

FRANCE: Bordeaux

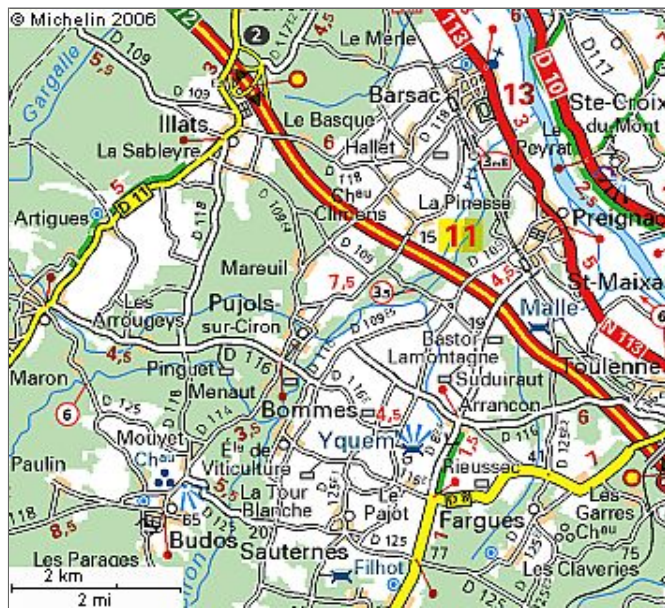
Southern Graves and Sauternes

Home of the great sweet whites - dry whites and reds too

By Jane Anson



Harvesting in the vineyards of Château Suduiraut in Sauternes with Château d'Yquem in the distance. ©Mick Rock/Cephas



The map above does not cover the complete extent of this micro-region. On the left its position is indicated within the main wine region.

To see the locations for recommendations in this Guide, use the on-line maps. These fully clickable Michelin maps allow you to plot routes and print locations. This service is accessible only to Gold subscribers.

Stately châteaux and the historical cradle of Bordeaux

These two regions are south of the city with a history that stretches back much further than the Médoc – vines from almost 2,000 years ago grew around here, and today there are still plenty of Gallo-Roman remains to explore. Graves owes its rather gruesome sounding name to big gravel stones which store the heat of the sun and help ripen the grapes. Its reputation was cemented by the philosopher Montesquieu, who lived at the Château de La Brède and promoted its wines in Paris and England. This gorgeous chateau remains a key sight. The northern section of Graves called Pessac-Léognan is treated separately in these guides, but there are plenty of excellent châteaux in this southern section, many making a high proportion of white wine as well as red, and offering serious interest to the gourmet food-and-wine traveller.

Sauternes seems surprisingly little visited. In 1855, it was the only place other than the Médoc and Haut-Brion to be recognised in the ranking of Grand Cru Classés. Even today, it's the only other part of the Bordeaux region that is stacked with so many stately châteaux obviously built with serious money. Don't be fooled though – Sauternes is an expensive wine to make and there may well be a fair amount of peeling paint behind the wrought iron gates. When made with care, keeping yields very low and with manual harvesting, the production cost per bottle is several times higher than in any other appellation. It's a very attractive landscape of gentle slopes, endless vines, and good opportunities for picnics along the Ciron River - the same river that creates the microclimate responsible for noble rot.

Geography

This micro-region covers the area on the left bank of the Garonne River from La Brède and St-Médard d'Eyrans down to just south of Langon, bordered on the west by the Landes pine forest. It has a mild maritime climate influenced by the Gulf Stream and the river with only occasional spring frost. There is plenty of rainfall coming in from the Atlantic falling mainly in the spring. Summers are usually dry and hot with good weather often extending into autumn, although rain can be a threat to the harvest.

Here the terrain comprises well-drained gravelly slopes with more sand than in Pessac-Léognan. Further south, the Sauternes and Barsac vineyards lie around the valley formed by the Ciron, a tributary of the Garonne. Autumn sunshine combines with the morning mists rising from the Ciron to provide ideal conditions for botrytis to form. The Sauternes soils consist of clay, limestone and chalk under gravel; the best vineyards are on gravel slopes. Less hilly than Sauternes, the soils are more alluvial in Barsac.

BASIC INFORMATION

● How to get there

Southern Graves is located between the left bank of the Garonne and south of Bordeaux. The fastest route from Paris, by car, is to take the A10 which takes you straight to Bordeaux. To reach southern Graves you continue on the ring-road heading south and circle around the city centre. From the ring-road take the A62 heading south and take either exit 2 or exit 3 at Langon. By train, the TGV Atlantique service will get you to Bordeaux in less than three hours from Paris, five hours from Lille and seven from Brussels. From Bordeaux there are local train services to the region on the Bordeaux/Toulouse and Bordeaux/Agen line. The closest airport is found at Bordeaux-Mérignac.

