

## Chateau d'Yquem

Sauternes can be a difficult place to navigate around, and you often find yourself using Yquem as a kind of viticultural North Star, standing as it does at the highest point of the appellation, its medieval stone turrets softened by the spreading leaves of the cedar tree that stands just to one side.

The tree was planted by recovering soldiers during World War Two, when the chateau was temporarily used as a military hospital, and today is just one small part of a beautiful botanical garden that lies behind the stone walls.

Producing perhaps the most famous sweet wine in the world, Yquem is owned by luxury goods house LVMH, with the impeccably turned-out Pierre Lurton as director. Yquem has 113 hectares of vines, but only 100 hectares are in use at any one time, with plantations of 80% sémillon and 20% Sauvignon blanc.

Standards at all 1855 First Growth estates (Yquem is famously Premier Cru Classé Supérieur, so theoretically one notch ahead of the red wine First Growths) are legendary – and put that together with the meticulous attention to detail needed for all Sauternes, and you really have a whole lot of manpower going on. Vineyard work is all done by hand, and grape pickers during harvest will visit each row of vine up to ten times, carefully selecting only the berries that have reached the perfect state of 'noble rot', where they have been shriveled almost to raisins, but still with a touch of lusciously concentrated juice inside. Yields are low, as at all Sauternes properties, and can vary from 3 or 4 hectolitres per hectare to 15 hectolitres depending on if the weather conditions play ball. And as befits a vineyard where such care is taken, all fertiliser is organic and used sparingly, with no chemicals ever applied.

In the cellars, fermentation stops naturally, leaving an average of 125grams per litre of residual sugar, but reaching up to 140g in some years (not that you'd know – a signature of this wine is its delicately sour notes of citrus and lime blossom, that cut through the honeyed sweetness). Its ageing abilities are legendary, easily hitting a century in the best vintages.

The wine maker, Sandrine Garbay, has been making the wine here since 1998 (the previous cellar master was at Yquem for 44 years), with Denis

Dubourdieu – who owns Chateau Doisy Daene, as well as being a professor at the institute of oenologist – as consultant winemaker.

There is no second wine, but the chateau produces a fantastic dry white wine, called Y d'Yquem, made from 50% sémillon and 50% Sauvignon blanc.

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## Wine Searcher profile – Chateau d'Yquem

You can tell you're at Yquem just by looking at the pickers.

For a start, there's a swarm of them – between 180 and 200 going through the 100 hectares of vines, painstakingly selecting bunch by bunch, grape by grape – and the animated chatting during breaks suggests that they have known each other for quite some time. Around 80% of pickers at Yquem return year after year, mainly drawn from the local community, with some 20% retirees who are valued for their meticulous attention to detail, and their flexibility which means they can turn up for work at short notice, as soon as the weather conditions are right.

'We need a large team which can be split over several areas, and work off and on over one month in most vintages,' says Antoine Depierre, chef de culture, 'and it takes specialists to recognise the different stages of evolution of the berries, so we try to ensure continuity year on year.'

The pickers are a testament to the astonishing attention to detail required to make Yquem, upheld as the world's greatest sweet wine. The timing of harvest is notoriously tricky – you need the right combination of sunshine, mist and rain to kick start the noble rot, and then have to wait for sufficiently high sugar concentration, with a potential alcohol of perhaps 20°, which may take you into late October, even November, while hoping that rain doesn't fall at the wrong moment to dilute the flavours. The pickers will trip through the vines up to 10, even 11, times per vintage – monitoring the notoriously uneven spread of noble rot (*botrytis cinerea*), and picking only the grapes that have reached the perfect shriveled state. Most Sauternes property will do this taxing selection three or four times, but Yquem pushes every aspect of its

production just a little bit further. In years when too few 'perfect' berries are produced, they simply skip the vintage (over the past century, that has happened in 1920, 1915, 1930, 1951, 1952, 1964, 1972, 1974 and 1992).

This is one of Bordeaux's oldest and most venerated estates. Its official birth date is given as 1593, but parts of the chateau itself date back to the 1400s, and it was accorded its own rank in the 1855 classification as Premier Cru Classé Supérieur, so theoretically one notch ahead of the red wine First Growths.

Despite all this, Yquem has recently proved more reactive and contemporary than many of its classified peers. It has an active social media strategy (Haut-Brion being the only other First Growth to be similarly engaged with social media – although Lafite has recently ventured into Weibo in China), and a raft of consumer-friendly initiatives such as the Yquem by the Glass campaign rolled out with Michelin-starred restaurants in Paris, Geneva, London, Washington DC and Monaco, where director Pierre Lurton hopes to 'create new ambassadors for the brand'.

There is even something refreshing about Yquem being the only one of Bordeaux's First Growths to have a female winemaker – Sandrine Garbay, who has been with Yquem since 1994, when she was hired aged 27 as laboratory assistant, and promoted to winemaker in 1998. The previous cellar master Guy Latrille, was at Yquem for 44 years, and spent the last four of them training up Garbay ('an unforgettable experience' she has called it). The last few vintages have seen Denis Dubourdieu – owner of the nearby Barsac estate Chateau Doisy Daene, and professor at the prestigious Bordeaux Institute of Oenology – as consultant winemaker, but it is Garbay and Lurton who are taking the major decisions throughout the year.

'I dreamt once of becoming a laboratory assistant, and spent four years from 1990 and 1994 at the Institute of Oenology, studying mainly about red wines and malolactic fermentation,' says Garbay. 'I loved this, but found that I wanted to be on the ground, among the vineyards – and I was lucky enough to meet the right person at the right time. I started at Yquem two months after finishing my thesis.'

Continuing its move into modernity, the estate has recently hired a commercial director, Renaud Ruer, who acts also as a brand ambassador, travelling widely to hold tastings and dinners to promote Yquem. The commercial strategy is set by Lurton, and by owner LVMH, the luxury goods house which bought the property in 1999 from long-time owner Alexandre de Lur Saluces. The Comte de Lur Saluces stayed on for a few years as an ambassador for the brand, until leaving in 2003.

The LVMH ownership is significant because, although one of Lurton's first actions was to strengthen ties with the Place de Bordeaux, and the traditional selling system of *négociants*, LVMH has an enormously strong distribution network, and a key presence in China through its brands Louis Vuitton, Fendi, Krug and many others. This is one of the key new markets for Sauternes wines to develop, and one that has proved resistant thus far to the famed sweet wines of Bordeaux. Although the market there is still niche, it is highly brand-conscious, and Yquem has unarguably the strongest sweet wine brand name in the world, making it the likeliest Sauternes to benefit from an upswing in consumer interest (its phonetic translation in Mandarin becomes 'drop of gold').

There is no second wine produced here, and yields vary enormously from year to year, but rarely rise above 80,000 bottles per year. Production of the dry white, however, called Y d'Yquem, made from 50% *sémillon* and 50% *sauvignon blanc*, with one-third new oak, is increasing slowly - although still tiny, usually just a few thousand bottles per year.

Commercially, selling Yquem can be challenging in a region that is so dictated by the rhythm of the red wines. This was highlighted with the 2011 vintage, when Lurton chose not to release Yquem as a wine for the following Spring (April 2012), despite having brought the chateaux back to the system in 2006. In explaining his decision, he cited the economic crisis, which had led to so many 2011 red wines dropping their prices and yet still have difficulty finding buyers, and said he would prefer to 'bring it out at a more suitable moment, one that suits the excellence of the wine in this vintage.'

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