

Panel 5 : The wine trade

Negotiating quality

For a long time, port trade was at the root of Libourne's prosperity. When the fortified town was created in 1270 on the site of the Gallo-Roman port of Condate (which later became Fozera), its trade was boosted due to significant tax exemptions. The goods which were traded there at the time were very diverse and included leather, pottery, wool and cloth, worked or raw metals, and of course salt and wine. During this period, the merchants' warehouses were close to the port but protected by the town's fortifications. The name of Rue des Chais (wine warehouse road) is a reminder of the importance of the wine trade when it was located in the town centre.

Although wine was not the only commodity on which the port's trade was based at that time, it nevertheless played an important role. Specific rules governing harvesting, the wine-making process and, above all, the conditions for transporting and selling the harvest already existed.

Until the end of the Hundred Years' War, English nobles consumed wines from Aquitaine - notably the famous claret (a light red wine) - but these wines were also appreciated on Dutch and German tables. This vast area of consumption was supported by the maritime routes which, starting from the Gironde estuary, extended up towards Northern Europe.

In medieval times, these routes also provided faster and safer transport conditions than routes overland.

Serving a region of high productivity, the port of Libourne was also at the junction point between the Dordogne river basin and key maritime routes. This location allowed it to sell what its land produced - namely wine from Fronsac, Saint-Emilion and Pomerol, as well as those from the centre of the Dordogne valley, such as the wine from Bergerac and Sainte Foy. However, as the fortified town enjoyed specific privileges, wine from its territory was sold first, whereas the wine from Bergerac and Sainte Foy had to wait until the winter period to be put on the market. This situation created many tensions and resulted in more than one arbitration by the Seneschal of Guyenne and the Parliament of Bordeaux.

Nowadays, it is obviously no longer feudal privileges which decide the conditions for marketing wines, but their quality and the terroirs from which they originate. These differ, even within the area around Libourne.

Of the 50,000 hectares devoted to vines in 1897, the editor Edouard Féret stated that *'from the point of view of quality, we find the Saint-Emilion region to be in the lead. Then comes Fronsadais, which produces renowned hillside wines and a fairly large quantity of palus wines'*. In 1936, the Pomerol and Saint-Emilion vineyards were granted 'appellations d'origine contrôlée' (AOC - protected designation of origin) by decree. These determine geographical areas, grape varieties and conditions of production, etc. The north-eastern part of the Libourne commune is part of the Pomerol AOC. Another part of the town was classified as *'Sables-Saint-Emilion'* during this period. The following year, the appellations Graves-de-Vayres and Fronsac were officially designated.

The wine trading buildings in Libourne

Wine merchants are traders who specialise in the sale of wines. Their role is to sell the production of the vineyards through their distribution network. This involves having a good knowledge of the world of wine and of vineyards and developing broad relationships with producers, retailers and consumers.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, several periods of economic prosperity enabled this profession to become established. The world of wine was changing significantly at the same time. Winemaking techniques were refined, making it possible to create wines which could be kept for a long time, whereas previously any wine made had to be consumed quickly. Wine was increasingly being stored and consumed in bottles, and not just in barrels. From 1870 onwards, phylloxera (an insect which ravaged the vineyards) forced the use of new grape varieties. The wine world always continued to adapt despite these developments and crises and had a profound influence on areas in Bordeaux and Libourne.

It was the merchants who shaped the harbourfront in Libourne. Two locations are particularly worthy of note in this regard.

Quai du Priourat, where there is a whole host of wide, deep wine warehouses which were built after the opening of the Pont de Pierre over the Dordogne in 1824. In previous centuries, the 'priourat' (or priory) consisted solely of former agricultural land managed by the clergy and, in addition, was highly exposed to the risk of flooding in the event of high water. What was to eventually become the Priourat district consisted at that time of vast plots of land free of buildings. During the period when Libourne was gradually expanding beyond the limits of its medieval walls, this area had the advantage (in addition to the possibility of constructing new buildings) of being located near the river and close to the road network which now linked Libourne and Bordeaux.

Development on the banks on this side of the port bear all the hallmarks of wine trading in the 19th century. When the walls of the quays were constructed in the 1840s, slipways were built to allow the loading of 'gabarres' (barges) in accordance to the level of the tide. The wine warehouses were built far back from the banks in order to protect them from flooding, but above all to allow the handling of countless barrels (which still remained the main method of transporting wine) during the loading and unloading of barges and lorries.

The wine warehouses themselves covered considerable areas so that they could accommodate their precious goods. Some were just simple, utilitarian buildings, while others proudly displayed façades decorated with carved designs glorifying vines and wine and sometimes even included initials. Stone signatures such as these testified to the prosperity of the merchant who owned it.

Quai d'Amade, located between Quai Souchet and the Pont de Pierre over the Dordogne displays other characteristics. It is one of the access points to the bridge and has therefore been made higher than the original level of the banks. Following the construction of the bridge, a housing programme was started, but never completed. Buildings on Quai d'Amade and Place Delattre de Tassigny are examples of part of this plan. While the upper floors were reserved for residential use, the ground floor and basements were devoted to commerce and the wine trade.

The storehouses or warehouses located in the basement of these buildings had access to the port via tunnels built under the bridge access ramp.

Initially closed off by gates and abandoned after the commercial port of Libourne ceased its activity, these openings were retained during the redevelopment of the Confluence. Entrances to these tunnels can still be seen on the Esplanade de la République, near the harbour master's office. The most recent developments of the Libourne harbourfront, which is now geared towards leisure and tourism, have given them a new purpose.



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HORAIRES :
8h30 > 12h30
13h15 > 17h

