

Château Margaux

A Day in Bordeaux with a Stop in Heaven

ON FRIDAY, MAY 18, THE CRYSTAL SYMPHONY DOCKED quayside in downtown Bordeaux. I and 18 others traveling with me were about to embark on an unforgettable wine experience. As many of you who read my columns know, I take a few people who are serious about learning more about food and wine on an annual trip using either Crystal's *Symphony* or *Serenity* as the venue. We do a number of on-board wine and food pairings and a special dinner, and we also visit local wineries when in port.

Of all wine destinations worldwide, it's probably safe to say that Bordeaux is the most exciting and popular. To a large extent, this is due to the overall passion that most serious wine drinkers have for Bordeaux. In addition to having a preponderance of the most famous names in wine, Bordeaux arguably produces the greatest red wine from Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Petit Verdot and Merlot of all the wine regions. Unlike visiting other wine areas, most of the châteaux are located within 35 miles of where our ship was docked. Alas, gaining access to many

of the châteaux is not easy (almost all are by appointment only).

I decided to start by setting the bar high. If you asked most wine crazed people which château they would most love to visit, Château Margaux would certainly be in the top five and probably number one or two. The problem is that Château Margaux is closed to the wine trade as well as to the public. Luckily, I had managed a visit when I was attending Vin Expo in June 1989, and engaged in some quasi-official roles and was forever smitten and wished to return. Over the years I have been fortunate to have met with the owner, Corinne Mentzelopoulos, and General Manager and Winemaker, Paul Pontallier, at least every other year. As a long-time, ardent fan and owner of many vintages of Château Margaux, I engaged with them often about this sublime nectar. Corinne had invited me to return, but time flies and finally, last October, I told her I was ready. Imagine her surprise when I told her that my dates were firm but it would mean an invite for nominally 20 people. She graciously extended the offer. Over the ensuing months, I worked with Aurore Cornic, public relations man-

