Bordeaux 2016 Abstract Submission

Title
The 1855 Bordeaux Classification Down Under: An Australian Wine Market Perspective

I want to submit an abstract for:
Conference Presentation

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Research Question
This paper examines the influence of the 1855 Bordeaux Classification in the Australian Wine Market by triangulating observational and analytical data related to education, opinion leadership and prestige business modelling.

Methods
This paper mobilises anthropological observational methods, qualitative interviews with opinion leaders, and comparative analysis of longitudinal data drawn from Langton’s Classification of Australian Wines.

Results
This study demonstrates a clear relationship between students’ and opinion leaders’ perceptions of the 1855 Bordeaux classification and the development of a prestige business model for the Australian wine market.

Abstract
In 1855, a selection of the most renowned and highest priced wines from Bordeaux were enshrined in history as part of the Bordeaux Chamber of Commerce’s contribution to the Universal Exhibition (World’s Fair) in Paris. There were 61 red wines from Bordeaux’s Left Bank – all from Médoc except Château Haut-Brion from Graves – and 24 white wines from the Sauternes and Barsac regions. The 1855 classification has remained a reference through the ages, ranking the châteaux from first to fifth classed growths. It is an unwavering monument to quality and price, having submitted to only two major alterations over the last 160 years - the omission of Château Cantemerle as 5th growth was remedied in the months following the classification, and the lobbying by Château Mouton-Rothschild resulted in an upgrade from 2nd to 1st growth in 1973.

The impact of the 1855 classification on the en primeur prices for Bordeaux and on the currency for classified growths in today’s globalised wine marketplace is undeniable. However, the 1855 classification is seeking more formal recognition: the Union des Grands Crus is supporting a bid for UNESCO classification of the 1855
classification. In 2015, UNESCO recognised the hillsides, houses and cellars of Champagne, and the climats and terroirs of Burgundy as cultural world heritage sites. Now Bordeaux wants the lynchpin of its wine culture recognised by UNESCO. The medieval town and ancient vineyards of Saint Emilion and Bordeaux’s Port de la Lune may have UNESCO status since 1999 and 2009 respectively, but UNESCO recognition of the 1855 classification would be Bordeaux’s crowning glory in a long-standing competition with its elite rivals in Burgundy and Champagne.

In an attempt to contribute to a global perspective on the 1855 classification, this paper will examine the view from Down Under – the Australian Wine Market. As an invited participant to the first symposium organised by the Union des Grands Crus, I have been asked to present a portrait of how the 1855 classification is perceived on the other side of the world. This assessment will be based on an analysis of three interrelated factors that demonstrate the influence of the 1855 classification in the context of the Australian wine market: education leadership, opinion leadership, and prestige business modelling.

Firstly, I will provide observational data based on five years of teaching an advanced group of students from the University of Melbourne about the 1855 Bordeaux classification in a subject called “Wines of the World”. This intensively taught subject culminates in a forum and debate on the validity of the 1855 classification today. The students are drawn from all over the University, including science, humanities, social sciences, commerce, medicine, and many of them work in the wine industry. Their opinions and reactions to the 1855 classification have been observed and noted over the years to establish a data set of the dominant factors that arise for debate among young (18-25 year old), highly educated, motivated, opinion leaders of the future.

These dominant factors will then be triangulated with those prioritised by opinion leaders in the Australian wine media. I will interview three major wine writers about their views on the 1855 classification and the results will be compared with those of the students to form a framework for considering perceptions of the 1855 classification in the Australian wine market. This framework will therefore reflect educational and opinion leadership.

Finally, I will use this framework to examine the impact of the 1855 classification on prestige business modelling in the Australian wine market through reference to Langton’s Classification of Australian Wines. This system for ranking Australia’s best wines has been the ‘ultimate form-guide’ for 25 years and is modelled on the 1855 classification. Although it is based on similar criteria of quality and price attested over time (at least 10 years), Langton’s Classification of Australian Wines has evolved from 34 wines selected in 1990 to include 139 fine wines in the sixth edition, launched in 2014. According to Langton’s website, “it is arguably the most famous and widely-respected wine Classification outside Europe”. The modifications adopted for Langton’s classification over the past 25 years will be analysed to ascertain the relationship between these divergences from the original model and the dominant preoccupations expressed by the students and the opinion leaders interviewed.

The results of this study demonstrate a clear relationship between students’ and opinion leaders’ perceptions of the 1855 Bordeaux classification and the development of a prestige business model for the Australian wine market. In this way, I will present a portrait of the 1855 classification from an Australian wine market perspective, demonstrating its influence through education leadership, opinion leadership, and prestige business modelling. As the UNESCO bid for formal recognition of the 1855 Bordeaux Classification requires evidence of the global impact and universal understanding of its cultural value, this paper will therefore contribute to strengthening Bordeaux’s dossier.