

# At the Source Bordelaise

By Horace Sutton

Not since Eleanor of Aquitaine divorced Louis VII in 1152 and married Henri Plantagenêt two months later, has there been such a flap in the gentle reaches of Bordeaux, in southwest France. It began late last June when Château Mouton Rothschild achieved its classification as "a first great growth." To anyone who is not a winewatcher, that may not seem as wondrous an event as man's first walk on the moon or the invention of sugarless gum, but it capped a fifty-year campaign undertaken by Baron Philippe de Rothschild to correct the injustice done nearly 120 years ago.

In Paris the *International Herald Tribune* predicted that the French minister of agriculture had "set in motion a process that will certainly create a furor in the wine world." The furor had scarcely reached cyclonic force along the estuary of the Gironde, where the Bordeaux grapes grow, when, in the very same month, the government began an investigation of some 2 million bottles of wine, which they said was really white wine mixed with low-quality red wine and then labeled as high-quality red.

At the very time Washington was going through its tortured inquiries, Bordeaux writhed in its great wine scandal. The cast included inspectors who didn't inspect, judges who didn't judge, officials who were more eager to camouflage the trickery than reveal it. Somewhere in the snake pit there were traces of a department of dirty tricks invented to snuff out the presidential aspirations of former Prime Minister Jacques Chaban-Delmas, who is the mayor of Bordeaux. Inevitably, the brouhaha of Bordeaux became known as Wine-gate.

Tax inspectors in the employ of Finance Minister Valéry Giscard d'Estaing impounded the 2 million bottles, but *monsieur le ministre* isn't giving out the findings of his investigation. On the other hand, enough poisonous drippings have been leaked to frighten all of Bordeaux, where a fifth of the population makes its living in wine-associated industries. It has been suggested that adulterated wine, while it may stain the reputation of Bordeaux, if indeed not all the wines of France, is not the heart of the matter. Giscard d'Estaing also entertains aspirations for the presidency, and

there are those who say that he is letting Chaban-Delmas twist slowly, slowly in the wind.

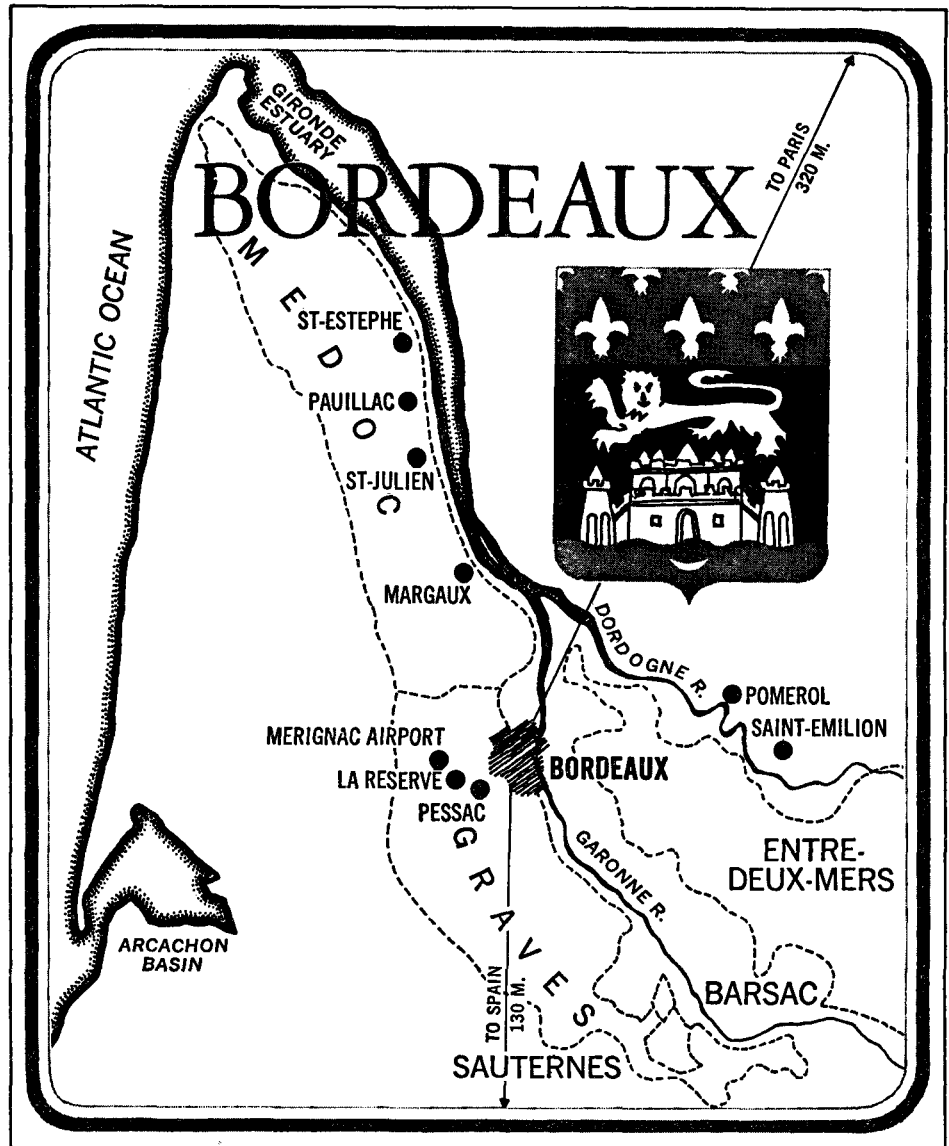
Wine-gate has forced other feuds to the surface, notably the religious and social frictions between the *chartrons*, whose forebears were Protestant émigré traders, and the Roman Catholics, who are wine growers. In a reverse of the current troubles in Northern Ireland, the Protestants, who had come from northern Europe, England, and the northern districts of Ireland, were roped into a district from which they got their name. They could work in Bordeaux during the day, but every *chartron* had to be back in his *quartier* after dusk.