● Useful information

Maison du Sauternes,
Place de la Mairie, 33210 Sauternes

Tel: 05 56 76 69 93

La Maison des Vins de Graves,
61 Cours du Maréchal-Foch, 33720 Podensac

Tel: 05 56 27 09 25

Email: contact@vins-graves.com

Website: www.vins-graves.com

Maison du Vin de Barsac,
Place de l'Eglise, 33720 Barsac

Tel: 05 56 27 15 44

Langon Tourist Office,
11 Allée Jean-Jaurès, 33210 Langon

Tel: 05 56 63 68 00

Website: www.sauternais-graves-langon.com

Conseil Interprofessionnel du Vins de Bordeaux (CIVB),
1 Cours du XXX Juillet, 33000 Bordeaux

Tel: 05 56 00 22 66

Website: www.vins-bordeaux.fr

● Main towns and villages

Sauternes

Good luck finding the village of Sauternes – for some reason it is only signposted about 2.5km outside, despite being accessed only by a number of winding roads that are near impossible to navigate through. But persevere, because it's lovely. It boasts a smart, beautiful central church, and a high density of wine shops, cafés and restaurants for its size. Oh, and before you scan down the page, I'm afraid Château d'Yquem really is open only to professionals. But it's far from the only thing worth discovering in this most interesting and rewarding of appellations.

Podensac

Home to the Maison des Vins de Graves, and well located on the N113 halfway between Bordeaux and Langon. There's actually not a lot in Podensac except for the Maison du Vins, but there are numerous pretty villages around it, and a few good local restaurants.

Langon

A smart market town with a wide range of shops and cafes. You are hardly going to cross France to visit Langon, but you will be pleased that you found it. On the Garonne River, Langon has one of the best restaurants in the area, and a very active tourist office with details of wine circuits.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Wine producers to visit

Clos Dady

Address: Château Bastard, 33720 Barsac
Tel: 05 56 62 20 01 Fax: 05 56 62 33 11
Email: clos.dady@wanadoo.fr Web: www.clos-dady.com
Geo-coordinates: Latitude: 44:34:16N (44.57107) Longitude: -0:19:14W (-0.32051)

Probably the grooviest couple in Sauternes, the dentist husband Christophe has a full-on Leo Sayer-haircut and a great line in trainers. He helps out at weekends and with wine sales, while his gorgeous wife Catherine works at the château full-time. The château itself is modestly-sized, but beautifully decorated, no expense spared. The vinification cellars are right next door, although the vineyard itself is a few kilometres away, and the whole thing backs onto the river, making it a good place to visit before or after a bracing walk along the river bank. Their Clos Dady is a delight – lighter and livelier than many Sauternes. Ask also to try a red wine that they make from Graves AC, called Clos les Ramparts – it's made in minute quantities, but is one of my favourite wines; rich, succulent and very impressive for the €15 price tag. From May 2009, they will produce a dry Graves white from 0.5ha – Clos les Ramparts, Graves Blanc Sec.

Useful information: Free tour and tasting, appointment preferred. English and Italian spoken, groups welcome (up to maximum of 20). Since last year, they have introduced a few interesting wine tourism days, from tasting Sauternes in the morning to canoeing in the afternoon (or even quad biking for the more adventurous) - prices vary according to individual demand. They also offer picnics and barbecues in the park and a guided walk along the river. All wines can be purchased at the small boutique.

Château de Seuil

Address: 33720 Cérons
Tel: 05 56 27 11 56 Fax: 05 56 27 28 79
Email: mailing@chateauduseuil.com Web: www.chateauduseuil.com
Geo-coordinates: Latitude: 44:38:19N (44.63863) Longitude: -0:20:23W (-0.33975)

Owned by Welsh-New Zealander couple Nicola and Sean Allison, this château, with 15ha in the Graves appellation and 10ha in Premières Côtes de Bordeaux, produces one of the region's most revelatory white wines. There is also a Bordeaux Blanc, but it's their white Graves, with a high percentage of Sémillon mixed with the Sauvignon, that could be straight out of New Zealand. It is packed with star-bright fruit flavours; apple, citrus and gooseberry with a lovely minerality. A very interesting visit also, because they are always trying out new methods (such as different yeasts, different methods of pruning and trellising, new types of oak), and they are happy to discuss them with you.

Useful information: Free tour and tasting, by appointment, Monday to Friday. Groups welcome, but strictly by advance appointment. This is a good château to visit during harvest time, as they like to get their visitors into the vineyards. English-speaking owners.

