

St. Émilion Wars

The classification controversy is over.
Or is it?

FRED MINNICK

The brisk March weather has forced Guy Pétrus-Lignac to wear a light coat and carry an umbrella. As he walks through his 14-acre vineyard, situated in the heart of St. Émilion, Lignac wishes he had worn a pair of gloves. "It's cold," he says.

He slowly walks through the rows, gently handling his 30-year-old Merlot and Cabernet Franc vines as he details his distinguished connection to French wine history. Château Guadet, named after Élie Guadet, a French revolutionary of the late 18th century, has been in Lignac's family for 166 years. (In 2005, they shortened the name from Château Guadet Saint-Julien to avoid confusion with the St. Julien of the Médoc.) Lignac is the great-nephew of Marie Louise Lacoste-Loubat, one of the founders of the revered Château Pétrus. As he puts it, "It's neat to be associated with a such a great history."

But in recent times, Lignac has found himself on the wrong side of the ledger. He received no inheritance after Lacoste-Loubat's death in 2006 amid the Pétrus scandal, in which charlatans took advantage of the elderly owner and several hundred bottles disappeared. Even that sordid tale pales in comparison with the St. Émilion classification controversy of 2006, when Château Guadet and 10 other estates were demoted from Grand Cru Classé to Grand Cru. The others were Châteaux Bellevue, Cadet-Bon, Faurie de Souchard, La Marzelle, La Tour du Pin Figeac, Petit-Faurie-de-Souchard, Tertre Daugay, Villemaurine, and Yon-Figeac.

Unlike the famous Bordeaux classification of 1855, the St. Émilion classification, authorized in 1954 by the Institut National des Appellations d'Origine (INAO), has been more or less amicably revised about every 10 years. After the



St. Émilion vineyards (left); Château Fonplégade, a Grand Cru Classé estate (above).

2006 decision, however, the demoted châteaux, including Guadet, took the decision to court. The ensuing legal battles and political lobbying, some pundits say, have given Bordeaux's oldest wine region a black eye that may never heal.

The Legal Battle

In the last successful classification, that of 1996, the St. Émilion Wine Council approved two producers as Premier Grand Cru Classé A: Châteaux Ausone and Cheval Blanc (the same two as in every ranking to date). Premier Grand Cru Classé B comprised Châteaux Angelus, Beau-Séjour Bécot, Beauséjour, Belair-Monange, Canon, Figeac, La Gaffelière, Magdelaine, Pavie, Pavie-Macquin, Trottevieille, and Troplong-Mondot and Clos Fourtet. Another 46 producers, including the 11 demoted in 2006, were recognized as St. Émilion Grand Cru Classé.

Any estate that meets the appropriate appellation standards can label its wines simply as

Saint-Émilion or Saint-Émilion Grand Cru. The latter category includes more than 200 châteaux, but because their wines are considered lesser in quality, they sell for proportionately less than those approved as Grand Cru Classé. That's why Guadet and the others contested the new classification: their new releases would go from selling at \$40-80 a bottle in the U.S. retail market to \$15-25. Perhaps more important, they would always be remembered as demoted wines.

"When you're declassified, you're the ugly little duckling," François Despagne told *The New York Times* when his estate, Château Grand Corbin-Despagne, was downgraded in 1996 (only to be promoted back to Grand Cru Classé in 2006). "People lose faith in you." Seeking to avoid that fate, the châteaux demoted in 2006 argued in court that the panel assessing the wines had a vested interest in the classification, since some of the panelists were négociants who worked for competitors or were property owners in St. Émilion.

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In April 2007, the Bordeaux administrative court suspended the 2006 classification, ruling that the evaluation was not carried out in an “objective” manner. The St. Émilion Wine Council appealed to the Conseil d’État, the supreme French administrative court, which overturned the suspension and sent it back to the Bordeaux courts for assessment. In July 2008, a Bordeaux tribunal again ruled that the classification was not an impartial system. According to French press reports, the opinion stated that panelists could not fairly evaluate a group of already classified wines and then a group of wines they knew were unclassified. All this time, St. Émilion producers were prohibited from labeling or marketing any new wine as Grand Cru Classé.

Instead of appealing the ruling, INAO urged the French government to intervene, using its emergency powers. Just as the 2006 vintage was about to hit the shelves as unclassified bottlings, the French senate voted to reinstate the 1996 rankings. Meanwhile, the French Court of Appeals continued to review the litigation; in January 2009, it ruled the 2006 classification was invalid. A March 2009 law allowed the eight châteaux that had been promoted to Grand Cru Classé in 2006 to keep their status, but required St. Émilion to revise its classification procedures by 2011.

“We have been working hard on the new rule, and it’s almost done now,” says Jean-François Quenin, president of the Wine Council and owner of Château de Pressac. “It will be roughly the same as before, but the procedures will be more clear. In the new classification, the commission will be as independent as possible. Tastings will be blind. The best will be classified; the worst will be declassified.”

