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## THE POUR

## The Paler Shade of Bordeaux

By ERIC ASIMOV

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IF you prefer a manual transmission, a vacuum tube amplifier or a phone that is just a phone and not a media center, then you understand how it feels to be a fan of good dry white Bordeaux. It's not at all easy to find what you want.



Joe Fornabaio for The New York Times  
Memorable Sip: A 1985 Lavelle-Haut-Brion, a Bordeaux, at Cru.

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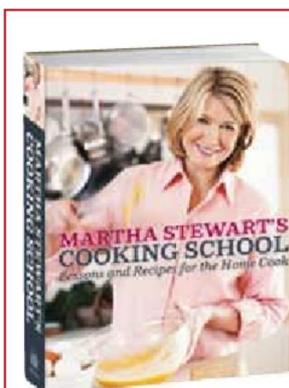
In his blog,



Almost any fine restaurant will offer a wine list with enough white Burgundies and chardonnays to float an aircraft carrier. But white Bordeaux? It has an archaic ring to it, reminiscent of the days of the British Empire, when the Bordeaux region seemed like one more of the king's dominions. Back then, fine wines from Graves, historically the most prestigious region for dry white Bordeaux, preceded the claret as surely as the fish course came before the mutton.

Red wine might have always dominated perceptions about Bordeaux, but white Bordeaux was once much more of a presence. A century ago more white grapes than red grapes were

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included the sweet whites of Sauternes and Barsac as well as the ocean of dry to semi-dry vin ordinaire that was usually labeled

Bordeaux blanc, Entre-Deux-Mers or Graves. Much of it was dreadful stuff, and after World War II growers began shifting to red. Clive Coates, an authority on French wine, estimates that the amount of red Bordeaux produced went from about a third of the harvest in the mid-20th century to more than 85 percent by the end.

Nowadays, white Burgundies outnumber white Bordeaux by roughly 30 to 1 at Cru, which has one of the finest wine lists in New York City. The proportion is slightly lower at Veritas, another wine-oriented restaurant. On lesser lists, you'll find scarcely any Bordeaux in the white section, which is full of wines from Burgundy, the Loire and California, along with Alsace, Germany, New Zealand and Austria. Even allowing that the producers of fine white Burgundy vastly outnumber the producers of fine white Bordeaux, there's no denying the fact that Bordeaux is an afterthought for lovers of white wine.

"It is one of my regrets that white Graves in stately maturity is almost unknown today," Hugh Johnson, the British wine writer, recently rued.

He might mourn as well the appellation Graves, the area south of the city of Bordeaux, which suffers from greatly diminished status. In 1987 the Graves region, the only one of Bordeaux's top appellations where most leading producers make both white and red wines, was cut in two. The northern end, encompassing the Bordeaux suburbs where many historic Graves vineyards like Haut-Brion and La Mission Haut-Brion are situated, was redesignated Pessac-Léognan, and now Bordeaux's best whites bear that appellation, although they can still be spoken of as Graves and bear the name Graves on the label as well. Bottles simply labeled Graves tend to be a lower order of wine.

Even when Graves was simply Graves, great white Bordeaux was always rare, yet whites from producers like Haut-Brion, Laville-Haut-Brion and Domaine de Chevalier make indelible impressions. These whites, made of varying blends of the sémillon and sauvignon blanc grapes, can evolve and improve for several decades.

I recently had a 20-year-old Laville-Haut-Brion, the white sibling of La Mission Haut-Brion, that was light-bodied yet dazzling in its intensity, with almost extravagant

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Mission are now owned by Domaine Clarence Dillon), is perhaps a little more finely etched and elegant, yet cut from a similar cloth. And then there is Domaine de Chevalier, a different sort of wine yet profoundly compelling as well, with a rich, almost viscous texture, tightly coiled with great complexity and subtlety, too.

If you can find them in retail shops, Domaine de Chevalier runs about \$50 to \$60 a bottle, Laville \$80 to \$100 or so, while Haut-Brion blanc, which is much more scarce, can cost three times as much. Still, it's much less than white Burgundy of comparable quality.

But you don't have to spend that much to get a taste of what good white Bordeaux can offer. Producers like Château Carbonnieux, Château de Fieuzal, Château Haut-Nouchet and Château Smith Haut Lafitte make fine, less expensive whites that, if they don't have the depth of the top echelon, still give a sense of its texture and intensity. Outside Pessac-Léognan, very good Graves whites come from Château du Seuil and Clos Floridène. Even a few chateaus in the Médoc, like Margaux and Talbot, make good white wines, though they lack the grace of the best Graves whites.

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