Château de Cérons

Address: 33720 Cérons
Tel: 05 56 27 01 13 Fax: 05 56 27 22 17
Email: perromat@chateaudecerons.com Web: www.chateaudecerons.com
Geo-coordinates: Latitude: 44:38:7N (44.63516) Longitude: 0:20:1W (-0.33355)

This imposing château is in the village of Cérons, just north of Barsac and Sauternes and like them a sweet wine appellation. The owner is Xavier Perromat, husband of Caroline Perromat at Haut Bailly and the property itself is a classic chartreuse (which means it has one large central room, and then rooms that mirror each other on either side). Xavier and Caroline have just fully taken over the château from his parents, and are about to embark on a series of renovations, from the winery to the interior. The wines of Cérons are slightly lighter than those of Sauternes, and this has all the gorgeous oranges, lemons, cloves and honey of the more famous neighbouring appellation, but with slightly more lift and freshness at the end.

Useful information: Free visit and tasting from 08.30-12.00 and 14.00-17.30, Monday to Friday, by appointment only. English spoken. Groups welcome (maximum 20).

Château de Portets

Address: 33640 Portets

Tel: 05 56 67 12 30 Fax: 05 56 67 33 45

Email: vignobles.theron@wanadoo.fr

Geo-coordinates: Latitude: 44:41:58N (44.69947) Longitude: -0:25:41W (-0.42807)

One of the notable things at this château is that the owner, Marie-Helene Yung, makes a 'feminine wine' that is aimed at women drinkers (being rounder and fruitier than classic Bordeaux fare, and with a more modern label). Whatever the merits of this approach, this is an attractive château (it stands on the foundations of both a Roman villa and a medieval castle. Apparently on 31 July 1808, the château was visited by Napoléon I, returning from Spain, en route to Bordeaux) and it has a collection of historical artefacts and old robes worn by the local Commanderie.

Useful information: Free tour and tasting, by appointment every day. Groups welcome (up to 50). Some English spoken. Wine available to buy direct.

Château Guiraud

Address: 33210 Sauternes

Tel: 05 56 76 61 01 Fax: 05 56 76 67 52

Email: dgalhaud@chateau-guiraud.fr Web: www.chateau-guiraud.fr

Geo-coordinates: Latitude: 44:32:3N (44.53428) Longitude: -0:20:29W (-0.34145)

Possibly the most impressive driveway in the area, and a neighbour of d'Yquem, this highly regarded 1855-classified estate has recently changed hands from the Narby family to the French Peugeot family, although winemaker Xavier Planty remains (and is now a shareholder, along with Stephan von Neipperg from Canon La Gaffelière). All the investment had already been done however, and what you find here are extraordinarily handsome grounds, very modern vinification rooms and gorgeous central rooms. There is a high number of Sauvignon vines planted here and they also produce an excellent dry white wine called G de Guiraud.

Useful information: Open seven days a week 09.00 - 12.00 and 14.00 - 17.00 by appointment if possible (groups welcome, 35 people maximum, always by appointment). Free tour and tasting for individuals or €6 per person over six people. A small boutique has opened offering limited direct sales. English spoken. They are also happy to organise meals at the property for groups of over 13.

Château La Tour Blanche

Address: 33210 Bommès

Tel: 05 57 98 02 73 Fax: 05 57 98 02 78

Email: visites@tour-blanche.com Web: www.tour-blanche.com

Geo-coordinates: Latitude: 44:32:34N (44.54267) Longitude: -0:21:7W (-0.35192)

One of the most informative visits in Sauternes is on offer here, as there is both a viticulture school (run as a national school, completely separately from the château), and a good wine tasting school, within the château grounds. The estate itself is fairly large – some 70ha looking over the pretty village of Bommès. The wines are aged in new oak, and can take a few years to reveal their excellence, but this was placed second after Château d'Yquem in the original 1855 classification.

Useful information: All year round from Monday to Friday, 09.00 - 12.00 and 14.00 - 17.00. Free for individuals; €4.60 per person for groups. The guided visit includes a tour of the vineyards (weather permitting) followed by a visit of the winery with explanations of all the different processes. A wine tasting concludes the visit, and there is the possibility of buying wine direct. English spoken.

Château Nairac

Address: Avenue Aristide Briand, 33720 Barsac

Tel: 05 56 27 16 16 Fax: 05 56 27 26 50

Email: eloise@chateau-nairac.com Web: www.chateau-nairac.com

Geo-coordinates: Latitude: 44:36:31N (44.60867) Longitude: -0:18:46W (-0.31286)

Owner Eloise Heeter-Tari is part of the Bordeaux Oxygène group of the young winemakers who are trying to drag Bordeaux into the 21st century – really worth seeking out for a chat during your visit. With this spirit in mind perhaps, the château has also recently produced a fresh, lighter style Sauternes, Esquisse de Nairac, which is trying to consciously appeal to a more modern consumer. The château itself is gorgeous - made of blush-red stone, in perfect proportion and is well known for its beautiful walled gardens, full of rose bushes and fruit trees.

Useful information: Free visit and tasting daily, by appointment. Groups welcome (maximum of 20). English spoken. You are welcome to picnic in the gardens in good weather if you ask in advance. Wine available to buy direct, including gift boxes.

