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As the Corkscrew Turns

IT WAS A PERFECT DAY to lose faith in wine. By midmorning on June 21, 2005, the heat and humidity were conspiring to make it another in a series of stifling hot days in Bordeaux. I'd set out from Saint-Émilion in my tiny Citroën rental car—windows rolled down to make up for the lack of air conditioning—en route to Vinexpo, the world's largest wine convention held once every two years in the sprawling convention site north of the city.

As I inched along in traffic across the bridge on the Gironde River, I was thinking about the schizophrenic state of the French wine industry, which—if you believed the French—was in a state of inescapable crisis. Winemakers were rioting in Languedoc, furious over global competition and circumstances beyond their control. French people were drinking less, having ceded to the Italians their place as the world's biggest wine drinkers. While Americans were learning from study after study about the positive effects of red wine, French government health campaigns were targeting their countrymen's overconsumption. (To show just how serious the Republic was about cutting down on drinking and driving, gendarmes were going after the once-sacrosanct Sunday lunch crowd by staking out traffic circles across the countryside.) French wine by the tanker was going unsold, and prices of run-of-the mill wines were collapsing as the once-untouchable French wine industry appeared to be drowning in foreign wines from places like Chile, where French winemakers had taken their *savoir faire*. Even French actor, winemaker, and *bon vivant* Gérard Depardieu was quoted in news articles saying he hadn't had a drink in six months! As for the French intellectuals,



1. A vineyard near Wolxheim, Alsace

what could they do but write essays proclaiming the end of France's wine glory?

Yet, in a seemingly cruel and simultaneous twist, the forces of globalization were inflating prices of the grandest of Bordeaux's *grand crus*, wines that were already out of the reach of most mortals. Bottles of most anything French and expensive were being snapped up as status symbols—like luxury watches—by freshly minted millionaires in Russia and China who, it was said, drank Petrus with Coca-Cola.

Just the day before, I'd lunched at Saint-Émilion's legendary

2 Introduction

Château Cheval Blanc, which is owned by a pair of regulars on the *World's Richest* list: Bernard Arnault, the French founder and chief of Louis Vuitton Mœt Hennessy, the world's leading luxury brand conglomerate, and Belgian industrialist Baron Frère. The aim of the lunch was to promote Cheval Blanc's adopted and renamed Argentinean family member, Cheval des Andes, which commanded about \$70 a bottle (cheap by Cheval Blanc standards).

I was seated at this lunch next to a fellow American—a wine writer who told me he also happened to run a wine fund on the side.

“A wine what?”

A “wine fund,” he explained, bought wine futures with investors' money for speculation. “It represents,” he said apologetically, “the dark side of wine.”

From the champagne and *amuses-bouches* delivered by white-jacketed roaming servers on the terrace, through the gazpacho and grilled steak accompanied by several vintages of the bold Argentinean red in the garden dining room, to the languorous finale of cigars and cognac on outdoor sofas under the shade of canvas umbrellas, one had to be impressed. Cheval Blanc's soft-spoken managing director and legendary winemaker Pierre Lurton quietly made the rounds, his mouth stuck in a kind of permanent smile that betrayed the possibility that schmoozing might not be his thing. Then the guests departed in a stampede of Mercedeses that left a trail of dust along the picturesque plateau of vines.

After arriving at Vinexpo, it didn't take long for me to feel as though I'd landed in another Oz. Three modern convention halls and acres upon acres of thousands of displays featured wine from just about anywhere grapes grow: from Syria to Lebanon to Israel to China. Prestige French, Spanish, and Italian wine groups showed off with opulent installations resembling five-star hotel lobbies complete with marble floors, plush wool carpets, and tasting bars and lounges equipped with furniture you could sink into and disappear. Amid it all were cries of “Mon cher ami!”—the universal business mating call of a population of mostly men in dark business suits, pronounced with English, Japanese, and German accents or the Bordeaux salesman's overly nasal French.

I made my way to the Bordeaux-Aquitane installation, where I learned that at 10 a.m. Serena Sutcliffe, the British-born former head of Sotheby's international wine department and one of the most respected tasters in the wine world, would be leading a "Balade en Bordeaux" (a stroll through Bordeaux) tasting while holding forth to a live audience. Nearly six feet tall and about sixty years old, with fairylike white hair pulled back in a ponytail and endowed with a long, formidable schnoz, Sutcliffe cut an impressive figure—accentuated by her above-the-knee skirt and chic pink T-shirt.

