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# Alexis Lichine's

# GUIDE TO THE WINES AND VINEYARDS OF FRANCE

THIRD EDITION, REVISED

Alfred A. Knopf New York 1986



### THIS IS A BORZOI BOOK

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# Also by Alexis Lichine

# ALEXIS LICHINE'S NEW ENCYCLOPEDIA OF WINES & SPIRITS (1967, 1974, 1981, 1984, 1985)

WINES OF FRANCE (1951)

# ALEXIS LICHINE'S GUIDE TO THE WINES AND VINEYARDS OF FRANCE

# by

# **ALEXIS LICHINE**

in collaboration with Samuel Perkins



TO SACHA AND SANDRA
raised in the vineyards of France
and now grown to be my companions
in the enjoyment of wine

# Author's Note

This book was originally conceived as a revision of my earlier work *Wines of France*, first published in 1951. But as the writing progressed, I became increasingly aware of the vast changes that have taken place in the world of wine over the past quarter-century. In fact, it was my privilege to be the instigator of some of these changes and the willing advocate of others. It was clear that the time was ripe for a completely new book about French wines and wine-making.

A project of this scope could not have been realized without the help of a number of people:

First, Émile Peynaud, one of the greatest of oenologists, who was generous in lending his experience and expertise, and who shares with me an abiding belief in, and love for, the greatness of Bordeaux wines;

Henri Meurgey, like his father before him, is an oenologist and a broker in Beaune, and former estate manager in Chambertin-Clos de Bèze. M. Meurgey allowed me to draw on his detailed knowledge of the growers and soils in the Côte d'Or—the region he knows so well;

Few people in France know their districts and their *métiers* as intimately as Jean-Pierre Moueix and his son, Christian. Had they lived a century ago, Saint-Émilion and Pomerol could have been classified in 1855, as the Médoc was in the great classi-

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

fication of the wines of the Gironde. Many thanks go to Georges Dubœuf, and to his assistant, Michel Brun. In our thirty years of friendship, M. Dubœuf has helped immeasurably to deepen my understanding of his beloved Beaujolais and Mâconnais;

Maurice Ninot was one of the artisans who assisted me when I first began estate-bottling on a large scale in Burgundy. His close friendship with the growers of the region has been a help in unraveling the intricate patterns of ownership among the Burgundy vineyards;

Patrick Léon is one of the few people in France with a knowledge of the wines of the whole country. Thanks also to Rosemary Barry for her contribution in time and interest; and to my editor, Charles Elliott, for his ready guidance;

The professional eye of Sam Perkins collaborated with me at all stages of the project. His enthusiastic and imaginative research was invaluable; his interest in every facet of wine was untiring. This book would not have come to fruition without him. My appreciation also to Katie Philson, for her faithful help at various stages of the book; to Victoria Foote, who gave me very valuable assistance with the new itinerary chapter in this book; and similarly to Elizabeth Schumann for further revisions. Above all, my sincere gratitude goes to Pierre Bréjoux, retired vice-president of the French National Institute of Place Names (I.N.A.O.), whose dedicated attention in the final stages of this project proved an immense help.

I am no less grateful to the many others who helped me and whose names are listed in the Acknowledgments at the back of the volume.

A.L.

# Preface

As an inveterate insomniac, I've often counted corks instead of sheep, and if it hasn't made me any wiser (it certainly didn't put me to sleep), it has at least given me many opportunities to mull over my own years with wine and to think about all the changes I have seen—and lived through. What are these changes?

I hardly know where to begin. Few people are aware of the upheavals that have occurred in the last thirty years of wine. Indeed, only now, in the course of writing this book, have I fully realized the chasm that yawns between the wine-innocent world that existed before World War II and the sophistication of today's consumers.

I have often been asked to write my autobiography, but I have always preferred the story of wine to that of my own exploits. On the other hand, much of the time I find that the two stories are one. I was born in Russia on the eve of the Revolution and, having toured the globe, came with my family to France, where I spent my childhood in Paris. After completing the courses at a *lycée*, I traveled in my late teens to the United States, where I enrolled at the University of Pennsylvania. On returning to Paris I found part-time work with the Paris edition of the *Herald Tribune*. The biggest news of 1933 was the repeal of Prohibition in the United States, and I took on an assignment that changed my life. Sensing that Americans would discover

wine, the editor of the *Tribune* wanted to attract potential wine and spirit advertisers with editorial profiles of France's major vineyard regions. Off I went in 1934, up and down the vineyard roads, from Champagne to Bordeaux. Although I had been an enthusiastic *amateur* of wines all my young life, my research and travels revealed to me the richness, the culture, and the subtlety of wine, to say nothing of the complexity of the wine business. I had found my calling.

