



Médoc

The jewel in the Bordeaux crown

WITHOUT DOUBT, this is the most famous and prestigious of all Bordeaux appellations. Its Cabernet Sauvignon-based red wines have been the international benchmark for many decades—and this well-earned reputation shows no signs of tarnish. However, the first-time visitor may be disappointed by the flat and uninspiring viticultural landscape. There is a notable absence of the rolling hills or steep slopes that characterise other famous regions of France—indeed, the highest point in the Médoc is a mere 43 metres above sea level—and the best vineyards are found between 4 and 29 metres.

The region extends north west from the city of Bordeaux (latitude 44.50°N) along the left bank of the Gironde river. This strip of land, almost exclusively devoted to viticulture, is just 5 to 12 km wide. The northern part of the region was



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formerly known as the Bas-Médoc (wines from these 4,800 ha are now entitled to the 'Médoc' appellation). The southern and more renowned part, the Haut-Médoc, includes the five famous communal appellations, i.e. Margaux (1,400 ha), Moulis (600 ha), Listrac (650 ha), St-Julien (900 ha), Pauillac (1,100 ha) and St-Estèphe (1,200 ha) from south to north. And there are an additional 3,200 ha entitled to the 'Haut-Médoc' appellation.



A vineyard in the Margaux commune. Top: Typical scene with the river in the background

This is a relatively new region by French standards. It is said that the wine merchants of Bordeaux were seeking new vineyard land so that they could market an alternative to the wines of the already established Graves region (immediately to the south of Bordeaux). How they came to select the uninspiring flood-prone marshland of the Médoc is a mystery. Perhaps it was simply that the land was cheap because it was considered only suitable for grazing. Whatever the reason, the land was drained by Dutch engineers in the 17th century and the characteristically large estates with their distinctive chateaux were born.

The peninsular location, formed by the river

to the east and the Atlantic Ocean to the west, is one of the critical factors of the regional macroclimate. This moderates diurnal temperature during the growing season and reduces the risk of spring frost. The Landes pine forests to the west are also said to provide some protection from cold westerly winds. The climate of the Médoc has many similarities with that of Coonawarra, e.g. MJT is 19.5°C and 19.6°C respectively. However, the Médoc is less sunny (SSH is 7.3 compared with 7.8 for Coonawarra) and has almost double the growing season rainfall of Coonawarra. Hence, disease pressure is much higher. Furthermore, although the Médoc may be maritime by European standards, it is certainly not by Australian: with a CTL of 14.1, the Médoc is more comparable with Orange (NSW).

The soil characteristics are also important in the success or failure of Cabernet Sauvignon here—and it is the physical attributes of the soil rather than the chemical that appear to be most critical. The best soils of the region are deep and well-drained with a high proportion of gravel and low to moderate natural fertility. Also, the beneficial effects of surface gravel on canopy microclimate should not be discounted. Some references contain misleading information to the effect that Cabernet Sauvignon does not like damp clay soils whereas Merlot does. It is not a question of preference at all—rather, because Merlot ripens earlier than Cabernet Sauvignon, it has more chance of reaching adequate maturity on the less-favourable clay soils than Cabernet. Give Merlot the chance of growing on the best soils of the Médoc and it performs wonderfully. Also, you will read that the finest vineyards ‘can see the river’. Logic dictates that it is not the view that is important here—rather it may have more to do with the fact that the deepest gravels are found close to the river.

The only varieties permitted for wines of the communes of the Haut-Médoc are Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Malbec (known as Cot) Petit Verdot and Carmenère. Typically, vineyards have a mix (and therefore so do the wines) of these varieties. For example, the encé-

page of Ch. Margaux is 75% Cabernet Sauvignon, 20% Merlot, 5% Cabernet Franc and 5% Petit Verdot whereas it is 70% Cabernet Sauvignon, 13% Cabernet Franc, 15% Merlot and 2% Petit Verdot for Ch. Lafite Rothschild. The Médoc and Graves are the only places within the greater Bordeaux region where Cabernet Sauvignon can ripen with any degree of consistency—and even then it must be planted on the warmest sites with the best soils. It is no coincidence that Cabernet Sauvignon dominates in Pauillac, the commune with the deepest gravel soils. It is said that one out of every two vines in the Médoc is Cabernet Sauvignon.

Row × vine spacing is typically 1.0 to 1.2m × 0.75 to 1.0 m—since 1994, the planting density for Haut-Médoc must be 6,500 to 10,000 vines per ha. The trellis is a VSP with fruiting wire at 0.4 to 0.5 m and single pair of moveable foliage wires at 0.7 to 1.0m. With hand pruning, 8 to 12 nodes are retained per vine on one or two canes. The canopy is summer-trimmed along the top and sides (rognage). Also leaves and lateral shoots are removed by hand in the bunch zone. Mechanical harvesting is widely used in the region. The presence of phylloxera necessitates the use of rootstocks, principally SO4, 5BB and Riparia Gloire. Average vineyard size is large by French standards, e.g. Ch. Lafite Rothschild (Pauillac) has 90 ha of vineyards and Ch. Margaux (in the commune of the same name) has 78 ha. Maximum permitted yield is 40 hL/ha (approximately 6.5 t/ha) for communal appellations and 43 hL/ha (approximately 7.0 t/ha) for Haut-Médoc. Typical phenological dates are 23 March for budburst, 17 August for veraison and 2 October (range = 3 September to 17 October) for harvest.

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The photograph of the vineyard in Margaux has been used with the kind permission of Rebecca Hardy.

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