A glass of wine in one hand, a cordless microphone in the other, and never far from a spittoon, Sutcliffe began her discourse with white wines, speaking to about twenty or so people who followed her around with wineglasses. The first wine, from the Bordeaux region Entre-deux-Mers, she noted as "tropicale" in its fruitiness; the second, from Bordeaux Superior, was the product of drought and small production: a "vraie manque d'eau" (drought) that led to a "petite recolte" (small harvest). Above the din, Sutcliffe spoke about climate and grapes, delivering her impressions in deliberate, fluent, British-accented French. Moving on to the reds and a 2002 from Graves, she pronounced its nose "typ-i-qu-e-ment Pessac" (typical of Pessac) with scents of "tabac Havane" (Havana tobacco).

I looked around: the crowd seemed to be only half-listening. I overheard some discussion among organizers about a problem with the acoustics. Sutcliffe's mic was turned up.

It wasn't anything Sutcliffe had said that made the scene so disturbingly odd. Maybe it was the imposing microphone she was holding, or the way she seemed to be speaking to a point somewhere over our heads. Or maybe it was the idea of an "expert" commentator holding forth on a subject as personal as wine. Almost every aspect of life has become mediated—saturated by experts who provide instant analysis and emotion and tell the rest of us what to think and feel. Had wine become no different? Indeed, here was a "celebrity" wine taster performing a sort of electronic circus ritual: life imitates television. Real or CNN?

I fled to an exhibition room that was holding one of the most popular programs of the week, presented by the Union des Grands

Crus de Bordeaux. More than one hundred wines from the yet-to-be-released 2004 vintage were offered by many of Bordeaux's prestigious châteaux. But with each mouthful I took—from Pauillac to Saint-Émilion, from Pomerol to Saint Estephe—the wines seemed to taste more and more alike: young and rude with raging tannins that made my tongue and the inside of my mouth feel as though they'd been freshly lacquered. The room was full of buyers, sellers, marketers, sommeliers, and consultants (along with my “dark side of wine” acquaintance) who dutifully sniffed, slurped, swished, and spit out scores of Bordeaux's finest reds and whites, then huddled in small groups to handicap the stuff with the dour calculation of stockbrokers.

Happily, there is another, brighter side to wine: Outside the velvet-rope corral of the wine elite and the factory walls of multinational wineries, we are living in a golden age for wine diversity, quality, and discovery. It's a movement led by small producers the world over, though their wines are not always easy to find. (Little guys don't have the same access to the distribution chain and your supermarket shelves.)

And what is true for wine in general goes double for France, still the world's largest producer of fine wines. No other place on earth has the astounding diversity of wine regions, microclimates, and independent producers. France is almost one-third larger than the state of California but has about four times the acreage of vineyards. Some 78,000 winegrowers—nearly eighteen times more than in California—operate in France's 472 wine appellations (and that accounts for only about half of France's wine production; the other half of French wine is made outside the appellations). New generations of French winemakers are producing smaller quantities of better wines, reflective of their regions and bearing little resemblance to the bulk cooperative wines made by their parents. The quality revolution in France is transforming not only the wine but also the wine-producing countryside. With increasing numbers and vehemence, winemakers are rejecting herbicides, pesticides, chemical fertilizers, and winery tricks to produce wines from grape varieties

that were considered obsolete a generation ago. This is good for the wine, good for the environment, and good for the intrepid wine lover.

I was born, by the way, a long way from any vineyards, in New York City. My first memory of wine was when I was four or five years old in my grandparents' apartment. My Neapolitan grandfather gave me the job of opening his bottles of pungent, 1960s-era Chianti that mingled with the aromas of my grandmother's meaty pasta sauce that had cooked in wine all day long. My grandfather, who died when I was six, was an unflappable, generous man who came to America as a youth, made money, lost it in '29, and restarted life with a small grocery store on lower First Avenue. In the basement of his store he made wine.

For most of my adult life, I thought of wine as a drink—a drink more satisfying, intriguing, and heady than beer, but still a drink. Over the years of married life in Texas—where I worked as a journalist and later as founder and publisher of an alternative newspaper—I appreciated a range of wines as wide as the stocks of local wine sellers. But the small wine rack in our kitchen pantry was usually empty, the result of our inability to buy wine faster than we consumed it.