In 1935, I returned to New York and took a job selling wine—at a store where bottles were hidden behind wooden paneling. The owners thought them too rare and refined for display! I soon began a Wine-of-the-Month Club, sending subscribers a bottle of wine every month, with background information and instructions for serving each selection.

Two years later, when working for a New York wine importer, I met Frank Schoonmaker, who at that time had a very fine retail wine shop in New York and circulated beautiful catalogues of wine to a mailing list of real aficionados—the hard-core oenophiles of the day. Schoonmaker's wines were bought for him in France by Raymond Baudouin, founder of the Revue des Vins de France and compiler of wine lists for, among others, Fernand Point's famous restaurant La Pyramide and Alexandre Dumaine's Hôtel de la Côte d'Or in Saulieu.

Baudouin was very knowledgeable about (and therefore unpopular with) the French wine shippers (négociants), not least because he was an early promoter of château- and estate-bottling. Traditionally, shippers bought wine in bulk, often disfiguring it by blending it with Algerian wines, and did the bottling themselves, collecting large profits. In 1939, I traveled throughout France with Baudouin. During the journey we stopped at a restaurant in the south, where the menu listed Romanée-Conti '29 for a dollar a bottle. After a bit of talk and a bottle of the superb vintage with our meal, we learned that the proprietor had eleven more bottles of this extraordinary—and virtually unobtainable—wine, and had never sold any. We bought his entire stock for \$11! Back at Frank Schoonmaker's in New York, we sold each bottle for more than all eleven had cost.

I recall on the same trip holding a newspaper and trying, in the glaring sun of the Beaujolais, to read the headlines announcing the declaration of war between France and Germany. Even that news took second place to my career in wine! Nor, in a way, was I alone: even after war was declared, Frank Schoonmaker continued to receive requests from Eleanor Roosevelt from the White House for good German wines. Like art, wine knows no ideology.

By 1941 our business was exclusively wholesale. Since, for obvious reasons, our stocks of European wines were beginning to run low, Schoonmaker and I set out for California. We approached the then leading wine-makers: John Daniel of Inglenook, Louis M. Martini, Carl and Herman Wente, Fountaingrove, Tony Korbel,

and F. Salmena. Subsequently, we were the first to market American wines under American names east of the Rockies. At the time, most American wines were sold (as many of them still are to this day) as so-called European equivalents, under such names as "Burgundy," "Sauterne" (without its final "s"), and "Chablis"—which they are not. As part of our efforts to root out this misleading practice, Schoonmaker and I introduced the word "varietal," indicating the grape variety along with the name of the county where it was grown.

After Pearl Harbor, when the United States entered the war, Schoonmaker went into the O.S.S. and I into the U.S. Army military intelligence. We sold our stocks of American wines to Charlie Berns, of Jack and Charlie's "21" Club and 21 Brands. Our French wines were sold off by the carload to several restaurants, among them Antoine's in New Orleans.

My recollections of the day-to-day aspects of military intelligence are much less vivid to me now than my memories of my other main wartime duty—taking charge of wines and other "V.I.P. requisitions" for the likes of Churchill, Patton, and Eisenhower, acting as aide-de-camp for the latter after VE-day. Then as now, as much diplomacy took place around the dinner tables as in the conference rooms.

Later in the war I "liberated" some extraordinary clarets—a 1906 Haut-Brion among them—for the table of Eisenhower and his guests, including Churchill and Averell Harriman. Eisenhower's taste ran to sweet wines, his favorite being Château Coutet, which I later supplied to him at the White House.

As a major and wartime aide-de-camp, I often shared in the enjoyment of my finds, which sometimes led to other remarkable experiences. It was, for example, over some claret at the Hôtel de Paris in Monte Carlo, after the liberation of France, that Winston Churchill, to whom I had been attached on several occasions, gave me a rambling discourse on the complexities of wine. I listened silently until I could stand it no more and then chimed in with my own remarks. Churchill sat bolt upright and said, "Boy, from now on you do the talking and I'll do the listening!"

