon – all well-balanced, good value, "*joie de vivre* wines", to quote Solange.

After that, we sampled Chardonnay, Merlot and Cabernet from the more upmarket French Tom range – all from vines that are at least 25 years old, growing in vineyards where the yield is strictly limited to ensure richer, higher-quality wine; and all aged in new American oak barrels for at least six months. Why American and not French? Because it gives a new-world appeal to unmistakably old-world wines, says Solange.

Understandably, the French Tom range costs about double what the regular range goes for.

Top of the school is the classic Thomas Barton range, recently released in Singapore. We tried the white Reserve Graves, the Bordeaux, the St Emilion, the Médoc, the Margaux, the Réserve Privée Médoc and the Sauternes – all wonderful, all before lunch, and again I couldn't bring myself to spit.



Out and About

The medieval city of Bordeaux recently underwent a major restoration and has been declared a Unesco World Heritage site. The porous white stone of its buildings soon blackens, and needs to be scraped clean every ten years or so.

They've done an excellent job of pedestrianizing the streets and installing a splendid tram system without overhead wiring. We spent a pleasant couple of hours window-shopping, sipping coffee at a pavement café and watching the passing parade. In the heart of the city is the Rue Sainte Catherine, Europe's longest shopping street. You could do far worse than basing yourself in Bordeaux; see the hotel recommendations at the end of this article.



The Bordeaux region has a number of chateaux that welcome visitors and give cellar tours. Our hosts took us to three of these: Chateau Giscours in Haut Médoc, Chateau Haut Brion in Margaux and Chateau Figeac in St Emilion. If you have the chance, don't miss seeing the ridiculously picturesque cobble-stoned town of St Emilion; it's like something out of a fairytale.

And don't leave Bordeaux without trying canelés, the spongy, elastic cakes that are synonymous with this region of France. They were originally made to use up the egg yolks left over after 'fining' the wine, a process of stirring beaten egg whites into each barrel to remove bacteria. The egg white acts as a magnet, attracting and combining with the bacteria present before settling to the bottom as sediment. After that, the wine is 'racked', meaning it's removed from the barrel, the sediment is chucked out and the 'fined' wine is poured back in. (Racking is done every three months during the ageing process, in any event.)



Where to Stay

As the headquarters and showcase for Barton & Guestier wines, Chateau Magnol mainly runs wine courses for and hosts its customers. Depending on availability, though, they do sometimes take groups of paying guests; if you're interested, contact Solange Galan on solange.galan@diageo.com.

Here are some other recommendations for hotels in Bordeaux and the area, courtesy of Solange:

- * Relais de Margaux in Margaux – Nice, with a spa and a golf course.
- * Les Sources de Coudalie – A hotel with a spa at Chateau Smith Laut Lafite.
- * Hotel Burdigele – Four stars.
- * Chateau Grand Barrail (www.grand-barrail.com)

– An opulent Relais and 1850s chateau in Saint Emilion, 40km from Bordeaux.

* Two inexpensive options (about 100 Euro per night), in the heart of the lovely medieval city of Bordeaux:

- Hotel le Normandie, close to the Opera
- Hotel Sainte Catherine, close to shopping heaven Rue Sainte Catherine

Getting There

We took the super-fast and comfortable TGV train from Paris's Gare Montparnasse, for the three-hour trip to Bordeaux. You can also fly to Bordeaux: the airport (www.bordeaux.aeroport.com) is located 11km west of the city. We flew out on the budget airline bmibaby.com to Birmingham. ✈