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GOING TO

Bordeaux

By SETH SHERWOOD

WHY GO NOW The wines of Bordeaux inspire superlatives like "extraordinary balance" and "gorgeous showstopper." The city itself, however, does not. With noses stuck in glasses, travelers tend to see only a boozy blur on their way back from Mouton Rothschild, Lynch-Bages and the nearly 12,000 other wine chateaus in the region.

And for years, the city of Bordeaux didn't seem to care. Like dust on an old bottle, a layer of thick grime sullied the ornate medieval churches, Baroque-era facades and Art Nouveau town houses of a bygone merchant class. The Garonne River waterfront, the former hub of Bordeaux's international trade, had devolved into an unsavory strip where prostitutes, not wine, were the commodity. Just a few years ago the city looked like a fallen aristocrat gone to seed.

But thanks to a newfound civic pride, Bordeaux's monuments are being scrubbed back to their original splendor. The cleaned-up waterfront is lined with top restaurants and upscale night-life spots. And a futuristic new tram system connects resurgent neighborhoods.

The best time to see this nouveau sparkle is during the Bordeaux Wine Festival, this year from June 29 to July 2 (www.bordeaux-fete-le-vin.com). Started eight years ago, the biennial festival brings together the region's venerable winemakers and vintners, turning the city center into a wine-fueled bacchanal. The city is ripe for a tasting.

WHERE TO STAY The year 2003 was a very good one for Bordeaux's hotels, with a pair of design-savvy boutique hotels adding spice to the city's otherwise lackluster offerings. The Lurton family, one of the region's most prestigious wine dynasties, opened La Maison Bord'eaux in the city's center (113, rue Albert Barraud; 33-5-56-44-00-45; www.lamaisonbord-eaux.com). Though housed in an 18th-century town house, the hotel is anything but old-fashioned. Each of the six sleek rooms is painted a signature color (including robin's egg blue, burnt orange and wine red) and outfitted with dark woods and contempo-cool furniture. The handsome common areas include a restaurant and a salon filled with art books and — what else? — wines from the Lurton chateaus. Doubles from 140 euros, \$185 at \$1.32 to the euro, breakfast included.

In terms of location, it's hard to beat Une Chambre En Ville (35, rue Bouffard; 33-5-56-81-34-53; www.bandb-bx.com), a five-room bed-and-breakfast nestled near the happening cafes of Place Gambetta and upscale stores of Cours de l'Intendance. Like La Maison Bord'eaux, it occupies a classic, three-story Bordeaux town house. The rooms are large (by French standards) with a tasteful, colorful décor. Doubles from 79 euros, breakfast 8 euros.

Even some faded gems are being polished. Just as it was slipping into old age, La Tour Intendance (16-17, rue de la Vieille Tour; 33-5-56-44-56-56; www.hotel-tour-intendance.com) got a full face-lift in 2004. The result is both rustic and chic, like a chateau transplanted in cosmopolitan soil. Many of the 26 rooms combine Old World details like rough stone walls and parquet floors with

modern amenities like flat-screen televisions and sleek bathrooms. Doubles from 88 euros; breakfast 9 euros.

WHERE TO EAT Loaded down with duck confit, sautéed foie gras and roasted goose, Bordeaux's heavy and fat-laden cuisine is the solid-food counterpart to its hearty red wines. And a recipe for gout. Luckily, a new generation of restaurants has lightened the menu with Asian touches, fresh ingredients from [Provence](#) and beyond and less butter. Many of the best new establishments have opened along the renovated quays of the Garonne. (Prices reflect a three-course dinner for two, without wine.)

The biggest splash was made by Denis Franc, the longtime chef and owner of Le Pavillon des Boulevards, a haunt of Bordeaux gourmands and Michelin-star chasers. His new Quai Zaco (80, quai des Chartrons; 33-5-57-87-67-72) is housed in a cavernous stone warehouse, jazzed up with local artwork, metal tables and molded plastic seating. The cuisine features fresh regional produce served with Provençal and Mediterranean accents. A zippy gazpacho is paired with chèvre ravioli, while a thick and meaty goose gets some zing from a sweet-and-sour chutney of pears, apples and pineapple. Other favorites include asparagus with Spanish ham and a veal piccata with stuffed tomatoes. About 70 euros.

Judging by the spooky-kitsch interiors at Le K Baroque (1, quai des Chartrons; 33-5-56-52-31-20), Vincent Price is alive and well. The dim restaurant is stuffed with purple velvet, oriental carpets, gilded mirrors and other decorative trappings of a slightly unhinged nobleman. The menu is similarly peripatetic. You'll find ingredients culled from North Africa (vegetable tagine with honey), Asia (lamb in green curry with Chinese noodles) and the tropics (sea bream and mango tartare). Around 65 euros.

