

Bordeaux is the very heart of the wine trade, it has been for centuries; but only very recently has the city emerged as a destination to compare to its wines, as **Robin Barwick** discovered

Pictures: **Leon Harris**

# SPECIAL VINTAGE



The "Right Bank" of Bordeaux, pictured outside the medieval village of Saint-Emilion

**W**e were standing in the middle of one of the giant wine cellars at Millesima, the international wine retailer based in the heart of Bordeaux, within a quick barrel roll of the Garonne River. To imagine the bottles—nay, the oceans—of the world’s finest wines that have left this place to be poured into glasses around the world over the centuries... It is unfathomable.

“If you have the opportunity you must try Chateau Palmer 1961,” recommends Fabrice Bernard, Millesima chief executive, with a broad grin. “One bottle is 10,000 Euros.”

Mention of “Palmer 1961” and pictures of Arnold Palmer hoisting the Claret Jug at Royal Birkdale spring to mind, but that is a different Palmer, wrong game, no relation, and different price range, too; one bottle of this vintage is worth considerably more than the £1,400 Sterling that Palmer the golfer won at the ’61 [British] Open.

Like the ships laden with barrels of claret, I and my traveling companion were on a journey, exploring one of the world’s great wine regions, perhaps its greatest, but our interests lay outside the glass. Bordeaux has grown beyond its vines over the years, and as employees of a top golf-lifestyle magazine we were duty bound to explore its newest charms, which include fantastic opportunities for the game. Of course

that doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t stop to appreciate its *raison d’être*, as the French say. And so, like the region’s vintners, we pressed on.

Our next stop followed the river north and out of the city, upstream to where the Garonne and the Dordogne split from the Gironde Estuary. From there it is not far up to the west coast of France, the Bay of Biscay and the Atlantic. But we are only travelling 20 miles north of Bordeaux and to a dusty, quiet village in the heart of what the wine trade calls the “Left Bank,” to the west of the Gironde.

The roads are narrow, winding, and they always will be because they are flanked by some of the most precious plants in the world: the vines of Margaux. Apart from the odd chateau, the occasional farm building and stand of trees, this rolling land is covered with perfectly ordered, leafy vines; predominantly Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, and where we are heading some Petit Verdot also flourishes. They form the basis of a famous blend.

In Bordeaux, wineries are referred to as “chateaux” (to use the plural) even if most vineyards don’t actually have a chateau on site as such. But the 66-hectare Chateau Palmer estate has evolved in the shadows of a classic, neo-Renaissance chateau built in the mid-19th century, as proudly depicted on the black and gold label of every bottle of Chateau Palmer and its sister wine, Alter Ego.

Behind the imposing chateau, huge, modern cellars house rows of oak barrels. This is July 2017, and slowly maturing inside the barrels is the 2015 vintage of Chateau Palmer and Alter Ego, which has since been bottled. Across Bordeaux, 2015 is anticipated to become the finest vintage in recent years, but that does not mean it is ready to drink.

“Further aging is done in the bottles,” explains our guide, Chateau Palmer’s Matteo Pratesi. “For Alter Ego it requires between five and 15 years, depending on the vintage and personal taste, and for Chateau Palmer it is between 25 and 40 years. We recommend that for the perfect maturation you should wait 25 years.”

Twenty-five years? Drinkers don’t have to wait that long—you buy a bottle and open it when you want—but it will take time to allow the full-bodied character of the 2015 vintage to emerge. Renowned wine critic Robert Parker described Chateau Palmer 2015 as having “a wonderful bouquet with layers of dark cherry... a classic Palmer... poised and effortless on the finish... real class and sophistication... a Palmer that will repay those with the nous to cellar it for 10-15 years”.

At the going rate of \$275 a bottle, patience is a virtue. By the way, as the years pass and stocks of Chateau Palmer 2015 deplete, the price per bottle will only rise. For the record, expectations for the 2016 vintage are equally high.

In the meantime, the 1961 vintage; that was bottled 56 years ago and should be about ready to go, right?

