

## **The 1855 Bordeaux Classification; complete nonsense, sorry Jancis.**

By Dave March CWM

So much has been written about the 1855 Classification of the wines of Bordeaux that it seems almost in bad faith to state that most of what is written is wrong.

That includes international wine educational courses and most text books, including august works by Tom Stevenson, Stuart Walton and even the 'Oxford Companion to Wine' by Jancis Robinson. Not to mention numerous web sites, and here I include [www.winesearcher](http://www.winesearcher.com), [www.winespectator](http://www.winespectator.com), [www.wikipedia](http://www.wikipedia.org) and even Bordeaux's own site [www.bordeaux.com](http://www.bordeaux.com).

At the risk of litigation, I feel someone should herald the research of Dewey Markham Jr and set the record straight. Dewey has spent a lifetime researching Bordeaux and has the evidence to prove his seminal work, '1855: a History of the Bordeaux classification' (John Wiley & Sons, 1997). Nearly 20 years on from his revelations and we still get it wrong.

Dewey shows there are several inaccuracies in nearly every summation of the Classification. Consider the most repeated;

'The 1855 classification of Bordeaux wines was created at the request of Napoleon III' (winesearcher), '..drawn up at the behest of Napoleon III' (The New Illustrated Guide to Wine, Stuart Walton) and set in stone by Wikipedia; 'Emperor Napoleon III requested a classification system for France's best Bordeaux wines that were to be on display for visitors from around the world'.

Wrong.

In response to the Great Exhibition of 1851, held near London, Emperor Napoleon III upstaged it by announcing a 'Universal Exhibition' in Paris and authorised invitations to all French regions to showcase new technologies, industries or products.

(He)...'wanted all the country's wines represented' (winespectator).

Wrong. Wine was not among the products as at that time it was merely a beverage, and often not a very good one. Burgundy and Champagne decided to add wine to their exhibit and enquired if Bordeaux would do likewise.

'He invited Bordeaux's Chamber of Commerce to arrange an exhibit' (winespectator).

Wrong.

Napoleon had nothing to do with any region's exhibits. Wine was not requested. But Bordeaux's Chamber of Commerce did not want Burgundy to upstage them, so made

plans to add some wine to their display. The Chamber invited 6 bottles of wine from any wine producer interested, not many were, but they coddled some bottles together – all uniformly labelled and nondescript – and sent them off to Paris.

On display, the bottles looked boring, so a large map of the region was added and a request sent back to the Chamber for a list of the best producers so that their position could be shown on the map. The Chamber of Commerce did not have that amount of wine knowledge so gave the task to the *Syndicat des Courtiers* (wine brokers) who supplied a list based on many that already existed. Dozens of lists of Bordeaux 'growths' had been developed over more than a hundred years and the Brokers used these for their final list.

'The members of the chamber knew a hornet's nest when they saw one, so they passed the buck' (winespectator).

Wrong again.

No-one was too bothered about the wines – they were only sent to pretty-up the display and the list was only advisory – it was never meant to be final. The list was a working document, a guide, nothing more. It enabled the 'Growths to be located in Bordeaux more accurately for visitors to the exhibition.

'Curiously, all of the courtiers' selections came from the Médoc' (winespectator). And another much repeated criticism, 'Only growths from the Médoc and one estate from the Graves, Château Haut-Brion, were classified among red wines ('The 1855 classification' by *Claude Peyrouet*) and 'the league table saw fit only to include the wines of the Haut Médoc' (Walton).

All wrong.

ALL the wines of Bordeaux were considered, including Graves, St Emilion, Pomerol and the surroundings. But the list was based on market values of the wines over decades and only Haut Brion outside of the Médoc could attain the Médoc prices. Consider average grape retail prices as at 1854;

1 <sup>st</sup> Growths	Ff 2,800 / tun ( 4 barrels of wine)
5 <sup>th</sup> Growths	Ff 1,200 / tun
Cru Bourgeois	Ff 1,000 / tun
St Emilion / Graves	Ff 875 / tun

This is the reason why only Médoc wines (and Haut Brion) made the list, others weren't thought good enough by the consumer. Sweet wines from Sauternes and Barsac were classified because at that time they were far more expensive than red wines.

Then, the oft quoted, 'there has only ever been one change to the Classification'.

Wrong again.

There have been three changes to the list since it was drafted. A portion of one Sauternes property was sold off and became an additional Cru Classé. Château Cantemerle was added to the list as a fifth growth while the exhibition was still running because its proprietor provided sales receipts to the Brokers proving the merits of her estate (it was handwritten on, squeezed below the others). And, in 1973 after 120 years of lobbying, Château Mouton-Rothschild was elevated to first growth status.

To prove how unimportant the Classification was in 1855, it seems the wines were on display in an annexe, away from the main exhibition and there is no evidence that Napoleon even made one visit to the wines despite his frequent trips to the show. Strange how some 160 years later this unofficial (it has no legal force – it was never made law) has become so entrenched in wine history and even given binding credence by subsequent legal decisions in French courts. The Official 1855 Classification is not 'official' at all.