Château Chantegrive

Address: 33720 Podensac

Tel: 05 56 27 17 38 Fax: 05 56 27 29 42

Email: courier@chateau-chantegrive.com Web: www.chateau-chantegrive.com

Geo-coordinates: Latitude: 44:39:14N (44.65399) Longitude: -0:22:52W (-0.38101)

The Lévêque family runs one of the largest properties in the Graves, with 92ha, and in 2005 began working with oenologist Herbert de Bouard of Château Angéjus. Even before this, they followed many of the winemaking practices of the big châteaux, without the attendant prices (in fact, most of these wines are great value at around €10 per bottle). The grapes are half red and half white, as is far more usual in Graves than elsewhere in Bordeaux. A young team are really making big changes here, and it is an invigorating visit. Lovely park also.

Useful information: €5 tour and tasting (refundable on purchase of a bottle), on appointment 09.00-12.30 and 13.30-16.30 from Monday to Saturday. Tour lasts one hour in the cellars and vinification rooms, followed by tasting of red and white Graves wines. Possibility to also buy wines direct. Tour in English if you book in advance. Groups welcome (up to 30 people).

Château Caillivet

Address: 33210 Mazères

Tel: 05 56 76 23 19 Fax: 05 56 62 20 69

Email: contact@chateaucailivet.com Web: www.chateaucailivet.com

Geo-coordinates: Latitude: 44:30:11N (44.50316) Longitude: -0:15:27W (-0.25737)

Very attractively placed on a hill overlooking a sweeping valley, the vineyard has been owned and planted by Antoine, Philippe and Sylvie Carrillo since 1997, with their first vintage being 2001. Everything is done by hand, with great attention to detail and they produce tiny quantities of an excellent wine. A visit here is really an absorbing way of spending a few hours.

Useful information: Free tour and tasting, daily throughout the year, 10.00 - 12.00; 14.00 - 19.00. Groups welcome (up to 70 people). Appointments not necessary for individuals, but if possible for groups. English spoken.

Château Suduiraut

Address: Suduiraut, 33210 Preignac

Tel: 05 56 63 61 90 Fax: 05 56 63 61 93

Email: contact@suduiraut.com Web: www.suduiraut.com

Geo-coordinates: Latitude: 44:33:26N (44.55729) Longitude: -0:19:14W (-0.32047)

Like Guiraud, the owners here must have struggled with an inferiority complex that comes from being right next door to Yquem. Not exactly easy keeping up with the Jones'... however, Suduiraut does pretty well for itself, now owned by AXA Millesime and run by the preternaturally talented Christian Seely of Château Pichon Longueville and Château Petit Village. The estate covers 92ha and falls in a warm microclimate that allows for slightly earlier picking dates than many of its neighbours. Since 2004, the 'S' de Sauternes was launched, a dry white wine.

Useful information: Free tour and tasting, strictly by appointment from Monday to Friday 09.00-12.00 and 14.00-17.30. Groups welcome (to a maximum of 50, and ideally no more than 25). Wine can be bought direct. English and Chinese spoken.

Château Clos Haut Peyraguey

Address: 33210 Bommès

Tel: 05 56 76 61 53 Fax: 05 56 76 69 65

Email: contact@closhautpeyraguey.com Web: www.closhautpeyraguey.com

Geo-coordinates: Latitude: 44:32:52N (44.54792) Longitude: -0:19:48W (-0.33001)

If its architecture that attracts you, then drive on by this place and head to its neighbour (and once part of the same estate) Château Lafaurie-Peyraguey. But if it's the wine you want, try this well run *premier cru*, which is very welcoming and makes an excellent visit. You will spend most of the visit in the cellars, where they give a great explanation of the labour of love that makes a good Sauternes. And delve into their history – Peyraguey was once owned by a Monsieur De Prichard, president of the Bordeaux Parliament, until he met the guillotine during the French Revolution. Today, Martine Langlais-Pauly runs the estate with a warm and exacting hand.

Useful information: Open daily, including weekends and bank holidays, appointment preferred but not essential. Free tour and tasting, in English or French. Wine is available to buy direct.

Château Doisy-Daëne

Address: 33720 Barsac

Tel: 05 56 62 96 51

Web: www.denisdubourdieu.com/gb/doisy.html

Geo-coordinates: Latitude: 44:35:29N (44.59131) Longitude: 0:19:50W (-0.33057)

You can't be serious about Bordeaux white wine, whether sweet or dry, without visiting somewhere owned by Denis Dubourdieu, the eminent professor at the Institute of Oenology and general white wine guru in Bordeaux. He also owns Cantegril in Barsac, Reynon in Beguey and Clos Floridene in the Graves, but this is perhaps the best known estate, now jointly run with his son Fabrice. Besides the excellent Barsac, the château also produces two slightly unusual wines – a 100% Semillon called L'Extravagant de Doisy-Daëne, and a dry white wine called Le Grand Vin Sec de Doisy-Daëne, reportedly the first dry white to be made in Sauternes.

