It’s been a few weeks but here we are, back in Bordeaux. Specifically, we are looking at St. Emilion. St. Emilion is an ancient walled city, a UNESCO World Heritage Site (one of 37 in France), a region and a Bordeaux wine appellation, or rather, two appellations: St. Emilion and St. Emilion Grand Cru. Located near Libourne on the east bank of the Dordogne river, the site of the walled city of St. Emilion goes back into prehistory. The Romans first planted vines in the area in the 2nd century. In the 8th century, a monk called Emilion settled in a cave in the area. The area eventually took his name as St. Emilion. The monks that followed Emilion to the area were the first to establish the commercial vineyards and wineries in the area.

The St. Emilion wine region surrounds the hill top town of St. Emilion on the “right bank” of the Dordogne in the greater Bordeaux appellation. The St. Emilion appellations encompass the communes of Saint-Émilion, Saint-Christophe-des-Bardes, Saint-Hippolyte, Saint-Étienne-de-Lisse, Saint-Laurent-des-Combes, Saint-Pey-d’Aremens, Saint-Sulpice-de-Faleyrens, Vignonet, and even a part of the Libourne. As previously noted, the “right bank” in Bordeaux encompasses everything east of the Garonne River. St. Emilion (and all of its Libournaise neighbors such as Pomerol and Castillon) is east of both the Garonne and the Dordogne. While there are some gravelly spots and some sandy areas, the dominant terroir in St. Emilion is red clay over limestone. The dominant grape variety is Merlot with a significant amount of Cabernet Franc also planted. Some properties have a small amount of Cabernet Sauvignon and even a bit of Malbec.

The two appellations are “St. Emilion” to which the entire area is entitled and “St. Emilion Grand Cru” which is an overlay appellation that recognizes the better terroir. Wines labeled St. Emilion Grand Cru are generally better but there are over-performers in the simple appellation, just as there are under-performers in the Grand Cru appellation. Together the two St. Emilion appellations make up about 6% of the total of planted land in the whole of the Bordeaux appellation. The Grand Cru appellation is much more commonly seen in the US market.

To add a layer of complexity, there is also an official three-tiered classification of St. Emilion administered by the INAO (Institut National des Appellations d’Origine but now known as Institut national de l’origine et de la qualité). In ascending order, the top wines of the appellation are classified as St. Emilion Grand Cru Classé, St. Emilion Premier Grand Cru Classé B, and St. Emilion Premier Grand Cru Classé A. In the most recent revision of the classification, there are 63 Grand Cru Classé chateaux, 14 Premier Grand Cru Classé B chateaux, and 4 Premier Grand Cru Classé A chateaux.

To further complicate matters, there are four appellations considered satellites of St. Emilion, all of which have “St. Emilion” in their names. They are Montagne-St. Emilion, Lussac-St. Emilion, Puisseguin-St. Emilion, and St. Georges-St. Emilion. Located on generally higher ground to the north and northeast of the larger St. Emilion appellation, these are a source for generally good but not top level wines from mostly Merlot grown in shallow clay over limestone rock.

So back to St. Emilion and more specifically St. Emilion Grand Cru – not the satellites and not the classified wine. As an appellation St. Emilion Grand Cru provides lots of very nice drinking wines priced right for regular consumption with meals. Just as the Haut Medoc is my go-to appellation for Cabernet Sauvignon from Bordeaux, St. Emilion Grand Cru is my go-to appellation for Merlot-based blends from Bordeaux.

While Merlot is the dominant variety in St. Emilion, the proportion of Merlot in any given vineyard can vary from under 50% to as much as 100%. Cabernet Franc makes up most of the rest of the plantation but some properties have 10% or more planted to Cabernet Sauvignon (most of its older vines) and there is even a little Malbec still in the mix. Merlot is best in the cooler, heavier clay soils where Cabernet Franc does well in the lighter, sandier gravelly areas. The final blend proportions are not an indicator of quality as there are fine wines at or close to $100 merlot and fine wines with more balanced blends.

Winemaking in most St. Emilion Grand Cru properties is fairly standard with pump-over fermentation in either concrete or stainless steel tanks and aging in a mix of new and 2nd and 3rd use barrels. Those with aspirations to higher quality may experiment with punch-downs (pigeage) instead of pump-overs. Malo-lactics are generally in barrel.

The wines tend to show lots of red and black fruit with some spice and a limestone minerality along with an earthiness sometimes described as “forest floor.” The good ones show freshness and have the structure to develop into more as they age.

Prices for Grand Cru St. Emilion are generally in the $20 to $35 range with the highest quality examples potentially jumping into the $60 to $80 range.

