



Bordeaux Opens Up

The vintage vacation scores high with lively, fresh, and delightfully playful notes – and that’s not to mention the wine.

BY DAVID HOCHMAN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CLARA TUMA



Echo, a cozy cave à manger (wine/tapas bar hybrid), in the heart of the city. Opposite: Château Smith haut Lafitte's vineyard.

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ROM THE ROOFTOP RESTAURANT

at Château La Dominique in Saint-Émilion, you can see two Bordeaux – old and nouveau – as if in cinematic split screen. On the new side, La Terrasse Rouge draws a lively, fun-loving crowd as colorful and polished as its merlot-red, mirrored cellar walls by Jean Nouvel, who also designed the new Louvre Abu Dhabi. Even before noon, you feel like toasting to celebrate any number of things: the oysters plucked fresh from local waters, the “swimming pool” of glass grapes that’s an artful play on the annual wine crush, and whatever the pour du jour happens to be.

It’s like tasting the future, frankly, which isn’t to deride part two of the view. Bordering La Dominique’s impressive 72 acres of



City standouts: The InterContinental Bordeaux's pool and (right) Pâtisserie Micheline et Paulette. Opposite, from left: The hotel's rooftop bar and Le Terrasse Rouge at Château La Dominique.



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“We used to say Bordeaux was ‘the sleeping beauty,’ but now it’s quite awake.”

avant-garde oenophilia is the Bordeaux you were probably expecting. The imposing *grand cru* houses, the best of the best in the world’s greatest wine region, stand like stone sentinels amid the vines. Don’t look for welcome signs, but Château Cheval Blanc is immediately next door. The Pétrus estate lies behind wrought iron straight ahead. Neither are open to tipsy door knockers or bus tours.

Bordeaux proper is like that too. The edgy and the venerable, the upstarts and the icons, the glitzy and the standoffish all coexist in an intoxicating swirl. When people in the port city talk about the “Bordeaux blend,” it’s not just about what happens inside that French oak. And something is definitely shifting in the mix. Twenty years ago, Bordeaux was a fading backwater with coal-black building facades, little to see or do, and an attitude toward visitors that basically sniffed, “Go someplace else.” Today, the area is booming with energy and openness. Freshly scrubbed neighborhoods, inviting hotels and dining spots, spiffy new promenades, and engaging museums make it a French destination second only to Paris – and now there’s a high-speed train that whisks you from the capital in the span it takes to rewatch *Chocolat*.

“We used to say Bordeaux was ‘the sleeping beauty,’ but now it’s quite awake,” says Florent Maillet of Chocolatine, one of Virtuoso’s on-site tour connections in France. He credits the city’s 2007 UNESCO designation as a World Heritage site with driving the turnaround. “Over the past decade, Bordeaux reinvented itself in a way that makes it friendlier and prettier – and the food scene is better too.”

To appreciate what’s new, begin with the ancient. It’s the first visit to the region for my wife, teenage son, and me, and our aristocratic base for a few days is the InterContinental Bordeaux, known locally as Le Grand Hotel, built where the Roman forum once stood. The hotel is an unapologetic throwback, with its Empire furnishings and tasseled ruffles, but there’s plenty to hashtag, including a two-Michelin-starred Gordon Ramsay restaurant, a rooftop “night beach” bar, and a stunning two-story indoor pool done up in black tiles with soaring red columns.

The eighteenth century was the beginning of Bordeaux’s golden age, and Baron Haussmann, a local prefect, used the city’s neoclassical look and open spaces as a guide when Napoléon III asked him to remake Paris into a modern capital. On a walking tour one cloudless summer morning, our guide, Hela Soula, leads us across the cobbled square from Le Grand to the magnificent Corinthian colonnades of the 1780s Grand-Théâtre de Bordeaux, now home to the Bordeaux National Opera and Ballet. “This building three times served as French Parliament, but it was also a hospice – and, for a time, a place of leisure and gambling,” she says. “As with everything in Bordeaux, you can’t always tell what’s happening by the face.”

That bears out everywhere we go. Along rue Notre-Dame in the villagelike Chartrons quarter, honey-colored row houses where international wine merchants once haggled today contain digital art galleries, pop-up design shops, and organic *juiciers*. A World War II bunker in the concrete submarine pen at Bassins à flot is now – sacrebleu! – the Moon Harbour whiskey distillery (true, it’s not red wine, but the corn and barley do come from nearby Gironde). On the reborn Garonne River waterfront, miserable dock warehouses – “You wouldn’t have walked around here in the 1990s, night or day,” Soula says – are giving way to industrial-hip havens such as Les Halles de Bacalan, an airy glass-and-steel food hall as ingredient- and provenance-focused as anything you’d discover in Copenhagen or Brooklyn. The scoopers at the chocolate mousse counter will talk you back to the cacao bean’s origin if you let them.

