

Lift your glass to Bordeaux

BORDEAUX. If, as Peter Ustinov said, Toronto is New York run by the Swiss, Bordeaux is Paris run by sceptics -- feet-on-the-ground philosophers and eye-for-a-euro wine-merchants. The spring wine fair here gives you a chance to sip a *primeur* (a “young, easy” wine often sold as an investment) and to ponder this ancient city’s leisurely sense of time: its philosophers go back centuries, its wine-merchants a couple of millennia.

A stunningly elegant city of 660,000 where the Garonne and Gironde Rivers meet between Spain and Atlantic, Bordeaux got rolling around 300 B.C as Burdigala. Happily, the Celtic-Iberian tribes who camped here picked a soil the Romans found perfect for wine. To this day, Bordeaux wines still look down their pricey, bouquet-sniffing noses at every other wine in the world.

The sceptics who inspired Bordeaux were less brash than Parisians, but they didn’t lack ambition. Two of its oldest philosophers set the intellectual world on fire: Montaigne (1533-1592) and Montesquieu (1689-1755). Both marked their city’s public life, Montaigne as Bordeaux’s mayor, Montesquieu as its regional parliament’s speaker.)

Montaigne’s *Essays*, an easy-to-read reflection on life rooted in his own experience, remains a how-to-live classic today. It teaches scepticism about all dogmas, especially about man’s status: “Even on the world’s highest throne, we are still only sitting on our ass.” Similar scepticism runs through Montesquieu’s *Spirit of Laws* and satirical *Persian Letters*. He questions extremist cant of all kinds, counselling moderation and balance: “Useless laws weaken the necessary laws.” His argument for separating executive, legislative and judiciary shaped the U.S. constitution.

A third Bordeaux philosopher, a Catholic novelist with “troubling” ideas on human relations, was Nobel Prize-winning François Mauriac (1885-1970). His scepticism – really disgust at bourgeois hypocrisy -- pierced the dilemmas of applying catechism morality to chaotic dramas of love, hate and passion. He makes you wonder again: do sin-anguished Catholics or Protestants enjoy sin more?

The “three Ms” (Montaigne, Montesquieu, Mauriac) all put water in their wine, but Bordeaux’s signature is written in wine. Traditions linger everywhere: stores, restaurants, tours, events, clubs all glorify the grape.

Thirty years ago, I attended a dinner in Bordeaux with members of several great wine families. My table-mate, from a firm 250 years old, was Madame Schröder-Schÿler (Margaux, Saint-Émilion, Château Kirwan wines). She told me that, even then, children of “good families” sometimes looked for spouses in England – homeland-by-marriage of 12th-century Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine, then of centuries-old British wine-trading partners.

As much as such rituals speak of stability, Bordeaux’s wine trade is agitated. Sky-high prices (fuelled by Asian speculators who mythically cut their *rouge* with Coca-Cola) make top wines unaffordable; mid-level exports face competitors from Australia, Chile and South Africa; weird French nomenclatures confuse buyers; traditional techniques often need foreign (sh! Australian) advice.

Most humiliatingly, U.S. wine-tasting guru Robert Parker makes a whole industry tremble by his yearly 100-point diktats. Some love his PR for Burgundy; others claim say his love of formulaic tastes will drive Bordeaux wines into homogenized oblivion.

Never mind wine-sipping. The real business of Bordeaux is business. Now more

people work in aerospace than in wine. Although Bordeaux has four universities, two MIT-style tech institutes, 14 professional schools and 5,000 full-time researchers, *Bordelais* don't like to waste time on speculation – unless it's property speculation. They hate dogmatism, like to make things work and, if possible, make a decent euro.

Their main fault: they carry debate to extremes. City council discussed a river tunnel for almost 70 years. Urban renewal became impossible. Credit for breaking the logjam goes to ex-mayor Alain Juppé, a talented former prime minister planning the now-trendy escape for French politicians: taking a teaching sabbatical in Quebec to live down a scandal.

Today, Bordeaux looks like a big Meccano set. Regional and municipal leaders have launched a decade-long plan to upgrade infrastructure – parks, roads, transportation, health and cultural services. They are preserving Bordeaux's kilometres of sumptuous 18th-century façades and its dozens of downtown pedestrians-only streets. Futurist trams with no overhead wires or steps glide along at ground level.

Visiting any French city outside Paris lowers your metabolism. Life is less frantic, people are more polite. Parks welcome dogs, bikes and sitting on grass. You start dreaming that life might be fun just going forward, not fast-forward (a common fantasy of Parisians who really *need* their rat-race).

Bordeaux isn't boring; it's alluring. First, for understated, grow-on-you beauty: Victor Hugo said: "Take Antwerp, add Versailles, and you get Bordeaux." Next, for culture open to the world: last week I attended a choral concert by Russian Orthodox monks in a 17th-century Catholic church. It was only one of a half-dozen top-notch cultural choices.

Paris is love at first and every sight. Bordeaux is a slow seduction – a low-key lady for a very long-term fling.