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THE POUR

White Bordeaux: Oft-Forgotten Bliss

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Léognan, France

HERE in the sleek, modern cellar at Domaine de Chevalier, a historic estate concealed by a forest just west of town, the custom for tasting is reversed. In most wine regions, the whites serve primarily as palate-fresheners before the serious business of evaluating the reds. But the reds are the prelude here and elsewhere in Pessac-Léognan, in the heart of the historic Bordeaux region once known simply and evocatively as Graves.

First come barrel samples of the fresh and lively 2007 red and the smoother, more polished 2006. Then, from bottles, the dense, powerful 2005 and the elegant 2004.

Only now is it time for the whites. The Domaine de Chevalier 2007, still in oak barrels, trumpets its presence with an explosive burst of pure sauvignon blanc fruit and a beautifully opaque texture that invites repeated sips in an effort to penetrate the wine's mystery. The 2006, not yet bottled, is rounder and less flamboyant, showing evidence of the wine's other key component, the sémillon grape, and the beginnings of a nutlike complexity that will emerge over a decade or so.

These are serious, potentially profound dry whites, from Bordeaux of all places, which takes almost literally the jocular maxim that the first duty of wine is to be red. Pessac-Léognan is the home of renowned estates like Haut-Brion and La Mission Haut-Brion, not to mention other fine red wine producers like Haut-Bailly and Pape Clément. Indeed, around 85 percent of the wine made in Pessac-Léognan is red.

Yet that remaining 15 percent includes some of the most thrilling, underappreciated white wines in the world, undervalued even though they often fetch a higher price than the reds from the same producers.

[White Burgundy](#) is what comes immediately to mind when one thinks of great French white wines, with a few afterthoughts remaining for Sancerre, Vouvray and Alsace. Alone among Bordeaux's leading regions, Pessac-Léognan excels in the production of superb dry white wines, which can be among the best whites that France has to offer.

Domaine de Chevalier happens to be my favorite, but it is certainly rivaled for primacy by the tiny quantity of jewel-like whites produced by Haut-Brion, the dazzling and delicious wines from L'Église-Haut-Brion, and perhaps the dense whites of Pape Clément, with aromas redolent of lanolin and beeswax.

These wines can be very expensive, though far less so than white Burgundies of equivalent quality. A notch below them in quality, and excellent values, are the creamy, luscious whites from producers like Smith Haut Lafitte, de Fieuzal, Carbonnieux, Haut-Bergey, Couhins-Lurton and La Louvière.

Yet few people — or few Americans, at least — seek out these wines.

Possibly, that's because white Bordeaux for many years had a deservedly poor reputation. "The white of 40 years ago was mainly sweet wine of low quality," said Denis Dubourdieu, a consultant and winemaker in Graves who has played a leading role in the improvement of the region's white wines.

That didn't deter the British. For years, the white wine of choice there was insipid white Graves, the vinous equivalent of the British cuisine of the time. But white Bordeaux — much improved nowadays — still sells in Britain today, as it does in Belgium and even in Russia and Japan. Yet the wines have gained little traction in the United States. That may be because thoughts of white wine go directly to [chardonnay](#), sauvignon blanc and other wines labeled by their constituent grapes.

"Americans think varietally unless it's a well-known label," said John W. Laird, vice president, European estates, with Diageo Chateau and Estate Wines. "It's another example of the relatively complex nature of traditional French sources."

The idea of white Bordeaux was not always so baffling. Before World War II, most of the wine produced in Bordeaux was white. In fact, up until the 1970s, *sémillon* was the single most-planted grape in Bordeaux.

"When I was a boy," said Mr. Dubourdieu, who was born in 1949, "it was two-thirds white, and when I was 20 it was 50-50." Many of those vines were in the Entre-Deux-Mers region, that swath of flat vineyard area between the Garonne and the Dordogne Rivers that is today a much-improved source of inexpensive Bordeaux blanc, as well as in Graves. Today the proportion in Bordeaux, including the sweet white wine centers of Sauternes and Barsac, is around 85 percent red.

The vineyards here in Pessac-Léognan, set amid pine trees and suburban dwellings, contain far more red grapes than white. Partly that's because the sort of clay and limestone subsoils required by the white vines are in short supply.

Of about 175 acres of vines at Smith Haut Lafitte, only about 27 are whites. At Domaine de Chevalier, about 12 of 99 acres are whites. Château Carbonnieux is an exception: its 235 acres of vines are evenly split between white and red. Far more typical is Château de Fieuzal, where only about 20 of 198 acres are planted with white grapes.

Demand has always been high for the Fieuzal whites, and after the estate was acquired by a French bank in 1994, about 27 more acres of whites were planted. But the quality wasn't the same, and 22 of those acres were grafted back to red grapes.

"For a banker, that was logical, but not for a winemaker," Gilles Maligne, the sales manager at Fieuzal, told me. "The soil was not suited for it." In 2001, the bank sold the estate to Lochlann Quinn, an Irish businessman.

Compared with the relatively simple task of making red wine, white wine is far more complicated and labor intensive. At Domaine de Chevalier, picking the white grapes, 70 percent sauvignon blanc and 30 percent *sémillon*, is difficult and time-consuming, said Rémi Edange, the assistant manager, as we walked through the densely planted vineyard. The white grapes are more delicate than the reds, and must be picked at peak ripeness and handled gently to avoid oxidation. This sometimes requires multiple passes at the same vines over the course of a couple of weeks.

Then, in the cellar, the red wine is fermented in huge steel tanks, before being put in barrels to age. But the white is fermented in small oak barrels, each of which must receive individual care to make sure a secondary fermentation does not take place. Then, as the wine ages, the sediment, or lees, in each barrel is stirred periodically, which contributes to the wines' voluptuous texture. "One bottle of white requires 70 times more precision than one bottle of red," Mr. Edange said.

While the number of white Burgundy producers can run into the hundreds, far fewer estates make fine white Bordeaux. Partly, this is because some of the best land for vineyards in the northern Graves was lost in the last century as the city of Bordeaux inexorably grew, planting houses rather than grapevines over the historic gravel beds. In 1875 there were 12,000 or so acres of vineyard in the northern Graves. A hundred years later, barely 1,200 acres remained.

Then, in 1987, the greater Graves region was divided into two, with the northern half, where the most prestigious properties were situated, taking the name Pessac-Léognan.

"The quality and characteristics of the wines were not the same," said André Lurton, the proprietor of La Louvière and Couhins-Lurton, who had pushed for the division for many years. "The price of the wine was twice in the north what it was in the south."

Since then, the region has experienced something of a revival. Vineyard areas that had been abandoned have been recovered, and roughly 3,700 acres are planted today.

By all accounts the split caused both the north and the south to improve their wines, but some today see the result as something of a marketing nightmare. "Graves was such a good name," said Guy Durand Saint-Omer, a wine importer and exporter in Bordeaux. "Pessac-Léognan is very local — it's meaningless."

While the south, which retained the name Graves, has struggled to establish an identity, its dry white wines can be good, too, and even superb. One of the leading whites comes from Mr. Dubourdieu's own estate, Clos Floridène, which makes a blend of half sauvignon blanc and half sémillon. The wines are fresh, balanced and richly textured, and can age for 10 to 15 years. If the top whites from Pessac-Léognan are great values at \$50 to \$100, these wines, at \$20 or \$25, are steals.

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