Useful information: Monday to Friday, free tour and tasting by appointment. Wine can be bought direct. Groups welcome to a maximum of 20. Visit of the winery, vineyard and tasting. English spoken and sometimes Spanish.

Places to stay

Relais du Château d'Arche

Address: 33210 Sauternes

Tel: 05 56 76 67 67 Fax: 05 56 76 69 76

Email: chateaudarche@wanadoo.fr Web: www.chateaudarche-sauternes.com

Geo-coordinates: Latitude: 44:32:12N (44.53659) Longitude: -0:20:36W (-0.34320)

The Relais du Château d'Arche is just exactly what you would look for from a vineyard hotel – within walking distance of the village of Sauternes (you even get to hear the church bells ringing across the surrounding vineyards), a gravel courtyard, smart but individual rooms (just nine, so there are never too many guests around). My only negative is that the breakfast area is a little soulless, but all in all this is a gorgeous place to stay.

Useful information: Rooms: €120 - €150; breakfast: €10.

La Milleva

Address: 10 Barrouil, 33720 Illats

Tel: 08 71 27 58 42 Fax: 05 56 27 00 63

Email: lamilleva@wanadoo.fr Web: www.lamilleva.com

Geo-coordinates: Latitude: 44:37:3N (44.61752) Longitude: -0:22:23W (-0.37302)

Just before Podensac and the Maison du Vins de Graves, this *chambre d'hôte* is in a traditional stone house, typical of the Gironde department, and it has a good wine cellar. Simply but stylishly decorated.

Useful information: Rooms: €66 including breakfast.

Manoir de Belle Fontaine

Address: 2 Rue Fontaine, 33210 Roaillan
Tel: 05 56 62 28 10 Fax: 05 56 62 23 87
Email: manoirdebellefontaine@wanadoo.fr Web: www.manoirdebellefontaine.com
Geo-coordinates: Latitude: 44:29:55N (44.49861) Longitude: -0:16:57W (-0.28261)

The full *manoir* experience awaits you here – sweeping staircases, even more sweeping views, large swimming pool - but rooms are still reasonably priced. Only four bedrooms, so book well in advance.

Useful information: Rooms: €78 including breakfast.

Peyraguey Maison Rouges

Address: 33210 Bommès
Tel: 05 57 31 07 55 / 04 63 Fax: 05 57 31 03 95
Email: belanger@club-internet.fr Web: www.peyraguey-sauternes.com
Geo-coordinates: Latitude: 44:32:35N (44.54305) Longitude: -0:21:23W (-0.35647)

Simple, unpretentious, charming and very reasonably priced. Outdoor swimming pool.

Useful information: Rooms: €72 - €83 including breakfast and a bottle of wine on arrival!

Le Caplane

Address: 33210 Sauternes
Tel: 05 56 76 61 17
Email: lecaplane@wanadoo.fr
Geo-coordinates: Latitude: 44:32:19N (44.53865) Longitude: 0:20:15W (-0.33737)

Isabel and Jean-Michel Descamps are your hosts at this well-located *chambres d'hotes*, with an 18th century stone house set in a large park, with a swimming pool. Just two bedrooms but there is also a *gîte* for weekly rentals in a separate house for five.

Useful information: Rooms from €70 including breakfast and a glass of Sauternes of arrival!

Places to eat

Claude Darroze

Address: 95 Cours du Général de Gaulle, 33210 Langon
Tel: 05 56 63 00 48 Fax: 05 56 63 41 15
Email: contact@darroze.com Web: www.darroze.com
Geo-coordinates: Latitude: 44:33:24N (44.55659) Longitude: -0:14:57W (-0.24927)

There are also rooms at this highly regarded restaurant. The decor is slightly chintzy, and the outside far from auspicious, but the food is really excellent, and well worth its reputation. Very good wine list too, concentrating mainly on Bordeaux wines, but grazing across several other French, Italian and Spanish areas.

Useful information: Menus from €40-€78.

Le Saprien

Address: 14 Rue Principale, 33210 Sauternes
Tel: 05 56 76 60 87 Fax: 05 56 76 68 92
Geo-coordinates: Latitude: 44:32:4N (44.53447) Longitude: -0:20:35W (-0.34319)

Pricey but renowned as being the best restaurant in Sauternes. It has a lovely terrace that overlooks the vineyards of Château Guiraud, and the wine list is heaving with the local wines (don't forget to try a glass of Sauternes as an aperitif, rather than waiting till after dinner).

Useful information: Menus from €25.

Les Erables

Address: 8 Bordessoule Ouest, 33210 Preignac

Tel: 05 56 62 20 94

Web: www.restaurant-poissons-les-erables.com

Geo-coordinates: Latitude: 44:35:6N (44.58498) Longitude: -0:17:44W (-0.29549)

Very friendly restaurant with great seafood, and a reasonably priced wine list.

