



HEART OF BORDEAUX
The tower at Château
Latour. Left: Château
Pichon Longueville
Baron.

Bordeaux

French Wine Explorers, wine-tours-france.com

Our first wine tour began around midnight in the middle of a torrential downpour. Although French Wine Explorers offers to pick up its guests from the airport or train station in Bordeaux, we had decided to drive ourselves to the starting point in Pauillac. Our GPS had guided us along a dirt track through the vineyards, when the spectacularly illuminated **Château Pichon Longueville Baron** loomed out of the darkness, its gabled, fairytale glory mirrored in a huge reflective pool set in the garden below. It was a magnificent sight and a surreal experience – one minute we were lost and alone, the next we were nestled in the luxurious comfort of the French Wine Explorer's six-day, five-night Bordeaux Prestige Wine Tour.

The château, whose six rooms were reserved exclusively for our group of 10, provided an exalted setting for this legendary tour. Elegant, authentic and slightly eccentric, with lavish period furniture, sweeping staircases, taxidermy birds and extravagant flower arrangements, plus a personal chef and ultra-modern cellars, it neatly encapsulated the spirit of our Bordeaux sojourn.

The tour itself had a dream itinerary – including meeting the owners and cellar masters of the world's most illustrious châteaux. We were set to explore the very heart of winemaking.

Pascale Bernasse, French Wine Explorer's president, explains tours are often the only way to visit Bordeaux's leading châteaux. "Because of our contacts in the wine business, our guests have access to prestigious wine estates which are not open to the general public," she says. "Seeing all five first growths, plus Château d'Yquem, makes for a very exclusive itinerary."

Our tour was led by the charming and informative Wendy Narby, a wine expert who spent years making wine with her family in Sauternes. The first stop was **Château Margaux**, which exudes the rarified air of an estate that has guided the wine world for centuries. Here, we explored bustling, historic cellars, and heard about the intricacies of the art of blending so vital to Bordeaux wine. Then came the long-anticipated moment we tasted the 2007 Château Margaux Pavillon Rouge and 2007 Château Margaux – elegant wines that lived up to their considerable reputations.

Moving on to **Château Latour**, we entered a starkly modern tasting room, with polished concrete floors, soaring ceilings, and a vast, glass, wine bottle-shaped tank suspended along one wall, a solitary tiny goldfish swimming inside. The room had a surprisingly intimate air and glorious vineyard views to the river. We tried the 2006 Château Latour Pauillac, 2005 Château Latour Les Forts de Latour and 2004 Château Latour Grand Vin in a setting that only added to their extraordinary appeal. Before strolling back to our château, we popped in for a tasting at nearby second-growth Pichon Lalande, where the highlight was the opulent, ruby-red 2004 Château Pichon Longueville Comtesse de Lalande.

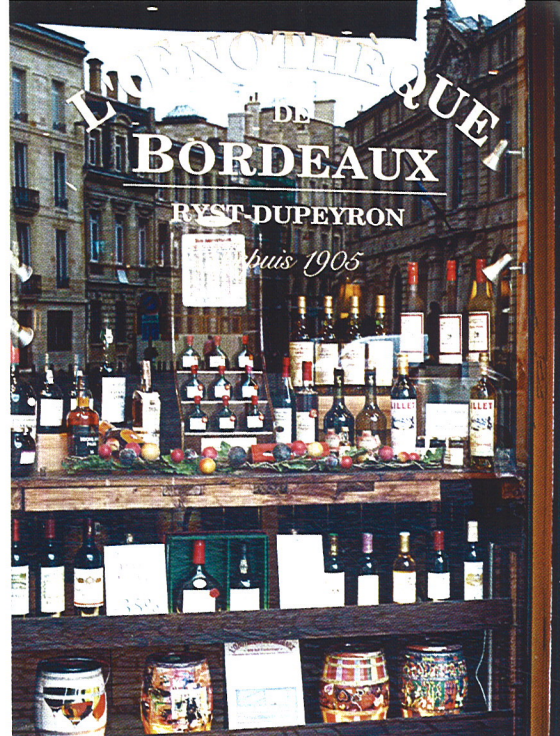
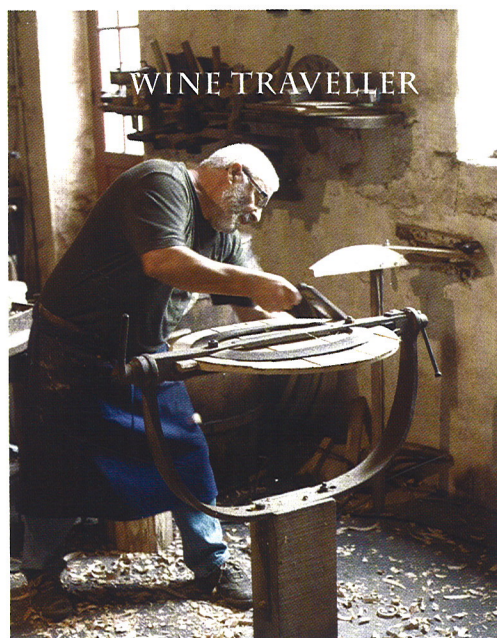
After such a privileged experience, I wasn't expecting our evening meal at **Château La Lagune** to make an impression. But cellar master Jerome Juhé's hospitality at this lovely château was unforgettable and his tour of the recently revamped winery showed us another side of Bordeaux. The wines, including 2007 Château de La Lagune Moulin de la Lagune, and the 2007 and 2009 Château de La Lagune, gave a clear demonstration of the recent rapid rise in La Lagune's reputation under the guidance of young winemaker Caroline Frey.