Despite these restrictions, the merchant traders became affluent French citizens. Their names, still English, Dutch, and Danish, are on the labels of some of Bordeaux's best wines. It is said, not without a note of tartness, that they

continue to give their children English names, send them through the English education mills—that they speak English with aristocratic intonations, wear English clothes, and affect English sports and English modes of decor. Until recently a marriage between a Protestant *chartron* and a Bordeaux Catholic was reason enough for loud whispers.

Whatever shame the summer scandals have wrought, whatever glory the ascendancy of Château Mouton Rothschild has bestowed, both events added a new piquant flavor to Bordeaux. No one ever doubted that its wines were, with those of Burgundy, the best of France. But unlike Burgundy, the Bordeaux region is not on the way to anywhere unless one is heading for Spain, whereas Burgundy and its Côte d'Or lie along the pathway to Dijon, to Lyon, in the heartland of French gastronomy. For anyone en route to the south of France, a few days of

Bob Pelletier



dawdling in Burgundy give one the chance to dine at the celebrated Hosterie de la Poste in Avallon and rest up for a day before taking on La Côte d'Or at Saulieu, the erstwhile temple of Dumaine, one of the great chefs of France in the post-World War II years.

Bordeaux has somehow evaded the singular character of Beaune, in the heart of Burgundy wine country, with its famed fifteenth-century Hospice, where the nuns in their enormous starched white coifs float across the red cobbles at the courtyard scene of an auction of vintage wines each November. Nor does it have an inn like Beaune's Hôtel de la Poste, which has given shelter to some of the world's renowned vintners and dealers, to say nothing of the travelers who come only to see the sights.

Although its wine is the spiritual lifeblood of Bordeaux and its economic elixir, the city is an industrial port dealing in oil, hydrocarbons, and chemicals. River traffic from the Garonne moves directly into the city, and the estuary of the Gironde makes Bordeaux an inland seaport, exporting the cereal products of the rich southwest, as well as wine, and importing raw chemicals and oil for its refineries.

ITS CLASSICAL HERITAGES, scattered as they are about the city, are a reminder of its golden age. The Place de la Bourse, a royal square built at the beginning of the eighteenth century, is pure French architecture that the provinces adopted from the Place des Vosges and the Place Vendôme in the capital. Classical mansard buildings enclose the cobbled plaza, which is open to the river. In the center stood the statue of the king, toppled during the revolution. Bordeaux was the center of the Girondists, the political party whose members got their name from the articulate deputies from the *département* of Gironde, who tended to expound more departural and advanced doctrines than the moderate royalist views of most Paris deputies. Twenty-two of them were ultimately executed in 1795, accused of conspiring against the unity of the republic. When the passions of the revolution were banked, a monument to the Girondists was put up in the Esplanade des Quinconces, 100 years after their heads fell to the guillotine.

The merchant traders occupied the fine town houses of the Quai des Chartrons à Bacalan, designed in 1780. One assumes they were in prominent attendance at the lovely eighteenth-century

Grand Théâtre, with its twelve Corinthian columns, its statues and arches, which commands the Place de la Comédie. The grand stairway, the huge crystal chandelier, and the gilded, painted ceiling seemed too grand a venue for "La Célèbre Opérette Américaine" *Oklahoma!*, which played there last spring.