Matteo leads the way out of the cool main cellar, back into the summer heat and to an ancient stone out-building connected to the chateau itself. It looks like a farmer’s old potting shed. The door is locked—and double-locked—and we crouch to peer through a small window into this poky, shadowy cellar. It is the owners’ private store, housing a few hundred dark and dusty bottles. At the far end, on a pedestal, is a stone statue of the 15th century Archbishop Berland of Bordeaux, to ward away evil spirits and uninvited guests. He might be eyeing me—can’t be sure in the dim light.

Many of the bottles date back further than even the hallowed 1961 we are chasing, to before the second world war. German forces occupied Bordeaux between 1940 and 1944 and as the Nazis approached, the chateaux did what they could to conceal their produce. Much of Chateau Palmer’s stock was hidden in trusted corners of Bordeaux city during the occupation, and some of it made it back home after the war. Some of those bottles are what we are peering at here.

“Also there are two double magnums from 1961, for only the most special occasions,” adds Matteo. “They are not for sale.”

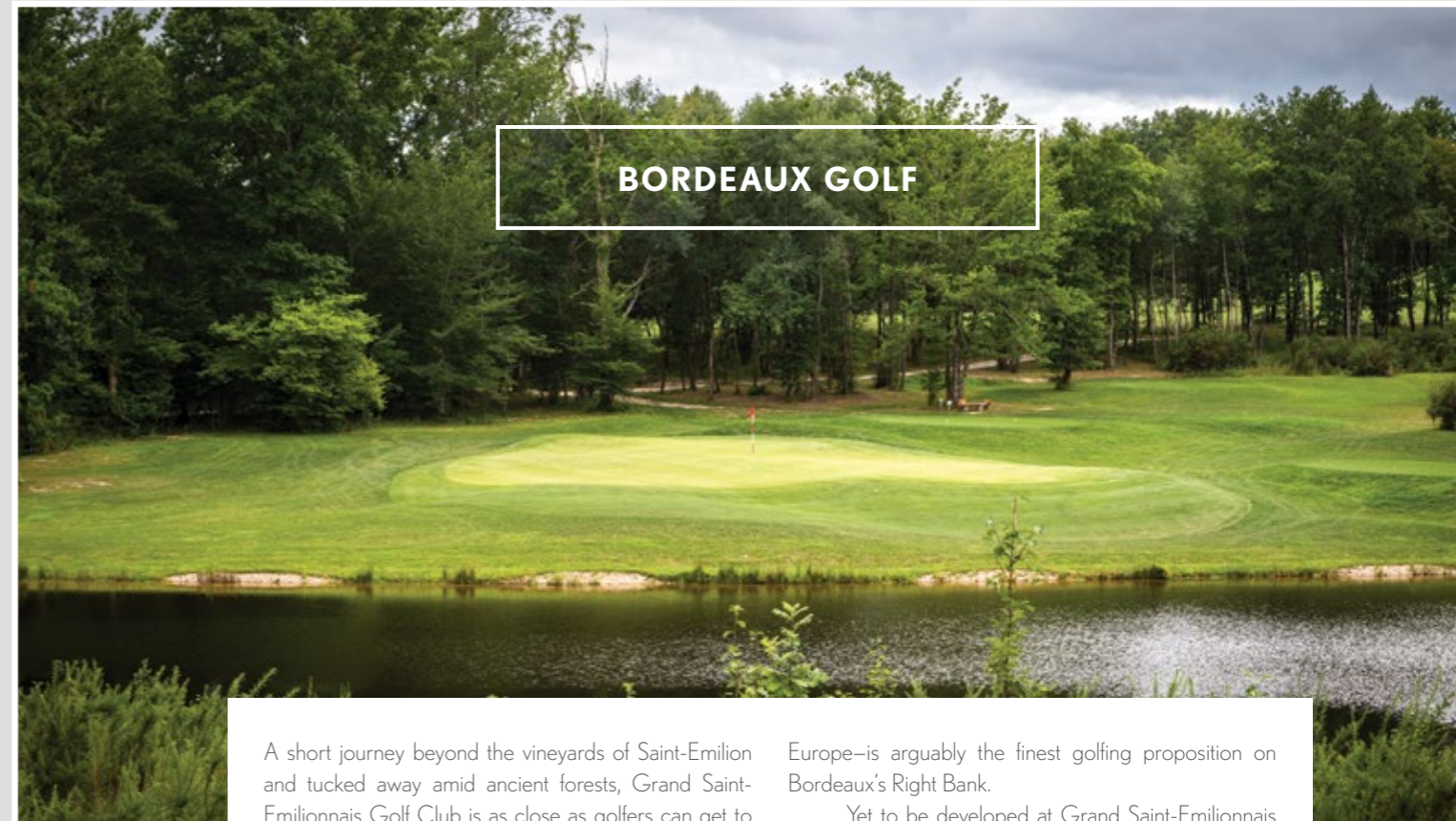
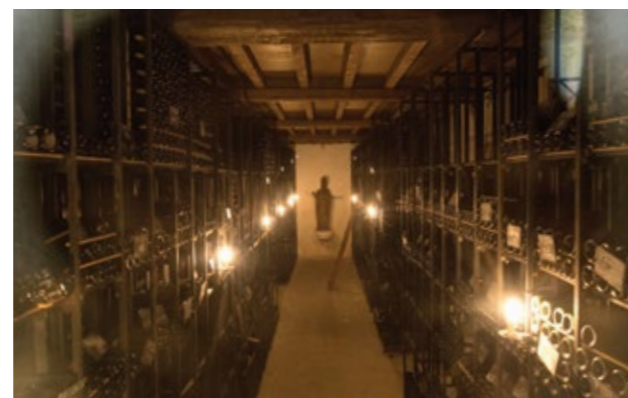
That’s fine, I don’t want to buy one, just taste it... apparently a wine of this extraordinary quality will keep for 80 years. I relay Barnard’s estimate of €10,000 for a bottle of 1961 (or €40,000 for a double magnum). “For Chateau Palmer 1961 there is no price,” comes the correction. Even Matteo does not have the keys to this cellar.



