

SAINT-EMILION – BORDEAUX’S MOST WELCOMING WINE REGION

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Set in the heart of the Libournais, Saint-Emilion is a celebration of singularity. Behind the ramparts of its storied mediaeval village stretches a wine region unlike any other in Bordeaux. Here, historic, family-owned properties still thrive and many gladly welcome visitors through their doors. We venture into what locals fondly call the ‘land of the thousand chateaux’.

SAINT-EMILION IS A KIND OF PERFECT FUSION BETWEEN STONE AND PLANTS



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EVERY YEAR, THE MEDIAEVAL WALLED TOWN OF SAINT-ÉMILION ATTRACTS OVER A MILLION VISITORS

Perched on its limestone promontory, the mediaeval village draws over a million visitors annually. Its cobbled alleyways, monolithic church and historic monuments have made it one of the most popular wine tourism destinations in France. Yet behind this heritage showcase lies a viticultural landscape unlike any other. One of Saint-Emilion's defining features is its remarkable fragmentation. Its 5,400 hectares of vines are divided among some 800 properties – a mosaic that dates back to the Middle Ages. This unique configuration has shaped a distinctive winegrowing culture rooted in three pillars: the transmission of heritage down through the centuries, an intimate connection to the land and a deeply ingrained sense of hospitality. Listed as Unesco World Heritage, the village stands as a beacon, attracting wine enthusiasts from around the world. Saint-Emilion's winegrowers have turned this influx into opportunity, cultivating a genuine tradition of hospitality. This report introduces three of them.

HISTORIC ROOTS

Nowhere else in Bordeaux are vineyards divided into such small, finely parcelled holdings, many of them still firmly in the hands of the same families. “The Bon family has been known in Saint-Emilion since the 13th century”, explains Guy Richard, owner of Château Cadet-Bon. “In the 14th century, Jacques Bon – known as Le Cadet – planted a vineyard on the hillside north of Saint-Emilion, on what later became known as the Butte du Cadet”. Such historic roots are not the exception here but the rule. Les Vignobles Rollet offer another example: “The earliest document mentioning the Rollet family and Château du Vieux Guinot is dated 1729”, comments managing director Geoffroy Billot. “The Rollets are among the appellation's oldest winegrowing families”, he adds. At Château Saint-Georges, the story stretches even further back. “Its origins stem from the Gallo-Roman period”, recounts owner Jean-Philippe Janoueix. “Excavations carried out in the mid-19th century



HÉLÈNE ROLLET, PRESIDENT OF VIGNOBLES ROLLET, AND GEOFFROY BILLOT, THE COMPANY'S MANAGING DIRECTOR

uncovered the remains of an extensive Gallo-Roman villa, said to have belonged to the celebrated Latin poet Ausonius". Owned by the Desbois family since 1891, "the vineyards of Saint-Georges were entirely replanted after the phylloxera crisis", he adds. Janoueix joined the Desbois family in 2013 and is now the property's main owner.

Alongside these deep-rooted family lineages lies another defining feature: physical presence. The winegrowers live on site, tending their vineyards themselves. When Guy Richard took over Château Cadet-Bon in 2001, the vineyard "was in very poor condition. Weed killers had been applied everywhere and no tillage was done", he recalls. Born into a winegrowing family, Richard had built a successful career in retail. He then embarked on a complete overhaul of the vineyard at Cadet-Bon, recruiting the help of consultant winemaker Stéphane Derenoncourt and soil expert Claude Bourguignon. Weed killers were abandoned, tillage reinstated and microbial life in the soil revived. In 2018, he converted the estate to organic farming, "to guarantee a more respectful future", he says.

SMALLER ESTATES WITH A DIFFERENT BUSINESS MODEL

Although Saint-Emilion is home to several large, prestigious properties, most of its vineyards are farmed by much smaller estates. With an average holding of just 7 hectares, this fragmentation naturally shapes a specific business model.

Château Cadet-Bon, for instance, spans 7 hectares in total, including 6 of unbroken vines – a perfect illustration of this scale. Yet its modest size has not prevented it from retaining its Grand Cru Classé status, which it regained in 1996.

Les Vignobles Rollet operate on a slightly larger scale, with 32 hectares under vine across the Saint-Emilion and Saint-Emilion Grand Cru appellations, spread between the villages of Saint-Etienne de Lisse and Saint-Pey d'Armens. Here, the estate has grown steadily, block by block, over the years.