Upon my return from Europe in 1946, I went to work as import-export manager for United Distillers of America, a group of distilleries owned by Armand Hammer, later of Occidental Petroleum fame. I put together some comprehensive lists of wines and spirits, but left Hammer in 1948 and started selecting wines for shipment to important customers in the United States. In this endeavor I had the help of H. Seymour Weller, a cousin of Douglas Dillon, Ambassador to France under President Kennedy, later Secretary of the Treasury, and who with his late father Clarence Dillon, was owner of Château Haut-Brion.

Arriving in the Médoc soon after the war, I discovered the châteaux in disrepair and the owners with little hope of finding buyers for their wines. There was no recognition on the part of the shippers or the growers of any markets beyond their old, familiar ones, now wrecked by the war. Visits to vineyards were discouraged and foreign wine merchants rarely were able to push beyond the warehouses of the shippers in Bordeaux. Philippe de Rothschild, of Château Mouton-Rothschild, was unusual among growers of the time for inviting visitors to his property.

In 1955, in order to coordinate my selections from all over France and to expand my clientele throughout the world, I started a shipping company in Margaux. I dealt exclusively in château-bottled Bordeaux and estate-bottlings from Burgundy, Beaujolais, and other regions of France. At that time château- and estate-bottling, with the wines then centralized under one roof for combined shipments, was not a general practice. But it soon caught on. Alexis Lichine and Company became a success and I moved its offices to the famed Quai des Chartrons in Bordeaux.

In Burgundy, only a handful of producers were bottling their wines at the domaine and it was an uphill fight to persuade the rest to follow suit. Today, not only are they doing their own bottling—a job the négociants used to do after blending—but they are further cutting out the shippers by selling wine directly to the consumer.

Estate-bottling of Burgundies won acceptance in England much later than in the rest of the world. Until 1967, as the largest shipper of estate-bottled Burgundies in France, I had not sold so much as a single case to an English buyer. No doubt this was due to the system of the English wine merchants, who "interpreted" wines for their clients, providing certain "styles" of Pommard, Clos de Vougeot, and so on. Although legal at the time (only because Britain did not belong to the Common Market and was not subject to the Appellation Laws of France), this practice usually made for wines that were heavy, thick in the mouth, with little nuance and often no more than a faint hint of the complex and delicate Pinot Noir grape of Burgundy. It's a blessing that this situation has changed since Britain has become part of the Common Market.

As a neophyte buyer in Burgundy, I accepted numerous invitations to eat with the growers at their midday meal. But after a couple of experiences of drawing up a chair at one o'clock for lunch only to rise at six, then to have to sit down again at eight with another grower for dinner, I soon learned that there was a better way to do business. I'd leave the lunch hours open for the haggling that always goes with buying wines, especially at the estates in Burgundy. At least I always knew I could find the growers at home, returned from the vineyards at the sacred hour of noon.

Resentful of attempts by outsiders to penetrate their stronghold, the shippers offered resistance at every level. Outsiders faced the difficulty of traveling not only from the United States to France by ship but also within France from one vineyard area to another. There was no regularly scheduled commercial trans-Atlantic air service, and not until 1961 was it possible to fly from Paris to Bordeaux. The French

wine establishment was a closed society, with family and business ties interwoven through many generations. Only with great difficulty could it be breached.

Moreover, at that time the export wine market consisted largely of people who drank only Bordeaux First and Second Growths (then cheap), without any desire to broaden their experience.\*

Around 1950, I conceived the idea of a book to explain estate-bottled Burgundies, which had become a specialty of mine. Most wine books then available were patterned closely on works like George Saintsbury's Notes on a Cellar-Book. They tended to be esoteric cellar records of great bottles—lavishly praised—rather than practical accounts of the story of wine from vine to bottle for the consumer. Indeed, many of the authors hardly acknowledged the part that grapes played in winemaking. Still, there were great ones among them, particularly the late André Simon, one of wine's finest writers, who contributed greatly to the reputation of wine as the highest expression of nature. The scope of my book quickly grew to include the wines of Bordeaux, and from there it was only a short jump to the Wines of France, whose publication brought me over a quarter-century of friendship with publisher and wine buff Alfred A. Knopf. (I should note in passing some help I received in preparing the index in 1951 from another good friend, a lady whose name then was Grace Kelly.)