Chateau Palmer and (below) its owners’ private store under the protection of Archbishop Berland



## 2015 is anticipated to become the finest vintage in recent years across Bordeaux



## BORDEAUX GOLF

A short journey beyond the vineyards of Saint-Emilion and tucked away amid ancient forests, Grand Saint-Emilionnais Golf Club is as close as golfers can get to realize the old cliché of discovering hidden treasure.

Grand Saint-Emilionnais is home to a stunning parkland golf course designed by Tom Doak—the creator of Bandon Dunes in Oregon and The Renaissance Club in Scotland—that only opened in 2015. It is a young golf course—still rough around the edges—although it is adorned by oak trees that are over 100 years old, as the beautiful par-72 challenge wends through land that was once hunting grounds to French aristocracy.

Grand Saint-Emilionnais is owned by the Mourgue d’Algue family. Gaetan Mourgue d’Algue founded the European Tour’s Lancome Trophy and his daughter Kristel played on the Ladies European Tour. The family-run course—the first Doak design in continental

Europe—is arguably the finest golfing proposition on Bordeaux’s Right Bank.

Yet to be developed at Grand Saint-Emilionnais is a full-service clubhouse. The club’s next major project is to restore a derelict 19th-century manor house behind the first tee, which will serve beautifully as the hub to the golf club once developed.

Starring on the Left Bank is the longer-established Golf du Medoc, a 36-hole resort located 10 miles to the northwest of Bordeaux’s city center. Featuring a 79-room hotel, spa, extensive clubhouse, restaurant and tour-level practice facilities, Golf du Medoc lies on flatter ground than Grand Saint-Emilionnais, yet courses designed by Bill Coore (Chateau course) and Ron Whitman (Vines course) provide appealing challenges of championship caliber.

[segolfclub.com](http://segolfclub.com) & [golfdumedocresort.com](http://golfdumedocresort.com)

The charming woodland setting of Grand Saint-Emilionnais (above) and Golf du Medoc (below)





### New age, old city

Bordeaux has undergone a striking and rapid transformation over the past two or three years. It is no accident. With fine wines now readily produced in so many other countries, Bordeaux can no longer rely on its heritage and on the quality of its produce to remain on its highest echelon.