The prime symbol of Bordeaux’s resurgence rises across the street from Les Halles. La Cité du Vin is, guaranteed, the headiest wine experience you’ll ever have without actually drinking any. The eight-story, iridescent-aluminum discovery center – think of it as an inebriated answer to Bilbao’s Guggenheim Museum – took three years to construct and hovers over the city like an alien spacecraft from a planet with very good grapes. Even if wine talk bores you (personally, I’d rather sip the stuff than have someone mansplain it to me) the immersive exhibits here will have you riveted. Glass bell jars filled with licorice, leather, and musty old books let you sense what good – and tainted – wine smells like. In a circular, pillowed lounge called Bacchus and Venus, you (if you’re 18 or older, that is) peer through peepholes at displays on wine as an element of seduction. The museum’s wine shop, Latitude20, has more than 14,000 bottles from as far away as Peru and Tahiti, but it’s the old-school Bordeaux lineup under lock and key at the center that has customers reverently whispering names as if they were deities: Margaux, Latour, Haut-Brion, Mouton Rothschild.

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Clockwise from left: La Cite du Vine's Bacchus and Venus lounge, the Grand Théâtre, touring the wine museum, and Les Halles de Bacalan.





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Clockwise from top: Sunset apéro on Arcachon Bay, Cap Ferret's Sail Fish Café, and the seafood platter at La Co(o)rniche.



THE CLASSIC WAY TO VISIT BORDEAUX WAS

typically to transit through town as quickly as possible on the way to somewhere better – Biarritz, maybe, or Spain’s Basque region – unless you happened to be trading in barrels. Now Bordeaux is like a vintage cabernet: The more time you give it, the more you’re rewarded.

At Maillet’s recommendation (OK, he gracefully demanded we do it), we extend our Bordeaux sojourn to include outlying parts of the greater Aquitaine region. An hour’s drive due west of the city, Cap Ferret occupies a narrow 11-mile tail of sand in Arcachon Bay. Do not confuse this with Cap *Ferrat*, the blingier Côte d’Azur hideaway favored by the likes of Picasso and Beyoncé. Cap Ferret is moneyed without being showy, and its unfussy beaches are the point. Picture Martha’s Vineyard with better brioche. My son, who’s learning French, says it’s where the Bordelais go to “sea and *piscine*.”

For our day trip, Maillet arranges a driver and a private cruise aboard a skippered wooden pinasse, the traditional open-air vessel that’s emblematic of the area. We spend the better part of the morning lazily gliding past Victorian-style, three-story brick “cottages” on the water and watching fishermen work the offshore oyster farms. The whole peninsula has a dreamy, tucked-away feel – even the main attraction, Dune du Pilat, the highest sand dune in Europe, is peopled mostly with Bordeaux locals in termite-on-a-hill mode. The one jet-set spot is La Co(o)rniche, where apparently even the vowels get VIP treatment. Designer Philippe Starck transformed a dowdy 1930s clifftop hunting lodge into a glamorous aerie where everybody feels like a somebody, even us. Shaded beneath parasols at the poolside restaurant, we lunch on platters of fresh langoustines, oysters, and mussels as a staff “paparazzo” snaps professional portraits from afar that are the best family pictures of our trip.

Les Sources de Caudalie, closer to the city, is another inspired Bordeaux turnaround story and our address for the rest of the vacation. In 1990, Daniel and Florence Cathiard, who met on the French ski team in the Jean-Claude Killy era and later built a French sports supply empire, bought Château Smith Haut Lafitte, a vineyard 20 minutes south of town. It wasn’t easy, but they have since picked, pressed, and aged their way to the top of the wine world.

The vineyard is spectacular, in part because the Cathiards have an exquisite eye for large-scale modern sculpture by artists such as Jim Dine and Anthony Caro. But it’s the next generation where things get really interesting. Daughter Mathilde Cathiard-Thomas founded the Caudalie cosmetics brand, an international cult favorite, and her younger sister, Alice, along with Alice’s husband, Jérôme, manages the hotel and spa the family created next door. Les Sources de Caudalie is modeled after Aquitaine farmhouses, with 61 rooms and suites tucked across eight different ivy-shrouded *maisons* with freestanding tubs, lofty peaked ceilings, and sundecks looking out to the vines and a two-Michelin-star restaurant.

