



A selection of Cru Bourgeois releases.

# Bourgeois Revolution



**THE ALLIANCE DES CRUS BOURGEOIS DU MÉDOC ASSURES AFFORDABLE LEFT BANK BORDEAUX FOR THE WINE LIST**

by Andrew Chalk

## THE HIGH PRICE OF CLASSIFIED

growths from Bordeaux's Left Bank make them a tough sell on all but the most expensive wine lists. Sommeliers and beverage managers are casting about for an alternative with the same organoleptic qualities to fill the gap. The problem is that once out of the regimented confines of the 1855 classification of Left Bank Bordeaux you are in free fall, surrounded by hundreds of choices of wines from France's largest wine region that vary in quality from formidable to forgettable. What somms need is some kind of Occam's Razor to expedite the choice of classified growth alternatives.

Enter the Alliance des Crus Bourgeois du Médoc (usually abbreviated to Cru Bourgeois) a private membership association that exists to promote recognition and quality among Médoc wines. The Alliance has its roots in 1962 and has morphed several times. Its current structure represents eight AOPs. The most general is the portmanteau designation Médoc. Within that, is the sub-region of Haut-Médoc. Within that are six communes (towns), each of which has its own AOP status. Four of these are the familiar Haut-Médoc communes of (going south to north) Margaux,

Saint-Julien, Pauillac and Saint- Estéphe. The other two are the lesser-known Lustrac and Moulis. Only red wine is covered by the Cru Bourgeois at the present time.

For a wine to be a Cru Bourgeois wine it is not sufficient to just "send in the check." Any Médoc winery may apply, but all are then subject, each year, to a two-stage acceptance process. First, the Alliance will send out a team of inspectors to examine the physical facilities in terms of them being a complete wine making facility. They will also confirm that the size of the vineyards is large enough to supply the number of bottles that the producer makes. If the applicant passes this test, then the second stage is a taste test of their wine by an expert but independent board to assess its quality. In an interview that I conducted with the Alliance's Director, Frédérique Dutheliet de Lamothe, she stressed that the experts are tasked with assessing quality, not some notion of typicity. That is important as it allows the expression of Cru Bourgeois to evolve over time.

The 243 producers who were successful in gaining the Cru Bourgeois designation in its first year with their 2008 wines (out of 290 applicants) got the right to use the distinctive neckband on each bottle of that vintage and the back label art on their bottles of that vintage. Note the innovative use of a QR code as a required feature of the seal. This allows the consumer to use the ubiquitous smartphone to check the

producer's web site for more information about the wine.

Both seals make a Cru Bourgeois wine unambiguously recognizable to the customer if the bottle is in their possession. However, they do not help when it is not. For the designation to be a selling point here, the distributor's product sheet (or sommelier's wine list) would have to specify the Cru Bourgeois wine in the description. Given limited description space and since we live in an "acronymistic" world, I would suggest the Alliance promote the use of "CB" as an official shorthand for Cru Bourgeois.

The designation is currently binary. The winery either passes or fails. It is also reset each year, preventing the ossification that besets the 1855 Médoc classification. These are both useful for the consumer. However, the now obsolete 2003 rules had a finer calibration; three levels went from Cru Bourgeois to Cru Bourgeois Supérieur and Cru Bourgeois Exceptionnel. I spoke to a winemaker who is a leading light in the Cru Bourgeois classification process and he said that there are plans to restore the three tiers and also allow each designation to apply for five years rather than one, allowing producers to market around it (without fear of it being pulled within months). Watch for release of the 2015 vintage (in 2017) and the 2018 vintage (in 2020) for the addition of a second and a third tier respectively if these changes are approved this year.



## FROM THE DIRECTOR

*In order to get an informed view of how Cru Bourgeois actually operates, I interviewed Alliance Director Frédérique Dutheillet de Lamothe. Here is what she said.*

**Q: Andrew Chalk: Who are the experts on the tasting panel?**

Frédérique Dutheillet de Lamothe: They are professional tasters from the wine business, mainly oenologists.