The stately château facade and manicured grounds provided a distinct contrast to the lavishness of the interiors, complete with chandeliers and themed guest rooms. Dinner was held in the cellar, with vaulted ceilings and tiled walls hung with copper pots. The chef cooked alongside us, dishing up sautéed vegetables with quail, followed by glasses of delicate crème brûlée. We enjoyed several wines including Mademoiselle L, an accessible, affordable wine suited to a young market, and the 2005 Château La Lagune Moulin de la Lagune. Meanwhile Juhé gave us a fascinating insider's look at the region, and at the end of the evening, he followed us out to the bus, still talking, still charming and waving until we were out of sight.

Our second day started at **Château La Mission Haut-Brion**, an illustrious estate now surrounded by suburbs. Recent renovations have reinforced a "cathedral of wine" atmosphere, with a nod towards the priests who grew grapes here in the 1600s, and the château retains the rarified air of old-world Bordeaux. For lunch we headed to Le Saprien restaurant where floor-to-ceiling glass fostered a feeling of being nestled in the vineyards as we tucked into a fennel and foie gras soup, tortilla with chorizo and potato, crayfish with salmon, followed by mille feuille. There were superb local drops to savour, including the G de Guiraud dry white wine and Sauternes from Château Guiraud, one of only two premier cru wines in the appellation, the other being Château d'Yquem, which serves as a delightful segue to the next destination on our itinerary.

Set on a lone hilltop – the highest point in Sauternes, **Château d'Yquem** resounds with four centuries of history. As we looked out from under ancient trees to the sweeping vineyard views we were told how the fungus botrytis cinerea transforms the almost-ripe, or damaged, white grapes into "liquid gold". Then we enjoyed a tour of the cellars and wandered around the château. Finally, we tried the exquisite 2008 Château d'Yquem Sauternes, which had a beautifully intense bouquet and elegant linearity.

After a very pleasant walk along Bordeaux's revamped riverfront and grand boulevards we headed to the Lion D'Or, a restaurant so popular with local winemakers that many of them even have their own pigeon holes for their favourite wines. The bistro meal was all that we hoped for and we had a wonderful sense of being at the very centre of the winemaking world. As we sipped on the 2000 Château Leoville Barton, we watched waiters play to the crowd in an entertaining charade, and navigate a truly memorable cheese trolley between tables.



DISTINGUISHED GUESTS

Clockwise from top left:
crates at Château Margaux;
making barrels on site; a
Bordeaux city wine shop;
Château Pichon Longueville
Baron; the chef at Château
La Lagune; Château Pichon
Longueville Comtesse de
Lalande; pouring wine at
Château Margaux.

BORDEAUX PRESTIGE TOUR

French Wine Explorers,
info@wine-tours-france.com.

DURATION: six days, five nights

NUMBER OF GUESTS: 12 max.

PRICE: \$US5990 (A\$5620)

2012 TOURS: May 21-26, June 4-9,

June 18-23, November 14-19

Tour commences: city of Bordeaux

ITINERARY

Day 1 – Transfers from Bordeaux to
Château Pichon Longueville Baron,
Pauillac.

Day 2 – Château Margaux,
Château Latour and Château Pichon
Longueville Comtesse de Lalande,
all in Pauillac; and Château La
Lagune, Medoc.

Day 3 – Château La Mission Haut-
Brion, Pessac Léognan; and Château
d'Yquem, Sauternes.

Day 4 – Château L'Eglise Clinet,
Pomerol; Château Figeac, St-Emilion;
dinner Château Pichon Longueville
Baron, Pauillac, with author Dewey
Markham Jr.

Day 5 – Château Lafite Rothschild,
Pauillac; and Château Cos
d'Estournel, St-Estèphe.

Day 6 – Breakfast at the chateau
before transfers to the airport or
train station.