The spa itself takes a decidedly natural approach to self-care: Products are guaranteed free of phenoxyethanol, phthalates, and other multisyllabic impurities, and wet treatments use water pumped from a hot spring hundreds of feet beneath the massage

Tip

"Miles Restaurant, a five-minute walk from the InterContinental Bordeaux, offers a perfect combination of fine dining in an intimate, casual atmosphere. There's no printed menu – you trust the whim of the chef, but every course on our tasting menu was exquisite. Reserve a seat at the bar to witness the kitchen's energy firsthand."

– Ioana Brooks, Virtuoso travel advisor, San Diego



tables. A “pulp friction” scrub incorporates chilled grapes to soften and soothe.

My family and I find our Zen outside under giant oaks. I'd been reading with great interest for months about the Japanese practice of *shinrin-yoku*, or “forest bathing,” and was delighted to see a sign at reception for a two-hour self-guided walk inspired by the activity. The idea is to immerse yourself in nature, usually on cultivated paths with meditative points along the way, as an antidote to big-city stress. No surprise, the Cathiards outdid themselves with a

magical trail straight out of *Le Petit Prince*. A stream “sings” through copper amplifiers. A tiny island clinks with wooden chimes. A dove-cote is repurposed as a cool rest spot. We emerge from the “bath” like rejuvenated gnomes.

An afternoon walk can make a traveler thirsty, and Bordeaux helps you find relief just about anywhere you go. It's less than an hour's drive from Caudalie to Saint-Émilion, where old Bordeaux meets what's to come, and both are exceptionally delicious. True connoisseurs secure tastings and splurge at the *grand cru* houses, but I'm more interested in sampling whatever's emerging.

That ruby-red architectural standout, Château La Dominique, turns a stainless-steel barrel room into an impressive contemporary art gallery in the off months, and last year it launched a blind-tasting program in a darkened private cellar, where guests concentrate on aromas and flavors without any visual cues about color, varietal, or year. It's indicative of a region awakening the senses in ways that are somehow vintage yet fresh. At lunch on the terrace, looking out to that panoramic view, I give up fussing over past versus future Bordeaux. Sometimes, you just have to drink to both sides.



Les Sources de Caudalie's wild blue lobster with sweet tomatoes and Lillet. Opposite, clockwise from left: The resort's pool, cannelés (a welcome gift), vineyard, and a Grande Suite modeled on Arcachon Bay fishermen's cabanas.



Downtown Bordeaux's Horace café and (opposite) Place de la Bourse.

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Uncorking Bordeaux

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Virtuoso travel advisors work with **Chocolatine** to customize exclusive tours throughout France (typically with private driver-guide services so you can sip your way through the *sud-ouest* safely and in style). A proposed four-day itinerary for Bordeaux and nearby highlights: a walking tour of the city, followed by lunch at Les Sources de Caudalie and a tasting at Smith Haut Lafitte; Médoc for big-deal estates such as Château Margaux and Mouton Rothschild, and smaller gems only locals know about; Saint-Émilion, with a tasting at an esteemed wine shop as a warm-up to hang time with vintners; and a skippered wooden *pinasse* cruise through Arcachon Bay, which might include lunch in an old fishing village or oysters and chilled rosé on a sandbank in the bay. *Departures: Any day through 2019; from \$6,040 for two people, not including accommodations.*

STAY A refurbished icon in the center of Bordeaux's historic Golden Triangle district, the **InterContinental Bordeaux – Le Grand**

is overtly lavish, with 130 rooms featuring marble bathrooms, damask wallpaper, views of the the Grand Théâtre, and a wine concierge on call to arrange tastings and vineyard visits. *Doubles from \$325, including breakfast daily and a \$100 spa credit.*

A vine-covered oasis 20 minutes from town on the grounds of Château Smith Haut Lafitte, **Les Sources de Caudalie** lets guests live out the “French paradox” inspired by a study concluding that French cuisine and lifestyle improve health and well-being. Who’s to argue? Contemporary buildings use recycled local materials across eight spiffy farmhouses with 61 large guest rooms and a spa you’ll never want to leave. *Doubles from \$350, including breakfast daily and a sommelier-led winetasting. VI.*



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