



# Note(s) from Bordeaux, or, Settling Well

## by Charles M. Bear Dalton



Sometimes only the best will do. But most of the time, we settle. We settle because the best is too expensive or too much trouble, or even unavailable.

As I write this, I am sitting in a perfectly functional hotel room in Bordeaux. It has wi-fi and plenty of hot water and is comfortable enough but...it is also small and could stand some updating and has a poor breakfast. It also

is less than a block from where I am taking a re-accreditation course to get recertified as an International Bordeaux Educator. And it is within easy walking distance of several good restaurants and watering holes. It is not one of the nicer hotels I have stayed in here but it will do.

Over the last four nights, I have been to three nearby restaurants: Ferrand (twice), l'Orleans, and Bistro les Negoçiants. I also tried to go to Brasserie Bordelaise but it was too crowded with lots of people waiting outside the door. I don't like to wait.

The first time at the highly recommended Ferrand, I had Soup de Poisson (Bordeaux-style fish soup) and some cold seafood (Plat de la Mer) with a bottle of Bordeaux Clairet (a sort of dark Rosé from Bordeaux). It was all good but they were really crowded and it took several requests to get my check so I could leave.

The next night (Monday), I had a pretty good meal at the well recommended l'Orleans (excellent oysters on the half shell and some pretty good but oddly prepared duck breast with frites and salad). The wine list was just OK. I wasn't disappointed but I wasn't real impressed with what was supposed to have been a pretty good restaurant.

Tuesday, after checking on and deciding against Brasserie Bordelaise, I went back to Ferrand because I'd seen a juicy looking Magret d'Oie (grilled goose breast) with frites there two nights previously. They were really busy but a small table opened up just when I walked in. I ordered an appetizer (which in French is "entrée", go figure) called La Cocotte Pauillacaise (trust me, you don't want to know what it is but it would fit right in at Feast in Houston) and the Magret. They brought me the wrong appetizer but I sent it back and eventually I got the right one. It was a bit over-cooked. After a long time, they brought out the wrong main course. I had ordered Magret but they brought me a Confit leg of goose. I sent it back and they brought it back out. The second time I took it, as I didn't want to wait another hour to eat. It was good but it wasn't what I wanted. Just as I started eating, a woman at the next table lit a cigarette and proceeded to blow smoke in my direction for the next several minutes. I left, irritated.

Tonight I was tired of chasing a fancy meal so I went to Bistro les Negoçiants. It wasn't highly recommended and it wasn't full. It did not have a great wine list but it did have some good selections. I ordered some Foie Gras (you can't come to France and not eat some Foie Gras), a Magret de Canard (grilled duck breast), a delicious bottle of Ch. Pontac Lynch 2005 (which I am still sipping on back in my hotel room), and a bottle of Badoit Naturelle (more on that later). Everything was really good. The food was right and on time and I wasn't crowded, jostled, smoked at, or ignored. The check even came the first time I asked for it (which, frankly, is rare in France). I settled by not chasing after a super meal, and in settling came out ahead with the best meal I have had so far on my trip.

(By the way, none of the above is intended as a complaint. I'm just trying to make a point – which is coming – but be assured that I am enjoying my visit to Bordeaux and found pleasure in each of the above meals. And I know just how lucky I am to be here and to have the job I have.)

Sometimes, wine (you knew I was going to get around to wine, didn't you?) is the same way. We all want the best but sometimes what is touted as the best disappoints, or is too expensive, or is too much hassle, or is unavailable. So we settle. While I like and often prefer "the best", I've gotten to the point where I settle and often settle very well. We can't all drive Bentlys, Maybachs, and Rolls Royces but that doesn't mean we can't have fun driving. Since I am in Bordeaux, I'll focus on that.

If I am having a plate of oysters at a Bordeaux oyster bar, I do not even want a glass of Haut Brion Blanc (the undisputed best white wine of Bordeaux); I want a \$10 bottle of Ch. Bonnet Blanc Entre Deux Mers. Which is not to say that I don't love Haut Brion Blanc. It's just that the Ch. Bonnet goes better with raw oysters. In this case, the best would be overkill.

As much as I like drinking great wines in great vintages, I can only rarely afford them and even then have a hard time justifying paying the equivalent of two or three months' truck payments for a bottle of wine. So I settle. Rather than Ch. Margaux, I drink Ch. Rauzan Segla. Sometimes, rather than Rauzan Segla, I drink Segla (the second wine of Rauzan Segla) or the above mentioned Ch. Pontac Lynch, both of which I quite enjoy.

I often drink a less fancy vintage rather than a more fancy one. I'd rather drink a lot of 1999s than a lot of 2000s and I'd rather drink a lot of 2004s than a lot of 2005s even though the 2000s and the 2005s are the "great vintages". The 1999s and the 2004s (not to mention the 2001s and 2002s) are more ready and despite their being "good" or "classic" rather than "great" vintages, they often taste better right now. Some would say that drinking "lesser" is settling but I don't think so.

Some of the wines I settle on are some of the greatest pleasures I have because they satisfy me intellectually as well as sensually. You might say that even though they aren't the best, they are my favorite wines. Here, in no particular order, are some of my favorite Bordeaux Wines to settle on:

- Ch. Pontac Lynch Margaux (2005, 2003, and especially 2004)
- Ch. Pontoise Cabarrus Haut Medoc (2006, 2005, and 2003 – wish we still had some 2004)
- Ch. Batailley Pauillac (2006, 2005, 2004)
- La Parde de Ch. Haut Baily Pessac Leognan (2004 YUM)
- Ch. Pibran Pauillac (2005 and especially 2004)
- Ch. La Bernadotte Haut Medoc (2006, 2005 and especially 2004 and 2001)
- Vieux Chateau St. Andre Montagne St. Emilion (2006, 2005, and especially 2004)
- Ch. Boyd Cantenac Margaux (especially 2004)
- Segla, 2nd wine of Ch. Rauzan Segla Margaux (especially 2004 and 2002)
- Ch. Haut Bages Liberal Pauillac (especially 2004)
- Ch. La Confession St Emilion (2004 – yum)
- Les Tourelles de Longueville (2nd wine of Ch. Pichon Baron) Pauillac (especially 2004)

And another thing ...

On my last two visits to France, I have run into a new sort of bottled water. The question when you ordered a bottle of water in a restaurant (and no one drinks tap water in restaurants in France) was "with or without gas?" I like Vittel and Evian and especially Abatilles St. Anne (which Spec's will soon have) for still water and I like Badoit and San Pellegrino and especially Gerolsteiner (very minerally) for sparkling water. The new thing I bumped into though is "small bubble" or semi-sparkling waters. I have had examples from Perrier (Eau de Perrier) and Badoit (Badoit Naturelle) and all I can say is yum. Be on the lookout as these will be coming and they are excellent. See? I told you I'd get back to the Badoit. 🍷