

HARVEST IN SAINT-EMILION

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Harvest celebrations abound in wine regions around the world, but no where are they full of as much history and pomp as in France. In 2008 I had the ability to visit one personally, the 60th Jurade de Saint-Emilion and Ban des Vendanges or Harvest Proclamation in Bordeaux.



While California wine regions normally enjoy warm and sunny harvests, Bordeaux doesn't have the benefit of consistently temperate harvests, so harvest anticipation creates excitement and at times angst. Maybe that is why the celebration and ritual is taken so seriously. From the creation of the berries ceremonies follow the entire grape growing cycle are omnipresent throughout France due to the incredible history of grape growing.

The area of Saint-Emilion and its neighboring communes of Pomerol and Fronsac are located in France's southwest in the Bordeaux region. These communes, or villages, on the right bank of the Gironde estuary are not as well known to most as those on the left bank and herein lies some of the charm of the area. This wine region is known for the incredible quality of its wines but also for the amazing scenery, culture and cuisine. The vineyard area was certified in 1999 by UNESCO as a world heritage site due to the incredible history of winemaking and grape growing that dates back to Roman times and grew to dominate the landscape in the Middle Ages. Many of the buildings in the area date to the 11th century.

The history of the Jurade itself, initially a governing body for the region, dates back to July 1199. I will spare you the tedious details, but the present tradition of the Jurade dates to 1948. Today the group is made up of 49 "Jurats" from Saint-Emilion and 12 "Jurats" from Lussac Saint-Emilion and Puisseguin Saint-Emilion, satellite appellations. The group promotes the region and its wines throughout the world. Each year at the ceremony in September the group inducts new honorary members as ambassadors of the region and blesses the harvest. The small town fills with visitors on hand to share the festivities. Events include celebratory dinners, parties and an incredible fireworks show that included streams of fire and light pouring down the town's ramparts.

The wines of Saint-Emilion and its neighboring villages are distinctly different than those in the rest of Bordeaux. Here on the right bank the soils are heavier and less rocky made up predominantly of clays and limestone. Merlot finds a comfortable home here due to the higher water holding capacity of the soils. Typically the wines of Bordeaux have been blends, a great way for growers to hedge their bets at harvest and ensure that they have some grapes to harvest at all. The climate can be fickle, for example spring frosts or rain during harvest, and having multiple cultivars helps. Cabernet Sauvignon prefers the more gravelly soils of the left bank, as a later ripening grape it needs the additional heat from the rocky soils and prefers the well-drained sites. As a result of these small but important differences the wines of the left bank are usually Cabernet Sauvignon dominated while those from Saint-Emilion focus on higher proportions of Merlot and Cabernet Franc. Despite this fact, the wines can be incredibly concentrated, densely colored, complex and interesting.

If given the chance, Saint-Emilion is a great wine region to visit due to the plethora of other cultural opportunities that abound. The medieval architecture and stone buildings make you feel like you have stepped into another time. Many of the original structures are still standing like the massive monolithic church carved out of one huge limestone boulder and underground catacombs are worth a visit. Caves carved into (or out of) the limestone plateau stretch for miles. These historic cellars twist and turn and many lead all the way into the town from neighboring vineyards. Although it is too dangerous to walk into town this way, many vineyard visits include tours of their underground passages where wines can be stored in ideal conditions, cool temperature and high humidity. Navigating the city's above ground passages by foot takes care, especially if you have had a few glasses of wine with lunch. It is amazing

to see the town's older generation expertly ramble through the treacherous routes. The cobbles are ancient and weathered smooth and slick, and the streets in places so steep that I found myself removing my shoes and going barefoot while clinging to guiderails.

While you may see some impressive Chateaux or Estates, one of the most exciting things about Saint-Emilion is the small producers. With over 800 winegrowers there are many boutique producers making great wines at reasonable prices.



And if you can't make it in person you can toast the harvest just the same. Wines from Saint-Emilion are widely available and are really at home with food. Ideal for rich dishes, but not overpowering or overly flashy they can meld with a wide gamut of cuisine. Their inviting flavors of red and black fruits matches perfectly a day with a bit of chill in the air. One thing to note about wines from Saint-Emilion is the classification system. If you have heard of the system used on

the left bank of Bordeaux you may be familiar with premier cru, deuxieme cru and so on, resulting from a classification of vineyards conducted in 1855. That particular classification has not changed since! In Saint-Emilion they classify the producers, or chateaux, every ten years. Their system is currently undergoing some revisions, but the idea is to provide a reputable system that takes into account changes over time to the quality of wines produced. On the wine label you may see Grand Crus Classe or Premier Grand Cru Classe, the top echelon which is further divided into A and B levels. Until they get their latest revision sorted out the important thing to note is that if you see something like Grand Cru on a label of wine from Saint-Emilion that means it is a better than average. Do not overlook some of the smaller producers though, your best bet is to ask your local retailer or sommelier for guidance.

What to look for on the label:

The appellations: Saint-Emilion and Saint-Emilion Grand Cru, Montagne Saint-Emilion, Lussac Saint-Emilion, Puisseguin Saint-Emilion, Saint-Georges Saint-Emilion, Pomerol, Lalande de Pomerol, Fronsac, Canon Fronsac

Producers to look for:

Chateau Junayme (Fronsac)

www.vignoblesdeconinck.fr

Chateau Tournefeuille (Lalande de Pomerol)

www.chateau-tournefeuille.com

Chateau de Bel Air (Lalande de Pomerol)

Chateau Cheval Blanc (Saint-Emilion)

www.chateau-chevalblanc.com

Chateau Ripeau (Saint-Emilion)

www.chateauripeau.com

Chateau Franc Mayne

www.relaisfrancmayne.com



Chateau Lyonnat (Lussac Saint-Emilion)

www.chateaulyonnat.com

Clos Fourtet (Saint-Emilion)

www.closfourtet.com

Chateau Haut-Bonneau (Montagne Saint-Emilion) www.chateau-haut-bonneau.com

Chateau Guibot la Fourvieille (Puisseguin Saint-Emilion) www.vignobleshenribourlon.com

Chateau Canon (Chateau Canon)

www.chateaucanon.com

If you visit:

Consider transportation in advance, there is only ONE taxi in the entire area. Seriously, I know from experience! He does like to sleep at night if he has an airport pickup the next morning so keep that in mind! www.taxi-st-emilion.com
Robert Faustin Taxi No 1

Be sure to pick up some Caneles de Bordeaux

and Macarons, two delicious local treats.

Restaurant: Logis de La Cadene Restaurant 3,

place du Marche du Bois 33330 Saint Emilion

05 57 24 71 40

logisdelaCadene@wanadoo.fr

www.logisdelaCadene.com

Guest House: Le Relais de Franc Mayne

welcome@relaisfrancmayne.com; Natural water,

Swimming Pool, 9 Rooms, Underground Quarries

www.relaisfrancmayne.com

Resources:

Tourist Office of Saint-Emilion Jurisdiction

33 (0)5 57 55 28 28

www.saint-emilion-tourisme.com

www.bordeaux-tourisme.com

www.franceguide.com