The small Bar de la Comédie on the Cours Chapeau-Rouge has three sidewalk tables from which customers sipping an apéritif can look across to the theater and down to the river, where naval ships often ride at quayside moorings. Before the evening curtain the Chapeau-Rouge on the Cours is a busy restaurant. The Brasserie Café de Bordeaux could perhaps pass as the local edition of the Café de la Paix in Paris. It occupies a corner of the Grand Hôtel de Bordeaux, and its sidewalk tables face the theater as well as the mainstream of Bordeaux's traffic, vehicular and pedestrian. The Grand Hôtel, alas, is no longer grand. Built in the Twenties, it has somehow accrued a collection of plastic furniture in the lobby, a foyer decorated with a neon sign flashing *Bienvenue au Grand Hôtel*.

There are those who compare the royal entrance of Bordeaux's Cathédrale Saint-André with those of the cathedrals at Reims and Amiens. The sculptures of the ten apostles and the Last Judgment are Gothic masterpieces. So, for that matter, is the array of flying buttresses through which the camera's eye can view the Hôtel de Ville. The elders still like to sit on the benches in the shade of the chestnut trees that line the Place Pey Berland on the side of the cathedral. Inside that cavernous interior, hardly twenty feet shorter than Notre Dame de Paris, the visitor is likely to encounter that quintessential picture of pious France: an old man holding cane, beret, and rosary, placing his free hand on the marble statue of Mary and Jesus.

ALTHOUGH THERE is certainly a *cuisine Bordelaise* and no less an authority than

the weighty *Larousse Gastronomique* insists "its culinary glory equals that of Lyon, where, according to connoisseurs, the art of good food has reached the level of the sublime," the city itself has no starred restaurants to call its own.

Restaurant Clavel, to take one of Michelin's better, if starless, choices, is small, classic, and quiet. Nothing, the management announces, is *congelé* or *sur gelé*, which is to say frozen or iced. A few dozen dusty bottles of Bordeaux adorn a counter—an 1899 Château Ausone at about fifty dollars and a 1959 Château Ausone or Château Latour, your choice, at better than sixty dollars. The filet of sole, in the Bordelaise style, arrives, to one's surprise, in a red wine sauce. And so do the lamprey eels. Clams and small, gray shrimp are specialties, and so is grilled shad served with sauce Gribiche—oil and vinegar, hard-cooked eggs, capers, and tarragon.

One stays in the most comfort out of town in the ultra-contemporary confines of the Hotel Sofitel-Aquitania, facing an artificial lake and the new exposition hall, or at the more rustic La Réserve in the suburb of Alouette. La Réserve has only a handful of rooms, but they are artfully done, imaginatively named ("Don Juan," "Torquemada," "Pompadour," etc.) and priced at about thirty-two dollars a night for a double, service included. There is a lake too full of frogs and swans for a comfortable swim, but the beach at Arcachon is handy.

Besides its tranquil country setting, La Réserve's further joy is its kitchen, which wears the only star (one) that Michelin has awarded in the entire Bordeaux area.

