

DECANTER

St-Emilion: the grand tour

With 64 châteaux ranked equal at grand cru classé level, Bordeaux lovers can find the choice in St-Emilion daunting. James Lawther MW picks the best of the well-known names, the newcomers and the quiet achievers



Above: Château Grand Corbin-Despagne, declassified in 1996 and readmitted in 2006, has been run by the Despagne family for seven generations

THE ST-EMILION CLASSIFICATION, reassessed theoretically every 10 years, comprises a two-tier system of premier grand cru classé and grand cru classé wines. Led by high-profile estates such as Angélus, Cheval Blanc and Pavie, the first rank of 18 châteaux tends to hog the limelight, leaving the 64 grands crus classés (GCCs) in the shadows. The sheer number, too, makes it difficult to present a comprehensive picture. And yet, sift through the list of châteaux and there are clearly names to watch for quality, variety and even value.

The only hierarchy to be reviewed and revised on a regular basis, the St-Emilion classification has

its faults and detractors, but it remains a motivating force for producers. There may be objections to style or the quality aspect of certain terroirs, but on the whole it tends to highlight the movers and shakers – not least those that have joined or rejoined the ranks in the past 15 years. The difficulty, as mentioned, is the number, but – with a combined total of 925 hectares under production – the GCCs have a certain collective presence, representing just under 25% of the St-Emilion Grand Cru appellation.

The most recent classification was validated in 2012. New procedures were put in place, and in >

what is now considered an exam rather than a competition, successful candidates for GCC status had to achieve a score of 14 or above out of 20 (see April 2013 issue and Decanter.com for recent articles). Marks were allotted for a tasting of 10 vintages (50% of the final score), reputation (20%), terroir (20%) and winemaking practices (10%). Supervised by independent organisations Qualisud and Bureau Veritas, and by a committee of wine professionals from outside the region, 64 candidates achieved the standard required, including 16 new entrants. Only two candidates from the previous classification (2006) failed to make the grade, while seven others disappeared for assorted reasons (see box, p62). It was hoped that litigation from disgruntled producers could be avoided, but this now looks unlikely to be the case.

...The property to draw your attention to in this sector, though, is Château Grand Corbin-Despagne. François Despagne lives on the estate and is the seventh generation of the family to run it. A number of changes have been introduced since it was declassified in 1996 (to be promoted again in 2006), including lower yields for the Merlot and Cabernet Franc, a second label and organic cultivation, and the wines now have real vibrancy. It also represents the best value for money to be found in the GCCs at the moment.

If Grand Corbin-Despagne is a little more classical in style, Merlot-dominated Clos de l'Oratoire, further east, offers a touch more opulence and power, albeit with the same purity of fruit. This is another property owned by Count Stephan von Neipperg, and the same team that manages stablemates (now 1GCCs) Canon-la-Gaffelière and La Mondotte operates here under similar principles – respect for the soils and careful selection and cultivation of the vine.

'Grand Corbin-Despagne represents the best value for money to be found in the GCCs at the moment'

Château Grand Corbin-Despagne 17 (90)

£17.17(in bond)–£27.50 **Fine & Rare, Lea & Sandeman, Millésima**

Fresh and vibrant on the nose and palate. Lively fruit flavour and aroma. Long, firm finish. Plenty of energy here.

Drink 2017–2030 Alc 14.5%