Useful information: Menus from €10.50 for the *Menu du Jour* at lunchtime only, from €19 for dinner.

Le Medieval

Address: 16 Allées des Tilleuls, 33490 Saint Macaire

Tel: 05 56 62 28 38

Web: www.tilleul-medieval.com

Geo-coordinates: Latitude: 44:33:58N (44.56606) Longitude: -0:13:32W (-0.22552)

If you can grit your teeth through the rather unattractive approach, Saint Macaire is a gorgeous, well restored medieval village with a lovely church and well preserved ramparts. This relaxed restaurant has a good terrace in summer, and a range of well priced food. Try the local sweet wine to experience one of the lesser-known Bordeaux dessert wines. Some rooms also.

Useful information: Menus from €10.50.

Wine shops & Bars

Maison des Vins de Graves

Address: 61 Cours Maréchal Foch, 33720 Podensac

Tel: 05 56 27 09 25

Geo-coordinates: Latitude: 44:39:17N (44.65464) Longitude: -0:21:45W (-0.36240)

One of the best places to sample and buy Graves wines, with over 300 in stock and free tastings available.

Maison du Sauternes

Address: 14 Place de la Mairie, 33210 Sauternes

Tel: 05 56 76 69 83

Web: www.maisondusauternes.com

Geo-coordinates: Latitude: 44:32:4N (44.53447) Longitude: -0:20:35W (-0.34319)

Located right in the heart of the village of Sauternes, this shop stocks a range of around 80 local wines.

Other interesting shops

Pâtisserie Roger Lafitte

Address: 19 Allée Jean Jaurés, 33210 Langon

Geo-coordinates: Latitude: 44:33:11N (44.55307) Longitude: -0:14:43W (-0.24528)

Snooty service but a great range of hand-made chocolates.

● Wine related attractions

Château de Malle

Address: 2 Malle, 33210 Preignac

Tel: 05 56 62 36 86 Fax: 05 56 76 82 40

Web: www.chateau-de-malle.fr

Geo-coordinates: Latitude: 44:33:49N (44.56369) Longitude: -0:17:41W (-0.29467)

Built in 17th Century by Jacques de Malle, the château contains Europe's largest collection of silhouettes (life size figures carved out of wood) and there are also ornate Italian-style gardens, with plenty of other mini-Versailles attractions. The château also produces a wine, but not one of the region's best.

● Other interesting attractions

Château Roquetaillade

Address: 33210 Mazères

Tel: 05 56 76 14 16 Fax: 05 56 76 14 61

Email: roquetaillade@hotmail.com Web: chateauroquetaillade.free.fr

Geo-coordinates: Latitude: 44:29:31N (44.49181) Longitude: -0:16:7W (-0.26865)

A listed monument and a perfectly preserved medieval castle. For little ones, there's a petting zoo and farm over the road.

Château de La Brède

Address: Avenue du Château, 33650 La Brède

Tel: 05 56 20 20 49 Fax: 05 56 78 46 69

Email: info@otmontesquieu.com Web: www.chateaulabrede.com

Geo-coordinates: Latitude: 44:40:27N (44.67411) Longitude: -0:32:38W (-0.54399)

One of the few moated castles in the area, and extraordinarily well preserved, the château is also surrounded by English-style gardens. Expect plenty of proud displays of Montesquieu's musings.

Useful information: Open from Easter till the end of November (full details on website). Entry fee: €7.

Kayaking on the Ciron River in Barsac

Address: Base Nautique de Bommès, 33210 Bommès

Tel: 05 56 63 68 00

Geo-coordinates: Latitude: 44:32:52N (44.54768) Longitude: -0:21:33W (-0.35905)

From this shaded spot on the Ciron River, you can take a single-person or larger canoe out for anything from an hour to a full day.

Château de Cazeneuve

Address: 33730 Villandraut

Tel: 05 56 25 48 16 Fax: 05 56 25 48 16

Email: chateaucazeneuve@aol.com Web: www.chateaucazeneuve.com

Geo-coordinates: Latitude: 44:23:11N (44.38639) Longitude: -0:18:59W (-0.31636)

The difficulty in choosing producers in these microregions is whether to go for the best wines, the most spectacular châteaux, or the most welcoming and interesting visits. This château has decided wisely that rather than following a dusty winemaking style, they should concentrate on what they do best, and leave the winemaking to the many surrounding experts. What you get here instead are medieval cellars, caves, a huge park, ruins, a large lake, a mill, a bird island and more. Plenty for groups and families to do.

Saint Vincent de Preignac en Sauternais

Address: 33210 Bommès

Geo-coordinates: Latitude: 44:32:50N (44.54734) Longitude: -0:21:30W (-0.35831)

This little church in Bommès, one of the communes of Sauternes, has a well restored 18th century exterior, and some wonderful carvings inside. Its bell tower was designed by the same architect, Pierre Paul Courau, who also gave us the gorgeous church in Branne.