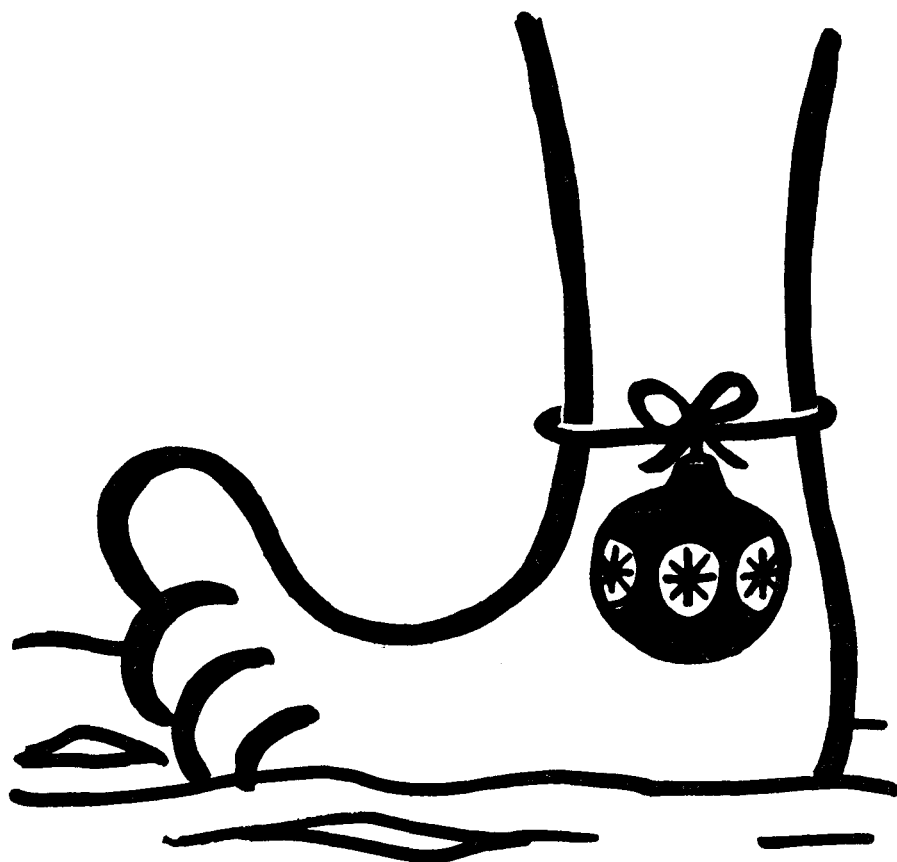
The restaurant serves a fixed-price menu at twenty-eight francs (somewhat less than seven dollars per person), but its specialties—should money be no object—will run a bill considerably higher. A slice of fresh duck liver, almost obscenely rich (and too much as a first course for any but a card-carrying gourmand), costs eight dollars a portion. But on demand, the chef also sends to the table such impressive specialties as a *chateaubriand en feuilleté*—a filet steak in flaky pastry, served with *sauce Périgourdine* (twenty-five dollars for four), and *lou magret*, a thick breast of duck that has had only a brief encounter with a charcoal brazier and arrives at table bloody as a pink steak.

All this sort of fare calls for wine, and in these precincts one doesn't think in terms of Burgundy. The vineyards are close enough for visits, and as with any

wine country in France, it is always a fascination to see the famous labels—Château Margaux at Margaux, and Château Latour, Lafite Rothschild, and Mouton Rothschild, all near Pauillac, the premier wines of Médoc—suddenly come alive as real places. One might walk through the cellars of Château Lafite, one of France's best labels (a bottle of its 1959 vintage now costs \$135 in New York), a vineyard bought at auction by James Rothschild in 1868. When France fell, the whole vineyard was requisitioned by the Germans as Jewish property, but much of the old stock was walled off and concealed. All the Germans took away was the 1941 vintage and some of the '42. The rest was coming out of its long rest in oaken vats and being bottled when the Germans gave up. On the twenty-fifth anniversary of Baron Elie de Rothschild's assumption of control of the vineyards, a bottle of 1797 Lafite, the oldest vintage extant, was uncorked.

The vineyards of Baron Philippe de Rothschild, whose Château Mouton was finally knighted this year in the first change in the official Médoc classification since 1855, is just next door. More interested in his wine, in his writing (he translates English classics into French), and in art than in his neighboring cousin, Elie (who recently rejuvenated the Rothschild chain of hotels), Baron Philippe has created a handsome museum of wine-associated artifacts, which adjoins the wine room at his vineyard.

TAKING OVER THE WINE interests from his father fifty-one years ago, when he was twenty, Philippe immediately enforced his personality on the vineyard. Merging two of the paramount interests of his life, he induced great French artists to design labels for his wine, among them Cocteau in 1947, Marie Laurencin a year later, Braque in 1955, Miró in 1969, and Chagall in 1970. All are on display, along with a chambered nautilus shell set in an elaborate vermeil mounting, used for wine at the end of the sixteenth century; a cup of sculpted ivory called *The Temple of Bacchus*, which its Venetian creator took fourteen years to carve; and an alcove of Rouaults, Picassos, and Giacomettis. It's a private museum, and visitors intent on a visit—it drew 15,000 last year—ought to avoid Saturdays and Sundays, when it is closed. On other days it is wise to call first (tel. 59-01-15). If a baron answers, it is probably the butler's day off. □



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# The Playwright as Voyager

By Henry Hewes

Of all the new American playwrights to emerge in the last decade, the most successful is John Guare. His *Muzeeka* won him an Obie in 1968; his *Cop-Out* earned for him the title Most Promising Broadway Playwright in *Variety's* 1970 critics poll; his *House of Blue Leaves* garnered the New York Drama Critics Circle Award as the Best American Play of the 1970-71 season; and *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, which he, Mel Shapiro, and Galt MacDermot adapted, won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award as the Best Musical of 1971-72. Therefore, it was not surprising that when Guare finished his latest script, *Marco Polo Sings a Solo*, there was no dearth of producers wanting to purchase the play. However, the author turned down all offers in favor of a not-to-be-reviewed shakedown cruise at the Nantucket Stage Company's Cyrus Peirce Theater. "I didn't want anyone else to own the play until I owned it," he explains. "And for me to own it, I needed to live with performances of it for a couple of months."

