

BORDEAUX: THE CENTRAL MEDOC TERROIR

GRAVEL TERRACES OF ST-JULIEN, PAUILLAC & ST-ESTEPHE

Our map of these three famous communes at the heart of the Médoc, on the Left Bank of the Gironde estuary, shows both the vineyard land and the locations of châteaux – and what lies beneath.

In addition to showing the topography – contours, streams, the estuary – and the borders of the appellations, it maps the underlying terroir through the ‘Terraces’ approach. The origin and age of the soil material – in the Médoc’s case, gravels – form the basis. The six terraces identified by soil scientists each have differing kinds of gravel, dating from various phases of the Ice Ages. These gravel beds were eroded by rivers and streams into low, flat-topped mounds, bounded by steepish slopes. These attributes come across clearly on the map – the contour lines, spaced at 5-metre intervals, show the rises and falls of a landscape seamed by *jalles* and rivulets that drain excess water – and frost – into the Gironde estuary.

This area has four of the six terraces found in the wider Médoc. Terrace 1, found inland, to the west (towards the top of the map) is the highest and oldest. T3, the most common here, rises to heights of 20-26 metres and provides sites for many of the classed-growth vineyards. T4, found closer to the Gironde, is slightly lower and is home to many of the St-Julien classed growths, the riverside vineyards of St-Estèphe and to Ch Latour in Pauillac. A small patch of T5 can be spotted on the southern (left-hand) edge of the map.

Beneath most of these terraces is a bedrock of limestone, and the clay-limestone subsoils contribute to the character of the terroir. Some estates – Latour is one – have significant amounts of clay in their soil. This combination of subsoil and well-draining gravel, so perfect for the Left-Bank varieties, has been known about for centuries. Latour, for one, was in aristocratic ownership from the 1330s.

The formation of the Terraces was just one phase in the geological drama. The final step – one that had a particular effect on the vineyards of the Left Bank – was a sea-level rise that took place a mere 10,000 years ago. The ‘Flandrian Transgression’ flooded the low-lying land along the banks of the Gironde, creating tidal flats and marshland. This *palus* land, mostly drained in historical times, still isn’t suitable for quality vineyards: as you can see, the 5-metre contour coincides with the borders of the senior AOCs.

This map stems from two in my book, *Inside Bordeaux*. At book scale, these are presented as a gatefold pair: the topography, châteaux and AOC borders on one side, with the underlying geology opposite. Now with the production of this large-scale map, we have worked hard to combine, add to and enhance the two, and are now able to show you the whole picture for the first time.

These notes are to accompany your map: I hope you enjoy it.

Jane Anson, November 2024

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