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The Wines

Here's a selection of wines from the St. Emilion Grand Cru appellation:

Ch. Cantenac, St. Emilion Grand Cru, 2007 ($23.99)
*Just south of Libourne and owned by the Roskam family who also own Ch. La Lauzette in the Haut Medoc.*

Ch. Cheval Brun, St. Emilion Grand Cru, 2008 ($23.74)

Ch. Cheval Brun, St. Emilion Grand Cru, 2009 ($19.94)
*A blend of 85% Merlot, 10% Cabernet Sauvignon, and 5% Cabernet Franc from owner Philippe Riviere and consultant Stephane Derencourt.*

Ch. Daugay, St. Emilion Grand Cru, 2005 ($31.99)
Ch. Daugay, St. Emilion Grand Cru, 2007 ($26.59)
Ch. Daugay, St. Emilion Grand Cru, 2008 ($28.49)
Ch. Daugay, St. Emilion Grand Cru, 2009 ($31.29)
Ch. Daugay, St. Emilion Grand Cru, 2010 ($31.99)
*Midway up the southern slope of St. Emilion, Ch. Daugay, the home of Jean Bernard Grenie and Helene Grenie de Bouard (owner and Angelius co-owner), is planted to 50% Merlot, 40% Cabernet Franc, and 10% Cabernet Sauvignon on clay over limestone and sand over limestone. Fermentation is in temperature-controlled stainless steel, aging is 50% in tank and 50% in second use oak.*

Ch. de Fonbel, St. Emilion Grand Cru, 2008 ($21.49)

Ch. Fonbrauge, St. Emilion Grand Cru, 2004 ($34.41)
Ch. Franc La Rose, St. Emilion Grand Cru, 2008 ($27.54)
Ch. Franc La Rose, St. Emilion Grand Cru, 2009 ($27.54)
*Owned by Jean Louis Trocard and made by his son Benoit Trocard from a 6 hectare vineyard planted to 75% Merlot and 25% Cabernet Franc. Fermented in concrete tanks and aged 18 months in French oak barrels (60% new).*

Ch. Haut Segottes, St. Emilion Grand Cru, 2007 ($30.89)
Ch. La Confession, St. Emilion Grand Cru, 2004 ($38.99)
Ch. La Confession, St. Emilion Grand Cru, 2005 ($59.84)
Ch. La Confession, St. Emilion Grand Cru, 2006 ($43.49)
Ch. La Confession, St. Emilion Grand Cru, 2007 ($44.64)
Ch. La Confession, St. Emilion Grand Cru, 2008 ($47.29)
Ch. La Confession, St. Emilion Grand Cru, 2009 ($49.39)
Ch. La Confession, St. Emilion Grand Cru, 2010 ($59.84)
*Owned and made by Jean Philippe Janoueix, La Confession is planted to 68% Merlot and 32% Cabernet Franc. The vineyards are plowed by horse. Fermentation is in wood and concrete with punch-downs rather than pump overs. Aging is in a mix of standard and “cigar” (elongated) barrels. The wine is bottled without fining or filtration. This is top-drawer stuff. (The winery dog here is a great dane.)*

La Sonate St. Emilion Grand Cru, 2004 ($29.79)
The 2.5 hectares vineyard is planted to 85% Merlot, 15% Cabernet Franc.

Ch. Laplagnotte Bellevue, St. Emilion Grand Cru, 2006 ($24.66)
Ch. Laplagnotte Bellevue, St. Emilion Grand Cru, 2007 ($25.39)
Ch. Laplagnotte Bellevue, St. Emilion Grand Cru, 2008 ($23.99)
Ch. Laplagnotte Bellevue, St. Emilion Grand Cru, 2009 ($24.99)
Ch. Laplagnotte Bellevue, St. Emilion Grand Cru, 2010 ($24.99)
*A 5.4 hectare vineyard located southeast of St. Emilion in St. Christophe des Bardes planted to 70% Merlot and 30% Cabernet Franc (average age 30+ years), fermented in concrete vats, and aged in all French oak (one-third new) barrels by owner/winemaker Arnaud de Labarre. A personal favorite.*

Ch. Peyroutas, St. Emilion Grand Cru, 2007 ($19.94)
*100% Merlot planted on south facing slopes vinifed by Stephen Derencourt.*

Ch. Puy Blanquet St. Emilion Grand Cru, 2009 ($26.59)
*A blend of 75% Merlot, 15% Cabernet Franc and 10% Cabernet Sauvignon from the famous Mouies family.*

Ch. Vieux Clos St. Emilion, St. Emilion Grand Cru, 2008 ($21.84)
Ch. Vieux Clos St. Emilion, St. Emilion Grand Cru, 2009 ($24.99)
Ch. Vieux Clos St. Emilion, St. Emilion Grand Cru, 2010 ($28.49)
*A 7.8 hectare walled vineyard on the west side (near Angelus) of St. Emilion planted to 60% Merlot, 30% Cabernet Franc, 5% Cabernet Sauvignon and 5% Pressac (Malbec) averaging 40-50 years of age on sand and sandy clay. Fermentation is in concrete vats and aging is in all French oak barrels (1/3 new). Due to the sand and the higher proportion of Cabernet Franc, Vieux Clos tend toward the elegant side of the style spectrum.*

And a couple of 2nd wines from fancier properties:
Chenes De Macquin St. Emilion 2007 ($22.79)
Chenes De Macquin St. Emilion 2009 ($35.69)
*2nd wine of Ch. Pavie MacQuin*

Jean de Trimoulet, St. Emilion Grand Cru, 2009 ($21.84)
*2nd wine of Ch. Trimoulet*

Leaf, St. Emilion Grand Cru, 2010 ($39.89)
The de-classified 2010 from the new Jacques Thienpont (of Ch. Le Pin fame) l’If.

Murmure de Larcis St. Emilion ($44.99)
*2nd wine of Ch. Larcis Ducasse*

Please note:
All wines are sold in cases of 12x750ml bottles. All prices are Spec’s “Cash Bottle Price.”

Not all wines are available in all stores.