Everything I'd ever thought about wine began to change in the summer of 2001 after I sold the newspaper and house in Texas and moved to France with my wife, Gilda—who was born in Nice but was reared in California—and our son, Alexander Dante (“Dantino”), who had spent his first seven years in Dallas–Fort Worth, Texas.

That year we bought and began making plans to renovate our new home: an eighteenth-century olive oil mill in the countryside outside of Grasse. There were no vineyards in our village—just the small plots of vines that peasants had used not long ago to make their own personal stocks. But the one feature of the place that sold me was the series of old stone-and-falling-mortar vaulted rooms under the mill. This cool, damp cave was filled with mold and cobwebs, and lit by dim bulbs hanging from frayed wires. It also happened to be filled with thousands of bottles of French wine—a

real cellar. At a moment when negotiations were completed and all that remained was the actual exchange of signatures, money, and keys at the notary's office, the old proprietor of the place—a wily Frenchman I shall call Monsieur A.—took me down to the cellar.

A man of about sixty who had a bad leg and walked with a cane, Monsieur A. was eager to sell because of his estrangement and imminent divorce from the much younger Madame A. Monsieur A., dressed in a pressed shirt and blazer, put his free hand on my shoulder as we walked among decades-old bottles from Burgundian villages and Bordeaux estates: “What will you have?” Monsieur A. purred into my ear as he invited me to pick a case of twelve bottles out of the cellar to keep. This was, I suspected, not so much a gesture of generosity as it was a way of cinching the deal—and keeping me from backing out.

In fact, I didn't know quite where to start, and selected the wines almost blindly. I had a lot to learn about wine and France, a fact that was underscored as we left the cellar: as we stepped into the sunlight, Monsieur A. cooed in French-accented English over my shoulder, “And if you ever need anything from the mayor [of our new village], he loves his *grands crus*.” Since that winter day, I've crisscrossed France many times, visiting, drinking, and even working in the vineyards. I no longer think of wine as a drink.

One of my earliest surprises living in France was discovering just how present wine is at every level of society. I remember seeing in American market surveys that wine is a product generally associated with class and education. In France I noticed that wine wasn't found just at restaurants, bistros, and cafés, but at truck stops, school picnics, and parent-teacher outings. As a tourist I had associated everything with France as “quaint.” I was stunned to learn that France has hypermarkets that make Wal-Mart look like a convenience store and where salespeople roam the aisles on roller skates. These stores had wine departments unlike anything I could have imagined: on their own they could be considered wine superstores, with reds, whites, rosés, *crémants* (sparkling wines), sweet wines, and fortified wines, arranged by region from most corners of France. These departments were presided over by male

and female sommeliers in burgundy-colored aprons who offered tastes of featured wines of the week. When they offered their wine sales in fall, I watched people fill their grocery carts to the brim with cases of the stuff. Everywhere I turned there seemed to be acres of wine at prices sometimes cheaper than mineral water.

Sometimes wine came from unexpected places. Even the city of Nice had a miniscule appellation of Bellet, which my wife and I explored going door to door and knocking until someone would sell us a few bottles. We tasted a different wine almost every night—usually indiscriminately and often irrespective of what we were eating. Pauillac with pizza? Echézeaux with barbeque? *Pourquoi pas?*

Over time, that changed as I discovered the pleasure—second nature in France with its myriad cuisines—of pairing wine with foods. I was introduced to the sommeliers' association of our region, Nice-Provence-Côte d'Azur-Corsica (although Corsica, true to form, later seceded), and I was invited to join. This association was full of professional sommeliers, wine enthusiasts, and students learning from the seasoned professionals who could wax eloquent about the wine's *robe*, or appearance, its nose, its attack, its ending, and yes, of course, its taste. Here I learned a new vocabulary of wine (in French), but—more important—as I listened to these sommeliers, I noticed that their flowery, often dubious, oratories always ended with mouth-watering food pairings, from wild hare in olives to duck flanks in sage, from Roquefort cheese to chocolate.