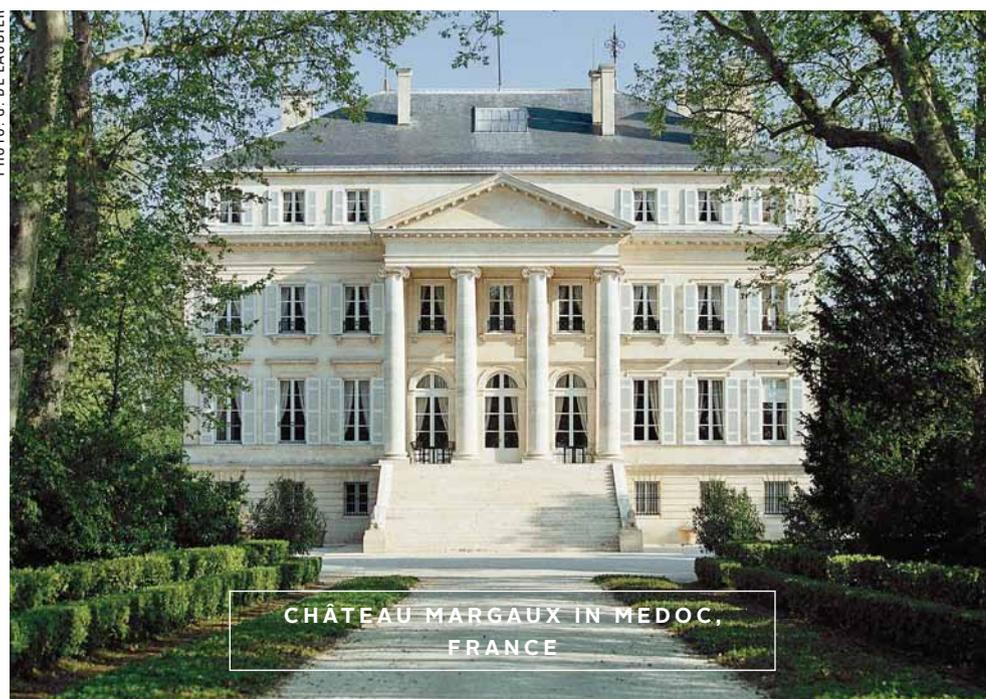


PHOTO: G. DE LAUBIER



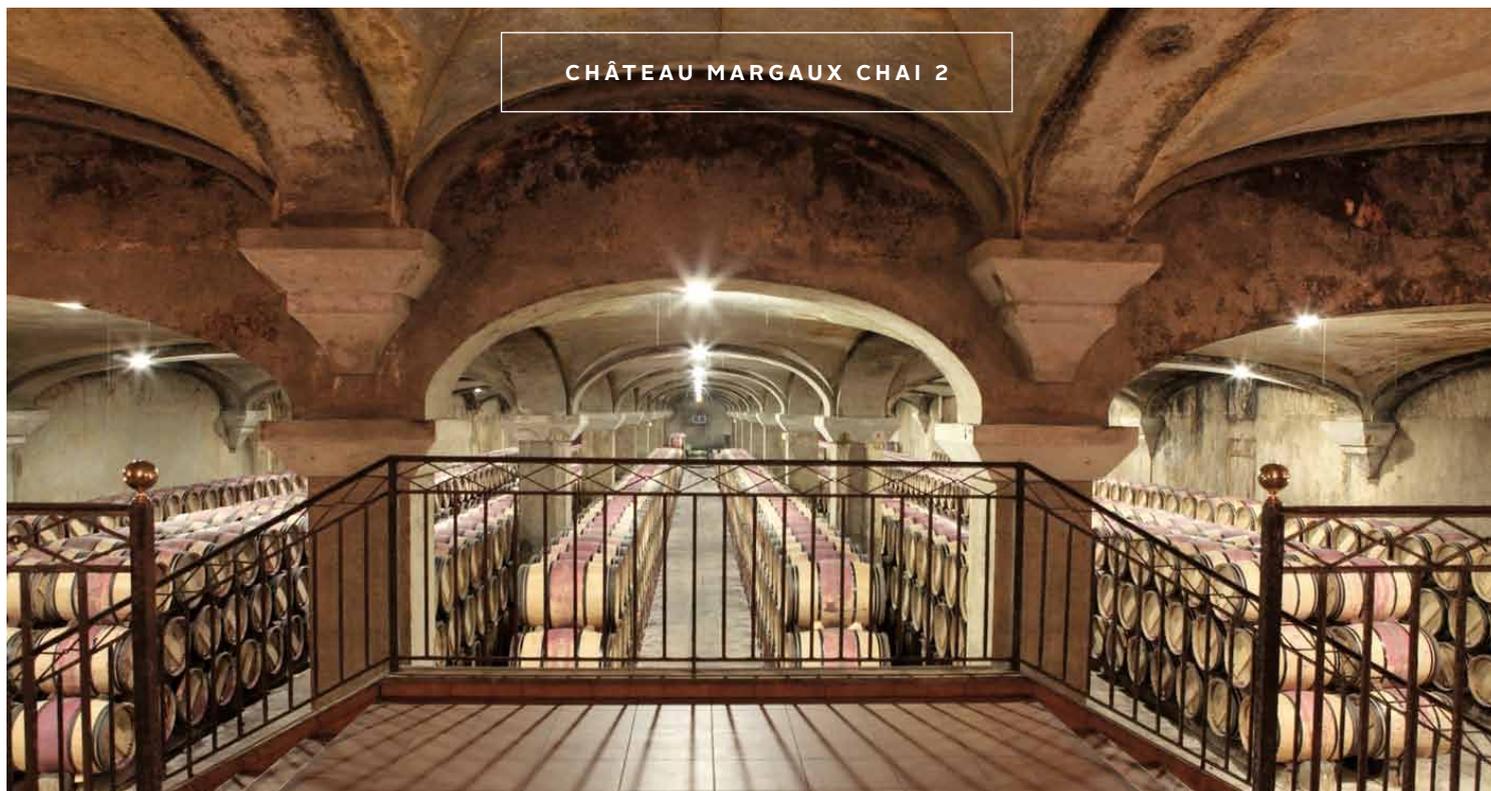
PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO

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ager for Château Margaux, and finalized the visit.

Château Margaux has been producing wine since the 15th century, but became more famous in later centuries and was enjoyed by Thomas Jefferson. It gained its rightful place when it, along with three other Bordeaux, achieved Premier cru (first growth) status in the Bordeaux Classification of 1855. The Ginestet family owned the property, largely or totally for the middle half of the 20th century. Although it often underperformed its peers in the '60s and '70s, the great leap forward came when Andre Mentzelopoulos acquired Château Margaux in 1977. Sadly, he died in 1980, but not before producing two excellent wines in 1978 and 1979. Sole owner since 2003, his daughter, Corinne, has shown exceptional abilities and insight in putting Château Margaux in the forefront of Bordeaux producers in most vintages. A key decision was to hire Paul Pontallier whose first vintage was the profound 1983 world-class wine.