Fortunately John Wulp, a playwright who had mortgaged his Nantucket house in order to mount a distinguished three-play season on the island, was willing to underwrite the deficit that a first-rate production would incur, to request critics not to review the play, and to leave the new work free from entanglements so that it could continue its subsequent development in the best possible way.

The Nantucket production turned out splendidly, not as a smash hit, but as six weeks of unpressured work-in-progress in which the playwright and his director, Mel Shapiro, learned what needed to be done with an extremely ambitious but quite disorderly masterwork. The play, set in 1999, uses a combination of farce and wild imagination as it follows eight characters whose foibles sum up the failures of the twentieth century. These characters include an astronaut who has discovered a new planet; his wife, who is trying to escape being impregnated by a new electronic uterine device on her husband's space-ship dashboard; a Western film star of the Seventies, back in vogue; his wife, who was the flower girl and who sang naked in *Skin*.

On a less mythic level, there are the film star's adopted son, who is having problems with both his bisexuality and his project to produce a film epic about the great heroes of the millennium; his wife, who was a child-prodigy pianist and wants to resume her career; her lover, a lawyer, who is negotiating the Paris peace talks, "now in their forty-fourth year"; and a young hanger-on who is obsessively in love with the would-be producer's wife.



Beverly Hall  
John Guare—"A very personal writer."

Guare sees the play as a journey from childishness to maturity and simply defines maturity as "a creating of your own structure that allows you to flourish."

There is a parallel to this in the playwright's own career. When he was studying at the Yale Drama School under the late John Gassner, he found himself rejecting the then prevalent emphasis on logic and good construction. Later, when he returned to Yale to study with Arnold Weinstein, Guare relished the pleasure of disregarding logic and structure in order to open himself up. He began to write one-act plays, one of which was performed at the Barr-Albee-Wilder workshop. Says the playwright, "I saw that Off-Off-Broadway was the place I could get a play done and, no matter how it came out, return again."

AS A RESULT of his Off-Off-Broadway outing, Guare was invited to become one of the playwrights at the Eugene O'Neill Memorial Theater Playwrights' Conference. "The great thing about the O'Neill," he says, "was that they gave me a date for staging my script. The first year I

came up with act 1 of *The House of Blue Leaves*. The next summer, they gave me another date, and I wrote *Muzeeka*. The year after that, another date, and I wrote *Cop-Out*."

Despite his success, Guare began to feel that maybe his revolt against structure had made it impossible for him to write anything but short plays. "It was," he says, "like living in too small a room." So he resolved to find a happier balance between getting deeper into himself and the problem of structure. He achieves rich self-expression by writing, without censoring, in pocket-size notebooks he carries with him everywhere. "I learned to do this when I was traveling through Egypt and the Middle East. I had no one to talk to so I wrote things down in a book. The act of writing became the most important link to being alive."

As for structure, Guare hopes to be able to put his writing in dramatically effective order by asking himself questions about what is or is not keeping audiences involved. He risks alienating them by using shocking images that will take them into their own dark subterranean passages. But he knows that if he does it right, he will make theatergoers aware of how they are hurting people around them. In the case of *The House of Blue Leaves*, he wrote nine different second acts before it came to him that, like the play's deaf movie star, all the characters were "deaf" to each other. Only then was he able to make the play work.

In spite of the problems that were not solved during the Nantucket run of *Marco Polo Sings a Solo*, director Mel Shapiro is optimistic. "The terrible thing about most playwrights," he says, "is that they can't grow or change with their material. Either they have written a literary conceit or they feel that a request for a rewrite constitutes interference with their psychic intuition. John is a very personal writer who loves to re-explore the events of his play."

Guare himself says, "I'm very obsessive about work. Work for me is all voyaging, a kind of emotional serendipity. I write to get objectivity on things that have happened. Life is the unconscious, writing the conscious." One suspects that this soft-spoken, playful playwright's approach to his material is a little like Marco Polo's to the world. He is described in the play as the only voyager who traveled to new lands and neither tried to destroy them nor to impose himself on them. □