Château Saint-Georges, by contrast, is a true outlier, boasting 44 hectares of unbroken vineyards. "Such a configuration is rare in Saint-Emilion", confirms Jean-Philippe Janoueix.

This highly segmented vineyard landscape calls for different business strategies. Small estates cannot rely solely on the traditional negociant channels. Instead, they have had to cultivate direct-to-consumer sales, building long-term relations with their customers and embracing exports without intermediaries. "We have always made a point of listening to the end customer so that we can better respond to market expectations", explains Geoffroy Billot. "Today, we're not just selling wine – we're selling expertise". Les Vignobles Rollet earns between 75% and 80% of its revenue in export markets, primarily in Europe and also in French Polynesia where it has built a long-standing presence. "Our philosophy is to craft wines for pleasure", comments its managing director.

A SENSE OF HOSPITALITY

In the vineyards of Saint-Emilion, welcoming visitors at the cellar door is a long-standing tradition. "Long before my arrival, the Desbois family always opened its doors to the public", explains Jean-Philippe Janoueix. "And since hospitality is one of the values I hold dear, I've not only continued but expanded this activity".

At Château Saint-Georges, this policy has led to a wide range of visitor experiences. The 'Terroir and Nectar' tour introduces guests to vineyard work and concludes with a tasting of two vintages. The 'Sensations and Flavours' experience, set within the herb garden, explores the development of wine aromas through four fragrant petals. The 'Epicurean Tastings' pair wines, cheeses and charcuterie, while the 'Winegrower's Stop-Over' includes a walk through the vineyards followed by a picnic in the chateau's grounds. "We welcome many Americans and Spanish visitors", notes Janoueix. "What we hope to share with them is our attachment to the French art of living".

At Château Cadet-Bon, Guy Richard has also made hospitality a cornerstone of the estate's development. "We host tours and tastings at the winery. These activities have brought us a growing number of visitors, strengthened recognition of our family-run estate

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CHÂTEAU CADET-BON, ON LE CADET HILL, IS A GROWTH WHOSE HISTORY SPANS THOUSANDS OF YEARS



CHÂTEAU SAINT-GEORGES HAS 44 HECTARES OF UNBROKEN VINEYARDS, A RARITY IN SAINT-ÉMILION



JEAN-PHILIPPE JANQUEIX
PERPETUATES THE SENSE
OF HOSPITALITY INHERITED
FROM THE DESBOIS FAMILY



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GUY RICHARD, THE OWNER OF CADET-BON,
BEGAN EXTENSIVE RESTRUCTURING OF THE VINEYARDS IN 2001



WALKS THROUGH THE VINEYARDS AT CHÂTEAU SAINT-GEORGES



and enhanced awareness of our wines". For him, the aim extends far beyond selling bottles: "We enjoy telling the story of Cadet-Bon, showing the work accomplished in this beautiful vineyard, explaining the winemaking process and then inviting people to taste several vintages".

Les Vignobles Rollet have likewise embedded hospitality into their commercial strategy. "We welcome guests by appointment", explains Geoffroy Billot. "This openness enables us to establish a direct connection with consumers, share the estate's story and foster loyalty – many of these visitors later become ambassadors for our wines". With over a million visitors drawn each year to its Unesco-listed heritage, Saint-Emilion is a tremendous economic powerhouse for the entire region. Visitors who wander through its mediaeval streets inevitably continue their journey by discovering the surrounding estates.

CLOSENESS – AN ETHOS UNIQUE TO SAINT-EMILION

Château Cadet-Bon with its 6 hectares of vines, Les Vignobles Rollet and their 32 hectares and Château-Saint-Georges with its 44 hectares may differ in scale, story and commercial reach. Yet, all three share a common ethos: closeness.

Firstly, they remain close to the land – their owners live on the estate and personally tend their vineyards. Secondly, they cultivate a close relationship with their customers – they are winegrowers who engage, listen, adapt, travel and welcome visitors.

And finally, there is a closeness in the way the wines are sold: direct-to-consumers, through on-site hospitality and curated tasting experiences. The aim is not just to sell a bottle of wine but to convey a story, forge a connection and build lasting loyalty.

"We need to lift the sacred aura surrounding Saint-Emilion", concludes Geoffroy Billot. The true identity of the appellation lies in making its wines accessible, encouraging openness and celebrating the spirit of engagement. Here, the art of hospitality is nurtured just as carefully as the vines themselves.