● Events

Châteaux en Lumière

A weekend (usually in early August, but check ahead) where a number of events are set around the backdrop of châteaux illuminated at night – concerts, markets, tastings, art exhibitions. Last year, the weekend coincided with the tourist office in Langon offering day or whole weekend horse-back rides through the vineyards.

● Drives

Pujols-sur Ciron to Sauternes

Take the road to Bommès from Pujols-sur-Ciron, the D116. Cross the river – take the time to stop the car and consider the Ciron River, whose early morning mists allow the all-important noble rot to form. From there, find the church of Bommès and turn towards Haut-Bommès and Sauternes, from where you will easily find Château La Tour Blanche. Drive down into the very pretty village of Sauternes for a wander round the church and a spot of lunch.

Approximate distance: 10km

Approximate time: 1.5 hours (with stops)

Restaurants en route: Le Saprien, Sauternes (or the more simple, but lovely Auberge des Vignes. Tel: 05 56 76 60 06).

View points and/or picnic stops: Viewpoints: On the D116 towards Landiras, just by Château d'Archambeau is a beautiful view over the River Ciron and the valley beyond.

Picnic/coffee stops: The port of Bommès. There's a picnic spot, and you can also canoe here in summer.

● Walks

Walk along the river from Portets village

Difficulty: Flat walking, easy level.

A walk along the river that was the main form of transporting the local wines during the 18th and 19th centuries. You will walk past three main ports: the old one known as Port-Madame in honour of the wife of the Seigneur de Portets, Antoine de Gascq, a second port known as Port du Roy after a visit by Henry IV, and a third that goes right up to the Château de Portets. The walking circuit takes you around the village, and past numerous châteaux including Gaubert Cabannieux (a chartreuse typical of the region) and Château Doms with its highly stylised façade.

Approximate distance: 4km

Approximate time: One hour

Restaurants en route: Restaurant Rapin, 35 Route des Graves 33640 Portets. Tel: 05 56 67 51 31.

View points and/or picnic stops: Stop in at Château de Langeloup, right in the centre of the village of Portets, for the Musée du Vigne et Vins (2-4 Rue de la Liberté, 33640 Portets Tel: 05 56 67 13 90)

WINE INFORMATION

● Main appellations

Sauternes

Appellation exclusively for sweet white wines made from botrytized grapes.

Barsac

Appellation for sweet whites. Barsac wines are also entitled to use the Sauternes AC.

Graves

Regional appellation for both whites and reds. The reds account for up to 75% of the production.

Graves-Supérieurs

Officially an AC for dry, medium and sweet white wines with higher alcohol content, but in practice it refers to only sweet wine. The production is in decline.

Cérons

Appellation for sweet white wines made from botrytized grapes. Any dry white wine or red made here is classified as Graves. Small production.

Bordeaux

Generic appellation for reds, rosés and whites (mostly dry) for the whole region, and, with Bordeaux Supérieur is the only AC permitted for rosés within the southern Graves. Dry whites made in Sauternes are also labelled using this classification. In addition, some reds may on occasions be declassified to this appellation, or of course, if the château owns vineyards outside the Graves region it will use 'Bordeaux AC' for the blend.

Bordeaux Supérieur

Covering the same area as the basic Bordeaux AC but with an extra half degree of alcohol and lower yields.

Crémant de Bordeaux

A very small amount of sparkling wine is made under this appellation. The majority of grapes must be from the main Bordeaux varieties and 100% from the Bordeaux AC area. The Traditional Method (bottle fermentation) is used.

● Main grape varieties

Red

Cabernet Sauvignon

The most important grape for the red wines of Graves, it can be difficult to ripen on cooler, damper soils and thrives on the well-drained warm gravel soils.

Merlot

Produces supple wines that develop earlier and also complement Cabernet Sauvignon in the red wine blends. In the Graves region the proportion of Merlot in the blend is higher than in the Médoc.

Cabernet Franc

Often called Bouchet it is a lighter and less intense version of Cabernet Sauvignon, but gives many wines their finesse.

Petit Verdot

A permitted variety, but few blends include it here.

Malbec

Occasionally used as a blending ingredient.

White

Sauvignon Blanc

Dominant grape for the best dry white wines in the Graves AC.

Sémillon

Blended with Sauvignon Blanc, it adds richness, structure and ageing potential to dry whites. Particularly susceptible to noble rot, it is the principal grape for the sweet whites of Sauternes, Barsac and Cérons, accounting for up to 80% in a blend.

Ugni Blanc

Used very occasionally for dry white Bordeaux AC blends.

Muscadelle

Adds perfumed character to sweet wines.