In 1951, with the book safely off my hands, I began to look about the Médoc for a property of my own. A large number of châteaux were on the market, including some of the most illustrious names of Bordeaux, but it was Château Cantenac-Prieuré which fired my imagination. Hoping for endorsement of my idea from men with experience in such matters, I sought the advice of the Duc de Montesquiou-Fézensac, owner of the beautiful Château de Marsan, in Armagnac, and of Georges Delmas, régisseur (vineyard manager) of Château Haut-Brion. Pierre de Montesquiou took one look at the ruinous state of the house and warned me that it would take decades and a fortune to restore. Delmas was equally emphatic after an informed inspection of the state of the vineyard. Luckily I disregarded their well-intentioned warnings, and took a plunge I have never for a minute regretted. Although the technical aspects of running a château may appear complicated, available local expertise, ripened over centuries, makes the task comparatively easy.

It is a long-standing tradition in the Médoc for the owner of a vineyard to join his name to the established title of the property. By law, the names laid down in the Classification of 1855 belong to the Committee of Classified Growths. I applied to the Marquis de Lur-Saluces, then president of the committee, who, in 1953, officially

<sup>\*</sup> See the chapter "Shall the Old Order Change?" for an explanation of "First and Second Growths," and of wine classifications in general.

authorized the change of name to Château Prieuré-Lichine. This will remain the château's official name long after I'm gone, although I still see columns by English wine writers who refuse to acknowledge the change that took place more than thirty years ago!

Soon after the Prieuré had become mine, Château Lascombes came on the market. With a group of enthusiastic and supportive shareholders, including David Rockefeller, George F. Baker Jr., Paul Mannheim, Warren Pershing, and Gilbert Kahn, I plunged for a second time, with equal pleasure and success. We finally sold Lascombes in 1971, and the sale enabled me to increase my holdings at Château Prieuré-Lichine. That property, which began as 11 hectares, now covers 62 hectares (155 acres) of vineyards.

By 1953, I owned small parts of Latricières-Chambertin and Bonnes-Mares in Burgundy, as well as the two châteaux in Bordeaux. The export company which bore my name soon grew to be one of the largest dealing in fine wines in France, and in the United States my activities as an importer, distributor, and all-round crusader on behalf of wines expanded at the same rate as the burgeoning interest in (and consumption of) wine. I was spending much time in helping to convert the United States to wine. For many years I faced six-week trips three or four times a year by propeller plane, train, and bus from coast to coast, deep into the grass roots of the U.S., which started to bear fruit. It was at about this time that I began the protracted labors that finally resulted in the publication of my *Encyclopedia of Wines & Spirits* in 1967 (revised and expanded in 1974 and every year thereafter, with a third edition published in 1981 and revised in 1982 and again in 1984, and a fourth updated and revised edition in 1985).

It became increasingly obvious to me in the mid-fifties that the 1855 Classification of the wines of the Bordeaux region had, after a hundred years, outlived its usefulness. It seemed high time to make the relative standings of the châteaux more accurate and comprehensible to buyers, especially in view of the boundary changes that have occurred with almost every sale of a property. Therefore, after consulting over seventy of the most knowledgeable palates in the Bordeaux wine trade, I devised my own classification system, published for the first time in 1962 and updated periodically since then. It is fully explained in the chapter "Shall the Old Order Change?" in this book.

Quite apart from the difficulties of buying wines in postwar France, the American market for wine after the Second World War was hard to crack. As an importer, I found my influence severely curtailed by the complicated legal system that controls the distribution of wines and spirits in the United States to this day. The wine and spirit laws, being different in each state, barred in many states an outside importer from having any contact with the client, whether as wholesaler or as retailer.

Many of the wholesale liquor distributors in the late 1940s were onetime bootleggers, reluctant to take on a product for which they foresaw no market. Retailers, for the most part, apparently felt the same way. My only recourse was to take the crusade for wine directly to the consumer.

