

Wines

Saint-Émilion wine classification



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The much awaited classification of the wines of Saint-Émilion was announced a few days ago.

After a year of deliberation by the classification commission under the guidance of the *Institut Nationale de l'Origine et de la Qualité* (INAO) and the French ministries of agriculture and consumption, the 2012 classification honours 82 properties: 64 Grand Cru Classé, 14 Premier Grand Cru Classé B and four Premier Grand Cru Classé A.

The first classification of Saint-Émilion was created in 1955 and, unlike other classifications, it was set up to encourage wine growers to seek to improve their quality and enhance the reputation of their wines. To achieve this, each classified property accepted the challenge to submit to a regular review.

The original criteria were varied but the main ones were that the estate must have special *terroir*, that the vineyards are in one parcel and no increase or change in vineyard size was to take place without permission, that the wines are submitted to regular blind tastings and that, in principle, the classification was to be reviewed every 10 years. In fact, it is only in recent times that this last rule was adhered to.

The 1955 classification honoured 12 wines with the title of Premier Grand Cru Classé (two of which were A) and 63 Grand Cru Classé.

The second classification took place in 1969 with no changes in the Premiers, but the Grand Cru Classé increased to 72. The third appeared in 1986 and here there were some important changes which affected all future classifications.

The big controversy was that Château Beau-Séjour Bécot was demoted from Premier, officially because grapes from a newly

purchased adjacent vineyard were added to the original wine. Although a fundamental rule was broken, many argued that the wine, in fact, tasted better.

This was a time when the influence of wine journalists, especially Americans, was becoming more important and when speculators started investing in wine resulting, in ever higher prices. This was also a time of great technological advances in wine-making equipment and ideas.

The 1996 classification saw fundamental changes in the criteria and regulations, namely to take into consideration the latest developments in the wine world. Beau-Séjour Bécot was reinstated as Premier and Château L'Angélus was elevated to join the Premiers.

"The 2006 classification led to legal battles by properties that were not classified"

The next classification took place in 2006 and led to a number of legal battles by properties that were not reclassified. Some months later the courts suspended the list but authorised all declassified and newly classified growths to keep their titles until a new classification under new rules took place in 2012. This meant that Château Troplong Mondot and Château Pavie Macquin joined the Premiers, bringing the total up to 15 Premiers and 58 Grand Cru Classé.

A big change here was the elevation of Château Monbusquet and Château Fleur Cardinal to Grand Cru Classé, whose vineyards are in areas of Saint-Émilion previously considered of lesser *terroir*.

Another decision that had many repercussions was Château Figeac's refusal to move to Premier A due to price. It was argued that Figeac should not be in the same category as Château Cheval Blanc and Château Ausone as Figeac's price was much lower than that of these two.

The 2012 list saw fundamental changes in the rules and regulations. A commission, made up of seven important players in the wine world without connections to Saint-Émilion, was set up to oversee the process. Each property had to submit comprehensive documentation with a precise indication of the land



Château Pavie, a vineyard in Saint-Émilion, France, which is classified as Premier Grand Cru Classé B, and listed as a World Heritage site by Unesco. Photo: AFP

used by the estate, and proof of the estate's reputation and means used to develop it with reference to promotion in France and abroad. Other criteria include facilities for wine tourism, distribution practices and a description of all technical factors.

The commission engaged two entities to help assess each application, one made up of tasting experts and the other of technical experts.

For Grand Cru Classé, each applicant had to submit 10 vintages and 15 for Premier Grand Cru Classé. All points assessed by the certifying bodies and submitted to the classification commission generated scores, which when counted led to the following grades: 50 per cent was based on tasting, 20 per cent on promotion, distribution and value, 20 per cent on *terroir*, and 10 per cent on practices.

For the Premiers the grades were: 30 per cent for tasting, 35 per cent for reputation, 30 per cent for *terroir* and five per cent for practices – clearly a move towards a more market-oriented classification, rewarding mostly the so-called modern-style wines.

The resulting list of classified growths has a number of changes.

The most important, in the Premier category: Château Pavie and Château Angelus joined Ausone and Cheval Blanc as Premier A. Château Canon la Gaffelière and Château Larcis Ducasse moved from Grand Cru Classé to Premier B. And Château Valandraud and La Mondotte moved from nowhere to Premier B.

Once again, Figeac was refused 'A' mainly because of price, disappointing wine lovers with a preference for classical, more

traditional wine. Another big change in this category is the disappearance of Château Magdelaine, which is now incorporated into Château Belair Monange.

At Grand Cru Classé level there were many promotions, as expected. Château Pressac, Château Fombrauge, Château Jean Faure, Château Ferrand and Château La Fleur Morange were awarded for their hard work and investments.

Others like Le Châtelet and Côte Baleau surprised some. Not many demotions in this category. Château Cadet Piola disappeared as it was merged with Château Soutard and, somewhat controversially, Château Corbin Michotte was demoted as it was found lacking in quality and investments.

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