We departed Bordeaux under a light mist and arrived at 10 a.m. The approach to the château is via a small tree-lined road, ending into a large,

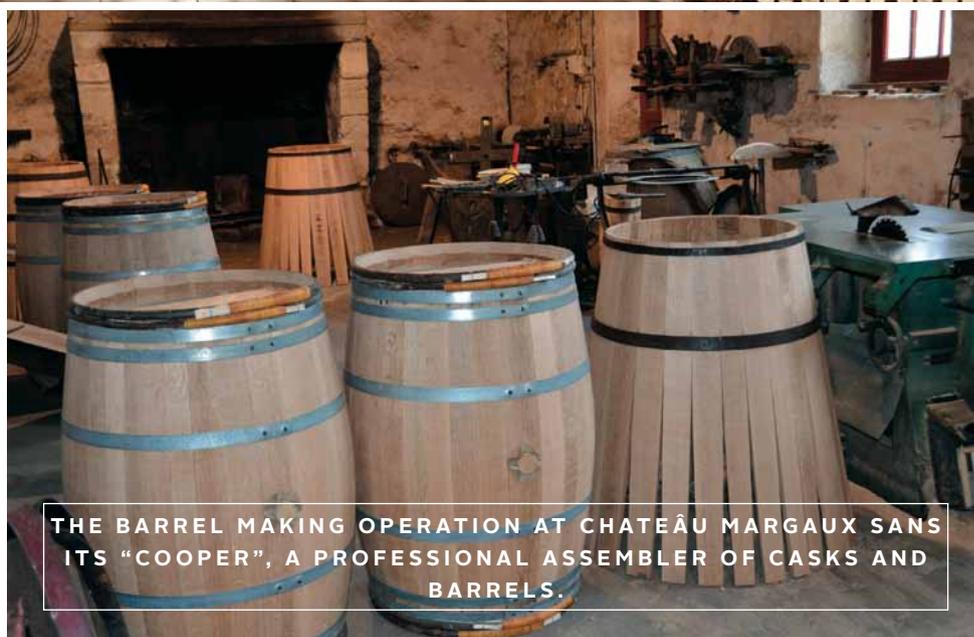


CHÂTEAU MARGAUX CHAI 2

PHOTO: MICHEL GUILLARD

wrought iron fence behind which majestically lies one of France's most famous icons, as well as one of world's most famous and beautiful wineries. We toured the normal operations of the winery but the highlight was the chai, where hundreds of barrels of Château Margaux, aged one and two years, were maturing. This was accompanied by almost non-stop photography. Also of particular interest was the barrel making operation. Although the cooper was not working, I had been able to observe him on my former visit. Château Margaux is one of the few remaining wineries in the world which extends its quality control obsession to the barrel production.

We finished with the tasting. We did not taste the dry white Pavillon Blanc du Château Margaux which has a production of approximately 35,000 bottles. Our hostess, Emilie Janot, poured the 2008 Pavillon Rouge (the second red wine of Château Margaux, representing 47 percent of red wine production in 2008, generally averages 200,000 bottles). This is a product of the best casks that do not make it into the Premier Grand Cru, Château Margaux. In general, these grapes come from younger vines and from parts of the vineyard that do not meet the standards of the flagship. It is wonderful – like a junior Château Margaux, which can be enjoyed much younger and at



THE BARREL MAKING OPERATION AT CHATEAU MARGAUX SANS ITS "COOPER", A PROFESSIONAL ASSEMBLER OF CASKS AND BARRELS

PHOTO: JIM BRYANT

a small fraction of the price of the Grand vin. This was followed by the 2008 Château Margaux which represented only 36 percent of red wine production or approximately 150,000 bottles annually.

Displaying a nose of great finesse and purity, this wine was very early in its drinking window yet showed great length and was rich and powerful. I remember a general silence fell over the group as we focused on this unique opportunity so that we could remember the great wine before

us, presented in such unbelievable surroundings. Having purchased and enjoyed Château Margaux often over the past three decades, I am secure in my knowledge that this precious time of rapture will be repaid many times in the forthcoming decades when I have occasion to open future bottles.

The remainder of our visit to Bordeaux will be featured in future editions of *Quintessential Barrington*. À votre santé! U