

Chateau Ausone



Unquestionably one of the biggest names of the Right Bank, this is also one of the oldest chateaux in the whole of Bordeaux. Situated at the edge of the limestone plateau on the approach to the village of Saint Emilion, at an altitude of 75 metres, Ausone dominates your view as you drive in to the village, with its beautiful stone gateposts, steeply sloping vineyards, and dry stone walls. Underneath the chateau are kilometre upon kilometre of stone quarries, the smallest of which (at 1,800m²) is the wine cellar. This was excavated back in the 16th century (most of the stone in Saint Emilion ended up building either the village itself, or the handsome limestone buildings in central Bordeaux). Further underground are stone vaults dating back 500 years! The humidity in the cellars is at well over 90%, meaning that they rarely have to perform *ouillage* (topping up), and the angel's rarely get their share! Above ground there is also the Magdeleine chapel (hence the name of the second wine of the estate, Chapelle d'Ausone), which again adds to the sense of mystique on visiting Ausone. They are currently renovating the chapel, and also creating a small room for receiving visitors (although don't hold your breath that this will ever be a centre for wine tourism - the Vaultier family are very discreet, and it is tough to get an appointment here).

One of the smallest of all the top estates in Bordeaux, at just over seven hectares (smaller than its Saint Emilion rival Cheval Blanc, smaller even than Petrus in neighbouring Pomerol, but twice the size of le Pin), vines have been cultivated here since the time of Roman poet Ausonius. I'm not sure anyone is suggesting that Ausonius actually owned this vineyard, but it is likely to have been named in his honour.



Anyway, beautiful setting and historical details aside, what people really come here for is the wine. Ausone has been managed since 1995 by Alain Vauthier, but there were a number of acrimonious years with the Dubois-Challon family. He took over full control only in 2003, and freed of constant in-fighting over methods and techniques, the wine has just got better and better. The vineyard at Ausone is planted to 45% Merlot and 55% Cabernet Franc, planted at 6,500 vines per hectare, and face southeast on a steep slope, so is well protected from north wind and rain. Vinification takes place in small wooden vats, at a relatively cool temperature of around 28 degrees, and the wine is never chaptalised. This is a wine that you just can't help but look forward to tasting, and I've never been here and been disappointed. I hear from those who can afford to buy *en primeur* wines of this calibre that Ausone is the only one that just never seems to be available, even more tough to find than Petrus and Le Pin.

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Also worth tracking down, by the way, are the other Vauthier wines: Chateau Moulin St Georges, Chateau de Fonbel