As I traveled through France, I made a point of visiting vineyards. Seeing and tasting wine in the areas where it was grown with the foods of the region taught me two things. First, I learned that wine is not so much a drink to pair with foods as *it is a food*. Wine is an important food group that has evolved with regional palates. The long, acid-polished wines of Burgundy, for example, fit hand-in-glove with Burgundian preparations of escargots, terrines of parsleyed hams, Bresse chicken and Charolais beef cooked in wine, and sauces of butter, cream, and mustards. The full-fruit wines of Provence are made for the simple olive oil and Italian-influenced dishes like stuffed zucchini flowers, pasta *pistou*, or octopus salad. *Vin jaune* from the mountains of the Jura (a slow-fermented and long-aged

“yellow” wine that can be kept for a century or more) goes perfectly with a bird drowned in that same wine or with a hot, oozing round of stinky Mont d’Or cheese. At Christmastime those French supermarkets moved foie gras by the ton along with naturally sweet wines from Sauternes, Monbazillac, the Loire Valley, or Alsace.

The second thing I experienced was *terroir*. It was one thing to understand terroir—the concept that soil, climate, winds, exposition, soil, and other seemingly cosmic factors affect wines. It’s another thing to *witness* it. I tasted syrah in wines in the Mediterranean part of the Rhône Valley in the south of France that were stout and aromatically explosive. Then I experienced the same grape variety a couple of hours due north in the cool, temperate climate of Côte Rôtie, where the wine turned out lean and elegant. I saw that a vineyard on one hillside could produce a completely different wine from the vineyard on the plain or on a hill across the road. Everywhere I went, I saw that the vineyards producing the most interesting and complex wines had been exploited since antiquity. The Romans, it seemed, knew their wine and marked the best real estate. *Veni, vidi, vici* translated to “location, location, location.”

Terroir is not new to France: the idea has been cultivated, advanced, and codified here as nowhere else. It is fairly new to us Americans, who tend to think more in broad black-and-white terms. To see the difference, you need look no further than wine labels. In California, Australia, and most of the New World, wines are classified foremost by what Americans see as the best way to determine *what they are*—grape variety. In France (with the notable exception of Germanic Alsace), where wines are often blends of several grapes depending on the harvest, wines are first classified by *where they are from*—*terroir*. In California, for example, pinot noir is called pinot noir. In Burgundy, where pinot noir is really the only red wine grape, the subregions and villages—with names such as Pernand Vergelesses, Gevrey-Chambertin, and Nuits-Saint-George—determine what the wine truly is.

In the New World we also tend to place more faith in better living through science and modern know-how. I’ve heard wine merchants in the states try to use “technology” as a selling point for wine, as

though they were selling the latest electronic gadget. Their point is that with modern techniques you could make a great wine almost *anywhere*. Technological winemaking, as developed by industrial winemakers in places like California and Australia and practiced to an extent now in the Old World, means drought-free summers because of irrigation; it means you don't have to wait for vines to mature fifteen years or more to develop "character"; it means adding acid to wine in hot years to lighten it; using flavor-inducing yeasts (or in some cases even essences) to seduce the nose with banana, kiwi, or ripe raspberry; dropping in wood chips to give it a toasty, vanilla flavor. Technology means no more "bad" years for wine, yet it also means no great or surprising vintages—just a perpetual assembly line of high-octane wines that tend to taste alike.

Wine is, naturally, a product of three elements: terroir, grapevines, and the winemaker. I am not against technology; I just think it should be used for other things like curing disease or making cleaner cars. My friend Arnaud Daudier de Cassini—a gentleman and microwine producer in Saint-Émilion—once philosophized in a conversation of wine-drinking men: "I could sleep with *putes* (whores), but even if they were more beautiful than my wife, what would be the point? How would I ever know what was real? What I have with my wife I know is real." And so, in my humble opinion, it should be with wine.

In France's vineyards there is now a backlash to the idea, which took hold after World War II, that to be "modern" meant to use the full range of herbicides, pesticides, and chemical fertilizers and treatments. France's terroirs are beginning to breathe again, a fact that is signified by the weeds and natural grasses now being allowed to sprout between vine rows and the sheep that are put to pasture in vineyards in winter.

At minimum, responsible winemakers use a "reasoned agriculture," limiting chemicals except in extreme cases. Many use organic agriculture with no synthetic products in the vineyard. More and more are turning to the holistic approach of biodynamics, which uses natural remedies and plants, timed to the cycles of the moon to return life to vineyard soils.

There is no one formula for great winemaking. One thing that great wines have in common is a winemaker *who is in the vineyard and who is close to his or her vines*. If I meet a winemaker in the fall around the time of the grape harvest, and he has a good manicure and unstained hands, I probably won't buy his wine.