My campaign followed a pattern that was adapted to circumstances as I found them. In Detroit, for instance, I went to the city's best restaurant, where I met Lester Gruber, the proprietor, on the eve of his departure for Europe. I tore up his proposed itinerary and gave him a revised version, based on a trip I had made two years earlier with Alfred A. Knopf. My high-handed methods produced a lasting friendship and eventually helped to establish wine as an indispensable feature of the Detroit restaurant scene. It was not long before bottles began to appear on the tables of private homes as well. This scenario, recast and rescripted as necessary, repeated itself from city to city across the country.

In 1959, I spent two days in an attempt—ultimately successful—to sell 42 assorted cases of wine to the largest retail spirits company in Milwaukee. The shipment (the first French wines the company had ever stocked) sold out in a week, and the next order, unsolicited this time, was for 350 cases. Shortly thereafter, the then Governor of Wisconsin, Warren Knowles, responded enthusiastically to my suggestion that he lay down a wine cellar—a task in which I was delighted to serve as consultant—and in no time it seemed that all of Wisconsin wanted wine. The hundreds of thousands of bottles now sold annually in the state can be traced in a direct line to that first sale of 42 cases. The Wisconsin example was typical of what happened not only in the Middle West, in the East, and in California, but also throughout the United States.

The problem of customer resistance was nothing in comparison to the legal bottlenecks that impeded the wholesaler, the retailer, and the restaurateur. Interstate and intrastate licensing systems were so complicated that businessmen felt they could hardly spare the time to unravel the red tape that accompanied a shipment. In time, I am glad to say, I showed them that the complexities of selling and stocking wine were no greater than those of selling spirits. Fear of wine—the great unknown—had been at the root of the problem.

The 1959 vintage was probably the turning point for wine sales in the United States. In that year some of the press, fearless of the pressures of the dry lobby, finally discovered wine as something newsworthy, and since then there has been a gradual but inexorable improvement in attitudes and taste. It is unfortunate that this change has not been matched by similar and equally necessary changes in the United States legal code. The laws, which still reflect a narrow-minded intolerance reminiscent of post-Prohibition days, treat wines as a suspect commodity, controlling them even more rigidly than firearms. Among the most backward are the sections restricting

licenses issued to importers, wholesalers, and retailers for the sale and distribution of wines and spirits.

In the 1930s, after repeal, many wine drinkers—although not the true oeno-philes—in the United States tended to prefer sweet white wines, especially Sauternes. Taste gradually swung to dryness, until it eventually became an almost obsessive expression of *chic*. People equated "dryness" with sophistication (what better example than the dry Martini?), and it became fashionable to be known to like dry wines—although to this day wines embodying a certain touch of sweetness evoke the most positive market response.

My personal view is that the current fad in the United States for white wine will lead, in time, to increased consumption of red, by far the more popular accompaniment to food in the major wine-producing countries. In France, for instance, red wine accounts for close to 90 percent of all wine consumed. A similar majority applies in Italy, Spain, Argentina, and Chile. The only exceptions are South Africa and Australia, where, in any case, more white wine is produced than red.

The appetite for white wine seems to be related to the American predilection for all things chilled. When I began my crusade on behalf of the grape, the "wines" of the United States were coffee, tea, milk, or cola. Alcoholic beverages—liquor or beer—were drunk either before or after meals, never with. The beer drinker who took that light alcoholic beverage with his food was already on his way to discovering wine. The cocktail drinkers have been a good deal harder to win.

Interesting changes have taken place in French wine consumption simultaneously with the development of wine appreciation in the United States. The average French consumer of vin ordinaire—usually a simple red wine from the Midi—was at first hardly aware of the "hierarchy" of French wines, and even to this day most of the top wines of France are exported to the United States, England, and the Benelux. However, the switch to direct consumer sales is symptomatic of the growing French interest in their own wines. In this connection it is interesting to note that while, overall, the per capita consumption of wines in France has fallen over the past few years, the consumption of better wines has shown a marked increase.

With the jet age and the concomitant influx of tourists into Europe, there has been an unprecedented upsurge of interest in wines of every kind all over the Western world. In the United States there is hardly a city of any size that does not have its wine—or wine and food—society, whose members meet regularly to taste wine, to talk about it, to hear invited lecturers, and to exchange ideas. No bookstore is without its wine-and-food section, and adult education programs offer courses in tasting and appreciating fine wines. Weekly wine columns are now commonplace in newspapers, whereas twenty years ago they were virtually unheard of. In England, always a mainstay of the Bordeaux wine trade, there has been a proliferation of books and