So the city and its industry is opening up to tourism and welcoming visitors like never before, literally. The chateaux are welcoming VIPs to stay in their historic guestrooms, and all-comers are welcomed daily through their previously locked gates, for tours and tastings. The city has built an impressive and interactive Cité du Vin museum to promote and educate—partly funded by Bordeaux’s wineries—and the gastronomic offering in the city is subsequently reaching new heights. The hotels are filling up, more flights are coming in and a new high-speed train connection delivers travelers from Paris in only two hours.

Visitors are discovering that Bordeaux—a city featuring some of the most impressive and carefully restored medieval architecture in France—scrubs up beautifully.

“People used to leave Bordeaux for the public holidays—the city would be empty—but now they come here for the holidays,” says Julien Gardin, director at La Grande Maison, a five-star boutique hotel with just six guestrooms, near the center of Bordeaux. The hotel opened in 2014 and is owned by Bernard Magrez, who owns 40 wineries around the world and is a noted art collector. The hotel’s Restaurant Pierre Gagnaire comes with two Michelin stars.

“We were fully booked for the public holiday at the end of May and it was our best week yet for the restaurant,” adds Gardin, “even though it was hot and sunny and great weather to go to the beach. Our occupancy rate is constantly increasing; every month this year is around 10 percent up on last year.”

Also enjoying ever-increasing demand is Bordeaux’s Le Grand Hotel, a five-star, 130-room InterContinental Hotel located in the very heart of the city, on the Place de la Comedie and opposite the city’s equally imposing Opera House. The hotel features two Gordon Ramsey restaurants, Le Bordeaux Gordon Ramsey, which is streetside, and Le Pressoir d’Argent, offering an exquisite fine-dining experience and which has been awarded two Michelin stars.



Saint-Emilion (top), La Grande Maison (above), the bar in Le Grand Hotel (right) and Bordeaux’s bistro culture (below)



**“People used to leave Bordeaux for the public holidays—the city would be empty—but now they come here”**

Visitors to Bordeaux are well anchored in the center of the city as it has a singular charm of its own, while also serving as a pivot to the vineyards. The “Left Bank” is to the west and to the north of Bordeaux, while the equally renowned “Right Bank” is to the east, wherein just 30 miles away sits the enchanting and ancient village of Saint-Emilion. Like Margaux and practically all of the countryside around Bordeaux, Saint-Emilion is steeped in the wine trade and completely surrounded by vineyards such as the famous Chateau Soutard, which welcomes visitors with a fascinating tour and opportunity to taste a beautifully crafted range of wines.

There is just so much to see, but critically and as much as anywhere in the world, so much to taste.

Perhaps the ideal spot to take it all in on a summer’s evening is the Night Beach rooftop terrace at Le Grand Hotel. Affording guests a 360-degree view around Bordeaux and beyond, a fitting aperitif here is a gin and tonic expertly mixed with Fever Tree tonic, plenty of ice and a double of G’Vine Gin, which is produced in the south of France and is gently infused with grapes and the vine flower.

The perfect Bordeaux evening might progress a few floors down to Ramsey’s Le Pressoir d’Argent for dinner and a bottle of, well, Chateau Palmer? If you do order, just double check the vintage.



Market day in Bordeaux (bottom left) and the view from the rooftop terrace at Le Grand Hotel (below)



## Greens & Grapes

It’s the same when you visit any great city; it’s only great if you know where to go and how to get there, and much depends on who you know. For *Kingdom’s* trip to Bordeaux we struck gold with travel company Greens & Grapes, which is established with the specific mission of organizing Bordeaux vacations that incorporate the finest golf, gastronomy and vineyard experiences.

“We are based in Bordeaux and we organize complete holiday packages that include accommodation, golf, wine and gastronomy,” starts Sylvie McPhilemy, who runs the business with her husband Lucius. “We can offer standard packages or tailor-made itineraries.

“We are providing our clients with the kind of service we would love to receive when we go abroad. We are a small business offering a personal level of service that can’t be done by a travel agent who isn’t local. It can’t be done over the phone from another country.

“We have personally visited every single vineyard, golf course, restaurant and accommodation that we send clients to. Flexibility is also key, and in every package we include concierge and chauffeur services.”

Beyond Bordeaux, Green & Grapes offers a dual-destination package that brings in the 2018 Ryder Cup course, Le Golf National in Paris.

[greensandgrapes.com](http://greensandgrapes.com)

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