The American Perspective

In the village of St. Émilion, population 800, the small-town syndrome is in full effect: everybody is on one side or the other. For French wine producers in general, the classification battle has been an embarrassment. In a time when they’re already losing market share to the New World, Spain, and Italy, they believe this dispute has damaged one of their strongest appellations. But does the American consumer care?

“This whole classification controversy has been a yawn from the beginning,” says Gordon Hullar, owner of Vintner Select, an Ohio distributor. “It’s just not important.” Importer Stephen George of California-based Montesquieu says



Guy Pétrus-Lignac of Château Guadet.

American consumers are simply unfamiliar with the nuances of classification: “Particularly when it comes to St. Émilion, most people don’t know the difference between a Grand Cru and a Grand Cru Classé.”

Florida wine educator and sommelier Charlie Arturaola agrees. “This is controversy in France, not here,” he says. “I opened a generic St. Émilion at one of my classes, and they did not know it was a \$25 generic Grand Cru versus a Grand Cru Classé. The wines are extremely close in quality.” People buy wine by reputation, not classification, says Paolo Barbieri, MS, wine director at Alex in Wynn Las Vegas. “Maybe the declassification will impact prices,” he notes, “but you buy for the name and tradition of the winery.”

Kasi Shelton, wine director and sommelier at New York City’s Vero, says she’s noticed fewer St. Émilion wines being offered by distributors, but feels that’s more of an economic consideration than anything to do with the classification battle. “With the economy, a lot of people are not able to buy these wines,” Shelton points out. “We don’t sell as many Bordeaux wines as we used to.” In George’s view, wineries promoted to Grand Cru Classé could actually have a strike

Photos by Fred Minnick (top left, right)



Jean-François Quenin (above), president of the St. Émilion Wine Council and owner of Château de Pressac (bottom).

against them. “The folks in Bordeaux think being promoted to Grand Cru Classé justifies a price increase, but many importers may be less inclined to import wine that has been promoted with an increased price,” he says. “I don’t think most consumers believe being promoted warrants an increase in price.”

In fact, most American wine drinkers tend to follow the recommendations of Robert Parker, a handful of consumer magazines, and, most important, their sommeliers and retailers, says Hullar, who believes “St. Émilion wines will continue to be the best value in Bordeaux.” Arturaola believes the classification controversy may actually be a good thing for savvy consumers: “St. Émilion is the most democratic appellation in the world. They have the ability to change their classification every 10 years. By this process working itself out, St. Émilion has shown that they take their classification seriously.”

The Future of St. Émilion

St. Émilion winemakers are looking forward to putting this ugly mess behind them. “We need to move on,” says Quenin.

Lignac’s ancestor won the gold medal at the Paris Universal Exhibition in 1867. His father received numerous awards for vintages of the 1980s. Under Lignac’s leadership, Guadet won a gold medal at the Brussels Concours Mondial in 2008 with the 2003 vintage and a silver medal in 2009 with the 1998 vintage. He hasn’t been as vociferous as other winemakers impacted by the classification controversy, but he has consistently maintained that the 2006 evaluation was unfair. Now that the region is starting with a clean slate, he says, “All I can do is make wine.” 🍷

CURRENT ST. ÉMILION CLASSIFICATION

Premier Grand Cru Classé A

Château Ausone
Château Cheval Blanc

Premier Grand Cru Classé B

Château Angelus
Château Beau-Séjour Bécot
Château Beauséjour
Château Belair-Monange
Château Canon
Château Figeac
Château La Gaffelière
Château Magdelaine
Château Pavie
Château Pavie-Macquin
Château Troplong-Mondot
Château Trottevieille
Clos Fourtet

Grand Cru Classé

Château L’Arrosée
Château Balestard La Tonnelle
Château Bellefont-Belcier
Château Bellevue
Château Bergat
Château Berliquet
Château Cadet-Bon
Château Cadet-Piola
Château Canon-la-Gaffelière
Château Cap de Mourlin
Château Chauvin
Château La Clotte
Château Corbin
Château Corbin-Michotte
Château La Couspaude
Château Dassault
Château Destieux
Château La Dominique
Château Faurie de Souchard
Château Fleur Cardinale

Château Fonplégade
Château Fonroque
Château Franc Mayne
Château Grand Corbin
Château Grand Corbin-Despaigne
Château Grand Mayne
Château Grand-Pontet
Château Les Grandes Murailles
Château Guadet
Château Haut-Corbin
Château Haut-Sarpe
Château Laniote
Château Larcis Ducasse
Château Larmande
Château Laroque
Château Laroze
Château La Marzelle
Château Matras
Château Monbousquet
Château Moulin du Cadet
Château Pavie Decesse
Château Petit-Faurie-de-Soutard
Château Le Prieuré
Château Ripeau
Château Saint-Georges Côte Pavie
Château La Serre
Château Soutard
Château Tertre Daugay
Château La Tour du Pin
Château La Tour du Pin Figeac (Moueix)
Château La Tour Figeac
Château Villemaurine
Château Yon-Figeac
Clos de l’Oratoire
Clos des Jacobins
Clos Saint-Martin
Couvent des Jacobins





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