● Main wine styles

Sweet Whites

Sweet wine production is of great importance here. Rich, honeyed, lush wines are made from grapes affected by noble rot (*botrytis cinerea*) that concentrates the sugars, acidity and flavours in the grape. These wines are costly to make because of the risk and the work involved in carefully selecting only those grapes affected by noble rot, meaning that yields are usually very low.

Dry Whites

Crisp, dry whites are produced from blends of Sauvignon Blanc and Sémillon grown on the sandier soils. The quality has improved immensely over recent years due to the investment in new technology, and the use of new oak.

Reds

The reds are blends using mainly Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot with a small dose of Cabernet Franc. Ageing in oak barrels is usually for 15-18 months, but can be up to two years. The wines are fresh and fruity, and due to the significant Merlot content are supple and more approachable when young.

Rosés

Bordeaux *clairets* and rosés are made by macerating red grape varieties for a short time. Both are fresh and fruity, *clairets* have a more intense colour. Very little is produced though it is increasing.

Sparkling Wines

Crémant de Bordeaux is mainly white with a little rosé, generally Brut. It can offer good value for money.

● Food specialities

Steak à la Bordelaise: steak served with a rich red wine and shallot sauce, ideally accompanied by well-structured red.

Oysters from Arcachon: dry white Bordeaux, such as white Graves.

Confit du canard: duck that has been cooked slowly in its own fat and then usually served grilled. This dish needs a rich, fruity red wine.

Entrecôte steak: often cooked over a barbecue of vine cuttings; this is enjoyed best with an elegant fruity red.

Foie gras of goose or duck: the classic combination when served as a cold starter or an aperitif is foie gras and a glass of sweet white wine such as Sauternes, Barsac, or a good Cadillac or Saint Croix du Mont. Red Graves accompanies pan-fried foie gras well.

Lamprey fish stew: prepared with red wine goes well with a youthful red Bordeaux.

Itineraries

IDEAL ONE DAY ITINERARY

MORNING

Starting out from Bordeaux, drive down the N113 to Podensac.

Visit 1: start off the day at the Maison du Vins, getting to know the region.

Visit 2: Château de Seuil and enjoy their white Graves.

Drive down to Sauternes and have lunch at Le Saprien.

AFTERNOON

After lunch, wander round the village of Sauternes, exploring the church and possibly driving off to the Ciron River for a stroll.

Visit Château la Tour Blanche. If you only have time for one Sauternes visit, make it this one, because there is so much to learn and it gives a great overview of the area.

IDEAL TWO DAY ITINERARY

DAY ONE

MORNING

Starting out from Bordeaux, drive down the N113 to Podensac.

Visit 1: start off the day at the Maison du Vins, getting to know the region.

Visit 2: Château de Seuil and enjoy their white Graves.

Drive down to Sauternes and have lunch at Le Saprien.

AFTERNOON

After lunch, wander round the village of Sauternes, exploring the church and possibly driving off to the Ciron River for a stroll.

Visit Château la Tour Blanche. If you only have time for one Sauternes visit, make it this one, because there is so much to learn and it gives a great overview of the area.

I'd then suggest checking in to Relais du Château d'Arche to enjoy a bit more Sauternes over a leisurely supper.

DAY TWO

MORNING

Get up and wander back down into Sauternes, where there is a very nice *boulangerie* just next to the church.

Visit 1: Ease into your day with a stroll round the gardens at Château Nairac followed by a tour and tasting of this excellent wine

Visit 2: Château Doisy- Daëne

If time, do a drive round the area, ending up at the St-Vincent de Preignac church in Bommès, then head into Langon for a spot of shopping.

Lunch: Claude Darroze.

AFTERNOON

You might want to take it easy after that great lunch. Head back up the N113 and just get in one more visit today.

Visit Château Chantegrive.

About the contributor

Jane Anson

Jane is a writer and columnist, based in Bordeaux, and was nominated for best Wine Writer in the prestigious Glenfiddich Food and Drink Awards in 2007. She is a member of the [Circle of Wine Writers](#) and the [British Guild of Travel Writers](#). Jane is Bordeaux correspondent for Decanter Magazine, author of a guidebook to Bordeaux for [FishersTravelSOS](#) and of guides to Bordeaux, Toulouse and Corsica for Thomas Cook Publishing. She also writes for the Telegraph, the Irish Independent, the Melbourne Age, Wine & Spirit, Gourmet Traveller Wine and a number of other international publications. She lived in Hong Kong and Japan for five years, and has travelled widely throughout the world's vineyards, specialising in the Great Wine Capitals of Bordeaux, Rioja, Melbourne, Napa San Francisco, Florence, Mendoza and Porto. She teaches and lectures internationally on wine tourism, and holds tasting classes with the Ecole du Vin in Bordeaux. Jane's has her own website [New Bordeaux](#) which includes all her articles as well as her [All About Bordeaux news blog](#).