No other agricultural product touches us like wine. Humans shape wine and give it its soul, but wine also shapes the people who make it, often on a level that is spiritually profound. In the vineyards of France, I have met scores of people with uncommon grace, humility, good sense, and wisdom. It is among these small, passionate winegrowers that I feel something very close to a state of *home*.

Among the small winemakers of France, I find much the same spirit of generosity and courage as in my grandfather's generation of Europeans. Today's *paysans* are well educated in modern schools, yet they are—to a degree that's rare in today's world—fully immersed in life. It's a life that combines hard work with the realm of sensuous gustatory pleasure; the marketplace with patrimony; economics with philosophy. And it's all tied to the forces of nature and its whims. The adventures in this book are intended to provide a glimpse into that world.

You can hardly discuss wine anymore without broaching the subject of Robert Parker, the American wine critic, publisher of the *Wine Advocate*, and one of the most feared and revered people in the world of wine. A lot of baggage has been laid at Parker's feet—some of it unjustified. At a dinner one evening at an inn in the Ardèche, I was seated next to a wine lover from Strasbourg. We discussed the French government's decision to allow wood chips in wine vats for the first time, and he said, "It's all because of Monsieur Parker." This was ridiculous, I replied. While Monsieur Parker may be responsible for the preponderance of what the French call a "Parkerized" wine style of big, blockbuster, and even woody wines, the man is an avowed foe of shortcuts. The biggest problem with Parker's one-man 100-point system in particular, and similar grading scales in general, is that they contribute to an illusory and narrow

star system, on which the Dark Lords of Wine from Bordeaux to Napa to Tuscany have been expert in capitalizing.

Fortunately for the intrepid among us, there are thousands of French wines, many of which fall under the radar of the arbiters of good taste, made by serious vintners with a greater connection to wine than the corporate investors or insurance companies that now own many a Bordeaux châteaux.

The new French wine country of small regional producers is not a world that all of France embraces. *La République*, after all, has one foot in its patrimony and another in a future that no one seems to comprehend. Recently over lunch I was rebuked by a French friend and neighbor who had no use for my small-is-beautiful view of France. “It’s not by patchwork with little organic producers in their vineyards that France will build its future,” he said. He seemed to spit out the words for “little” and “organic”: *petits, bio*.

I was stunned by the force of his reaction. On one level he is right. France is, after all, an industrial power with sixty million mouths to feed.

“France doesn’t need to be the Switzerland of the world,” he went on.

I fired back: “What about France being the *France* of the world?”

Wine and the world, after all, are better off because there is France—a France that exists outside of Paris or, for that matter, Bordeaux.

And that, friends, is something worth toasting.



Rebel with a Château

FINDING A MATTRESS IN SAINT-ÉMILION wasn't easy. The world's largest wine convention was about to descend on the city of Bordeaux, and vacant rooms in the legendary wine-growing village about twenty-five miles to the northeast seemed almost as rare as, say, Cheval Blanc '47.

Then I got lucky with a telephone lead. One bed-and-breakfast owner—who had no vacancy herself—said she had a neighbor who might have a free room just outside the vineyards of Saint-Émilion.

“Are you very big, monsieur?” Madame asked politely in French.
“Pardon?” I asked.

She explained that her neighbor was “perfectly charming,” but there was one slight problem: the beds at his place were . . . on the small side.

“Well,” she concluded, after I explained that I was approximately 180 centimeters (5 feet 11 inches) tall, “you could always sleep on a diagonal . . .”

I called and booked.

A week later as I drove toward my room at Château de Lesca-neaut, I began having second thoughts. What had I gotten myself into? A hobbit hotel? A closet under the stairs? It was only when I turned off the main road after Saint-Émilion and entered the vines of the Côtes de Castillon that my doubts began to dissolve.

Château de Lesca-neaut nestles in the flat vineyards along the banks of the Dordogne River, just a few kilometers from the site of the last battle of the Hundred Years' War. Castillon-la-Bataille,



2. François des Ligneris, in the Corbières

now a dreary village largely populated by North African immigrant families, was the site of the battle in 1453 in which French forces definitively drove the British (to the dismay of locals) out of Bordeaux and western France.

