

UNSUNG HEROES

He loves his claret, but when it comes to refreshing, good-value whites, **STEVEN SPURRIER** can't get past Bordeaux's other great style. Here, he recommends his top 20 from £5–£15, and considers the best-value region

Medium-priced dry white Bordeaux – either side of the £10 mark – is unjustly ignored in favour of the red versions, and even more so if compared to Sauvignon and Semillon wines made elsewhere in France. I have always been a fan, for there is nothing better after a day tasting young tannic reds in the Médoc than to relax in a brasserie over a dozen Arcachon oysters and a glass or two of white Graves.

While the classed growths of Pessac-Léognan enjoy reputations and prices to match premier cru Meursaults, the lesser appellations struggle for recognition. Perhaps it's just as well for consumers, as prices stay reasonable, but not so good for producers. As a category, these wines represent some of the best value among the world's modern dry whites.

Yet production in the Bordeaux region is steadily declining. Fifty years ago, the planting of white grapes in the Gironde exceeded those of red; the Entre-deux-Mers AC – the extensive vineyards between the Garonne and the Dordogne rivers – is exclusively for dry white wine. Quality, however, was deplorable and much of it was shipped in bulk to Germany to be turned into the sparkling Sekt. Prices of AC Bordeaux Blanc were a quarter that of AC Bordeaux Rouge and inevitably (and for the



better) Semillon and the lesser Colombard and Ugni Blanc vines were replaced by Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. By 2006, from a total of 126,534ha (hectares), white grapes represented just 14,226ha, or 11.2%, down from 15,483ha only six years previously. During this period, plantings of Merlot increased by 3,963ha, while Cabernets Franc and Sauvignon declined by 2,441ha and Semillon by 731ha. Only Sauvignon Blanc showed an increase, of a paltry 42ha.

While Bordeaux still represents almost 15% of the world-wide plantings of this very popular grape, it seems strange to me that production is still declining at this rate, particularly, as Sylvie Courselle of Château Thieuley notes, given the marketplace for dry whites is much less crowded than that for similarly priced reds.

Such thoughts were confirmed by a blind tasting of 77 dry white Bordeaux from 2007 back to the 2003 at £5–£15, for which I was joined by Margaret Rand and Richard Bampfield MW. Our opinions were very positive. For

Rand 'It was a great tasting. There was enormous consistency, with hugely appetising wines at the bottom and predictably riper fruit if you want to spend more. Bordeaux's reputation for making dull Sauvignon Blanc is completely wrong'.

For Bampfield 'these were easy to taste, partly because of the crisp, fresh style and partly because the quality was uniformly high. The AC Bordeaux were good, but the Graves were a revelation, where the unoaked wines had depth to

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match the freshness and the oaked wines had sufficient natural flavour to carry the oak effortlessly.' He concluded: 'This tasting demonstrated very clearly that Bordeaux is extremely well placed to compete with dry whites around the world in the £5–£15 price category.'

Another great advantage to these wines is that they are all, however fruity they may be, completely dry. The appellation rules allow a