As its name suggests, the Café du Théâtre (3, place Pierre Renaudel, 33-5-57-95-77-20) features a culinary headliner, Jean-Marie Amat, the former chef of the Michelin-starred St.-James in nearby Bouliac. The dramatic room — a soaring modern space with red walls and black floors — is a fitting backdrop to the moneyed Bordeaux crowd, who flock here to sample the ever-changing menu. You might start with the plates of dried spicy sausage and end with the classic vanilla mille-feuille. In between, try the roast tuna satay, cod beignets in tomato chutney or succulent lamb shoulder. About 75 euros; prix fixe about 60 euros.

WHAT TO DO DURING THE DAY After your nth wine tasting, give your palate a rest in the city. Lose yourself amid the narrow streets, centuries-old squares and medieval churches in the city center ([Unesco](#) is considering designating three areas as World Heritage Sites). To find the St.-André Cathedral, follow its Gothic spires, which resemble sharpened pencils studded with clove-like nubs. The majestic 18th-century City Hall is nearby.

Also worth photographing is the St.-Seurin Basilica, which sits atop one of Bordeaux's most venerable attractions, a sixth-century Gallo-Roman crypt. The crypt, open from June through September, holds sarcophagi, amphorae and other relics of a long-vanished Bordeaux; admission is 2.50 euros.

WHAT TO DO AT NIGHT Come nightfall, Bordeaux's gilded youth and young professionals set sail for the Bassin à Flots, a dockland on the city's far north side. Though still a tad rough-edged, the tides are clearly turning, thanks to new nightclubs popping up in old warehouses and ships. The top draw is La Dame de [Shanghai](#) (Quai Armande Lalande; 33-5-57-10-20-50), a Chinese junk-style restaurant and nightclub that fills with well-heeled folks in search of global house music and buckets of Cristal Champagne.

Also along the waterfront, but on the opposite side of town, is Mystic (5, quai de Paludate; 33-5-56-31-63-24), an amphitheater-like restaurant and nightclub. Opened in March, it took over the long-neglected Château de Descas, a 19th-century neo-Gothic

mansion that was an Usher-like symbol of Bordeaux's grandeur and decline. Outfitted with ghostly hologram portraits and playful electric candelabra, it is fast becoming a new symbol of the city's resurgence — and sense of humor.

WHERE TO SHOP Hardcore shoppers may swarm the Rue Ste.-Catherine, a car-free boulevard anchored by the Galeries Lafayette, but the most interesting shops lurk on its side streets. Notably, the Rue du Pas St.-Georges has emerged as Bordeaux's answer to Alphabet City, a corridor of avant-garde clothing boutiques, shops selling designer furnishings, live music joints and vintage bookstores. Among the brightest is Robba di Noi (76, rue du Pas St.-Georges, 33-5-56-01-04-84), a new home décor boutique that sells retro wallpaper, flamboyant local art and neo-Baroque Plexiglass coffee tables from a rising French designer, Emma Roux.

For further proof that Philippe Starck does not have a monopoly on high-end French design, hit Versus Mobili (14, rue Duffour-Dubergier; 33-5-56-52-10-27; www.versusmobili.com). The two-level store is a streamlined mix of established and up-and-coming designers, including Pop Art lampshades from the Parisian design firm 1961 and translucent chairs from Aïtal, a local company.

YES, FREE Admission fees to the city's museums were abolished last year. Highlights include the Musée des Beaux-Arts (20, cours d'Albret; 33-5-56-10-20-56, www.culture.gouv.fr/culture/bordeaux). Housed in a 1700's mansion, it boasts a small but impressive collection of 17th- and 18th-century art, including Jan Brueghel the Elder's delirious "Wedding Dance" and Peter Paul Rubens's gruesome yet powerful "Miracle of Saint Just."

YOUR FIRST TIME OR YOUR 10TH Sampling Bordeaux's wine region — a quarter-million acres that produces 800 million bottles a year — is a Herculean labor. (Not to mention a Dionysian one.) Fortunately for wine lovers, the Bordeaux Tourism Office (12, cours du 30 Juillet; 33-5-56-00-66-00; www.bordeaux-tourisme.com) provides daily bus trips (April 1 to Nov. 15) to the key appellations, including St.-Émilion (Wednesday and Sunday), Graves and Sauternes (Friday) and the Médoc (Thursday and Saturday). Each trip visits two chateaus and costs 28 euros a person.

HOW TO STAY WIRED Few hotels are equipped with broadband Internet. The cyber cafe g@llien (32, rue du Palais Gallien; 33-5-56-52-64-79) has 17 computers and charges 2 euros an hour.

GETTING THERE Most travelers get to Bordeaux via plane or train from [Paris](#). Air France (800-237-2747; www.airfrance.fr) has daily nonstop flights between Roissy-Charles de Gaulle airport and Bordeaux starting around 50 euros each way. High-speed TGV trains take three to four hours and leave several times a day. In Paris, trains can be caught at the airport (listed often as "Roissy" on train schedules) or the Gare Montparnasse. Tickets purchased online (www.sncf.fr/indexe.htm) start at 35 to 50 euros each way.

GETTING AROUND Christened in 2004, Bordeaux's long-awaited — and still-expanding — tram covers nearly all of the city center. Tickets for the glassy, futuristic cars are 1.30 euros and can be bought at vending machines at each stop; they are also good for city buses.