**Q: During the independent judging, on average how many wines are tasted each year and about what proportion fails to qualify?**

A jury composed of six professionals tastes 36 samples per tasting session. These sessions are staggered over a dozen dates between early March and July. Nearly 350 eligible châteaux, on average, are likely to present their wine to be tasted at the Official Selection of the Crus Bourgeois du Médoc. To do this, these châteaux file a sampling request through the independent organization which also manages the registration for the different tasting sessions.

**Q: Suppose I am a grower/winemaker in the Médoc and have never applied to be a member of CB. If I start the application process today, how long will it take before I hear the result of my application (membership or rejection)?**

Currently, the Cru Bourgeois classification is a yearly selection process for every château. Every year, every château wishing to be part of the upcoming Official Selection must reapply. Once the estate has sent an application form (before September 30, 2014 for the 2013 vintage, for instance), an independent body will come to inspect the premises of the château to ensure it has the capacity to produce a Cru Bourgeois-

quality wine. This is called an eligibility visit.

Between March and July (March to July 2015 for the 2013 vintage), when its final blend is ready to be tasted, the château submits the candidate vintage for a blind tasting. Six professional experts score the wine; an independent body is present to guarantee the conditions of the blind tasting. The average of the six scores is then compared to the vintage's benchmark, which is established in January by a technical commission on a blind basis as well.

If the score of the applicant's wine is above the benchmark, the candidate is granted the Cru Bourgeois mention for that vintage and receives authentication stickers to be affixed on each bottle of this wine.

**Q: What do the inspectors look for at a vineyard/winery on the initial premises visit?**

The inspectors verify a number of technical elements during their visits, notably the château's ability to guarantee traceability from the vineyard to the bottle. The candidate château must also be accessible for visits, provide a tasting space and have capacity to produce a quality wine by itself.

**Q: Once membership is approved, is it subject to annual renewal?**

Yes; the quality of each vintage is controlled during a blind tasting.

**Q: Do you think CB wines should be designated as such on wine lists by somms?**

Yes, of course, firstly because the Crus Bourgeois du Médoc are part of an official classification of Bordeaux wines, but also because it is a badge of quality that can be useful to consumers in making their wine purchasing decision. It is also interesting for clients of restaurants to make the link with the CB logo they might recognize on bottles in their local wine stores. The QR code on the authentication sticker may also be of use to the sommeliers, because it allows them easy and immediate access to the château's technical information on the Crus Bourgeois du Médoc website.

**Q: Should your logo not incorporate a means of contacting the organi-**

**zation (e.g. a URL) to facilitate consumers finding out about the organization?**

Every bottle features a Cru Bourgeois sticker with a QR code that can be read by any smartphone application, which links directly to the château's web page on the Cru Bourgeois website. The URL for the main Cru Bourgeois website is also included on every sticker.

**Q: What criteria do the expert tasting panel use to choose the "representative" wine?**

The expert tasting panel designates 16 wines which are considered the representative benchmark of Cru Bourgeois for that vintage. The wines constituting the benchmark must therefore be representative of their specific terroirs and appellations, as well as the quality level of the vintage which is being considered. Cru Bourgeois candidate wines for a given vintage are then tasted and evaluated based on the panel of benchmark wines.

**Q: What criteria do the expert tasting panel use to rate submitted wines?**

The expert tasting panel use the universal tasting method to judge a wine—analysis of the wine's color, aroma and taste—but they also look for balance, structure and major flaws. It is clearly the *quality* level that is judged during the blind tasting and not typicity, since our members wines are produced in eight different AOPs with different characteristic.

**Q: Why not introduce CB Supérieur and CB Exceptionnel again?**

It is true that in past decades, and even in the last two centuries, there was a hierarchy among the Cru Bourgeois du Médoc family. We might reintroduce a hierarchy when our members are ready to start on this new path, and also when we find a satisfactory way to adapt the current system, which has proven to be successful.

**Q: White wine?**

Crus Bourgeois du Médoc are only red wines produced from one of the eight appellations of the Médoc area. This has historically always been the case. ❧