St-Émilion

PETER DRY

Vineyards of the World

St-Émilion is a picturesque small town on the right bank of the Dordogne River, 30 km east of the city of Bordeaux. In order to trace its origins we must go back to the 8th century when a hermit named Emilion is said to have lived in a cave on the limestone outcrop on which the town was subsequently founded in the Middle Ages. St-Émilion is one of the three wine-producing districts north of the Dordogne collectively known as the Libournais (the other two districts are Pomerol and Fronsac). Libourne (approximately 5 km west of St-Émilion) is a port on the Dordogne and is the base for the companies shipping wines of St-Émilion, Pomerol and Fronsac. The Dordogne merges with the Garonne River downstream of the city of Bordeaux to form the Gironde River.

Today, the Medoc is perhaps the best-known of the Bordeaux appellations; however, St-Émilion was a wine region long before the Medoc[1]. In 1289 Edward, King of England and Duke of Gascony, specified the boundaries for St-Émilion and they are virtually unchanged today[2]. However, it was only after the Second World War that the producers of St-Émilion, with a few exceptions, became known outside France.

In total, St-Émilion comprises just 5,200 ha (only 5% of the total vineyard area of Bordeaux): it is just 10 km from east to west and 3.5 km at its widest from north to south. Unlike the Médoc, there are few large estates; instead there are many small growers with an average vineyard being less than 5 ha. Nevertheless, there is a relatively high proportion of outstanding vineyards. In addition to St-Émilion proper, there are the so-called St-Émilion satellites, namely the appellations of Montagne, St-Georges, Lussac and Puisseguin with 3,000 ha. Here the land is less intensively used for vines.

Compared to the relatively flat and open countryside of the Médoc, St-Émilion has a more variable topography with a mix of flat land and low hills. An important topographical feature is the cleft in the limestone plateau, immediately south of the town: this has created slopes with southerly and easterly aspects (known as the côtes). The most highly-rated vineyards in St-Émilion tend to be found on either the côtes (altitude 60 to 80 metres) or on the small area (60 ha) of deep gravelly soils near the boundary with Pomerol, 5 km west of the town at an altitude of 35 metres. There are many different soil types. More than half of the total area, on the flat land between the plateau and river, comprises a mix of gravels and sands of alluvial origin: these vineyards have the lowest quality rating. By comparison, the soils of the côtes are loams and clays derived from limestone.

Vineyard of the Côtes

As a result of its inland location, ripening in St-Émilion is earlier than in the Médoc, and at slightly higher temperatures. Nevertheless, the influence of the Atlantic Ocean extends well inland as a result of the wide Gironde estuary and the absence of hills: this gives some protection against winter freeze and spring frost, although in some years the latter may cause severe crop loss, e.g. April 1991. The MJT[3] is 21.0°C, and growing season day degrees and sunshine hours are 1,506 and 1,427 respectively[4]; the most comparable Australian locations with respect to the latter indices are Melbourne (Victoria) and Denmark (Western Australia). Growing season rainfall is 405 mm (54% of total annual): this is slightly higher than that of the aforementioned Australian locations. The flowering period in June is said to be critical for potential yield: it is often wet and cold, resulting in poor set, particularly for Merlot. Also, excessive rain at harvest can

Above: A Montagne vineyard
Left: A vineyard on graves soil near the boundary with Pomerol

lead to crop loss due to bunch rot. The côtes have the thermal advantage of their south-facing slopes that not only promote ripening but also confer some protection against frost.

With more than 60% of the planted area, Merlot is the major variety. Next in importance is Cabernet Franc (known locally as Bouchet), followed by Cabernet Sauvignon. The latter is grown on less than 15% of the area: it requires the very best sites in order to ripen because it bursts and ripens later than either Merlot or Cabernet Franc. There is also a small area of Malbec (known locally as Cot). A typical blend (= encépagement) of St-Émilion is 60% Merlot, 30% Cabernet Franc and 10% Cabernet Sauvignon. However, some of the most favourable sites have a high proportion of Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc, e.g. Chateau Figeac and Chateau Cheval Blanc.

In a typical côtes vineyard, row × vine spacing is 1.4 metres × 1.1 metre. On each vine, there is a single 4- to 5-node cane plus a 1-node spur. The trellis is a VSP with a single fruiting wire at 55 cm, a pair of moveable foliage wires at 75 cm and a single foliage wire at 115 cm. By comparison, in a typical Montagne vineyard where vigour is more pronounced, row × vine spacing is 1.8 metres × 1.0 metre and the trellis is higher with foliage wires up to 150 cm. Shoot thinning in June is commonly practised with final shoot density around 7 per row metre. Summer pruning is a standard practice. Merlot is typically harvested in mid to late September. Vintages with the highest ratings tend to be those with the earliest harvests[5]. The maximum permitted yield for all appellations in St-Émilion is 42 hl/ha (approximately 6 t/ha). Use of phylloxera-resistant rootstocks is essential: the main ones are SO4, 420A, Gloire, 5BB and 161-49.

DR PETER DRY *is associate professor in the Department of Horticulture, Viticulture and Oenology, Adelaide University. He can be contacted by e-mail at: peter.dry@adelaide.edu.au.*

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