As it turned out, the place was almost everything I like in a country inn—even if the bathroom towels were as rough as sandpaper and the plumbing brayed like an overwrought donkey. The 300-year-old farmhouse remained unchanged for generations with its creaky wood floors, country bourgeois décor, and canopied beds so small that my feet dangled over the edge and so high you needed a step stool to climb in. The chateau was presided over by a witty, world-weary proprietor, François Faytout Garamond, who inherited the place from his grandfather.

As for the wine of the chateau, Faytout Garamond had long since retired. He now left the work of toiling in the vines to his young, strapping son-in-law, while he let out the five upstairs rooms to tourists and padded around in a pair of *babouches* (slippers), a

habit from his years of living in Morocco. At the massive table in front of the hearth in the dining room, he joined his small number of guests for a breakfast of homemade cakes and jams under a series of large family oil portraits. “That’s where I like my family,” Faytout Garamond remarked, “on the walls.”

The first morning at breakfast Faytout Garamond’s clientele included me alone. He rarely accepted guests during Vinexpo, as he had no use for rowdy conventioners. I had only made it in, presumably, because Madame *la voisine* (neighbor) had already sized me up. And knowing that I was a journalist, Faytout Garamond immediately took it upon himself to educate me on the local landscape.

“The people around here are called *l’aristocratie du bouchon* [the aristocracy of the cork],” he said. Faytout Garamond was referring to Bordeaux in general and to the elites of Saint-Émilion specifically. Just in case I might miss the double entendre of the term, he made a point of noting exactly where the collective cork rests: “In their asses,” he said, using his thumb as a visual device. “The people here,” he went on, “are like this . . .” His long hands went up to the side of his head to illustrate horse blinders. “And *attention!*” he warned. “They drink too much.” As for Saint-Émilion itself, there was little good to be said about what it had become: “It’s Marrakech!” he sniffed.

Over the course of several days I listened to his view of a world that from his vantage was going to hell in a hurry. While he had little good to say about his own countrymen, Faytout Garamond had worse things to say about the Dutch. The entire population of the Netherlands, he informed me, was forever banned from his premises—the result of one young drunk who had brought back two hookers from Bordeaux to entertain himself in one of those tiny beds. Faytout Garamond says he was compelled to boot out the trio at 3 a.m., telling them to “go sleep under a bridge.”

During one morning of conversation during my weeklong stay (punctuated at regular intervals by Faytout Garamond sighing, “What is there to write about Saint-Émilion that hasn’t already been written? I don’t know . . .”), I said was going to meet François

des Ligneris, the owner of Château Soutard in Saint-Émilion. As it turned out, des Ligneris was a relative by marriage; his wife was Faytout Garamond's niece. "François really is a cultivated young man. Educated, well traveled, very open. He's part of the aristocracy, but he's *not really* at all like them," Faytout Garamond said. He fell silent. Then, with a look I took for worry, he added: "He does like to talk a lot . . . perhaps too much."

Saint-Émilion, at first glance, is one of those ancient villages that are almost too perfect—from its postcard panoramas and picturesque plazas filled with tables in summer, to the strangely disconcerting absence of anything that might be considered bad taste. Set into a steep limestone hillside, Saint-Émilion fills a natural amphitheater topped by a plateau with vineyards that run to the edge of the horizon. A bell tower and an old dungeon dominate the high ground, and looming over the plaza below is a stone mass containing a grand troglodyte church and catacombs carved by monks who trailed the real Émilion from Brittany twelve hundred years ago.

Some winegrowing areas have history, culture, and architecture; others have charm or natural beauty; and some just have that rare combination of climate and soils that tends to produce some of the world's great wines. Saint-Émilion seemingly has it all, which explains why the vineyards spreading over Saint-Émilion and its seven neighboring villages became the first winegrowing area on UNESCO's list of world heritage sites.

Wine tourists flock here by the thousands, soaking up an afternoon of the good life and warming up their credit cards at wine shops lined up like luxury boutiques that promise worldwide shipping in a half-dozen languages. If Saint-Émilion lacks anything, it may be a soul. Scratch beneath the surface and everywhere—including under hundreds of acres of vineyards—Saint-Émilion is a giant subterranean *gruyère* of caves and tunnels hand dug over centuries to excavate the large white limestone blocks used to build Bordeaux and the region's châteaux. Scratch into the veneer of Saint-Émilion's *grand cru* image and you also find one of the world's most combative arenas for wine.