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Lassegue 05 & 07 - Chateau Vignot 05, 06 & 07

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CHATEAU LASSEGUE

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When it comes to red wine, many Americans believe that bigger is better: The more powerful and full-bodied the wine, the higher on the quality scale it must be. The problem with this approach is that it excludes from consideration most of the world's great wines, which rely on a combination of nuance and finesse for their excellence.



The wines of St. Émilion are a good example. Primarily blends of Merlot and Cabernet Franc, they tend to reflect the character of the soil in which they are grown, and generally project elegance rather than tannic force. Despite the influence of consultants such as Michel Rolland, based in nearby Pomerol, the best wines from this region are beautifully understated.

Pierre Seillan and his wife, Monique, had been making wine for three decades. While still in France they formed a friendship with Jess Jackson and his wife, Barbara Banke, who asked Pierre to create the acclaimed wines of Verité in Sonoma. The two couples discovered that they had a goal in common: to locate a St. Émilion estate capable of producing complex wines that reflected the region's terroir. They eventually found Chateau Lassègue, which had all the necessary components---old vines, low yields, and 60 acres of vineyards located on nearly one dozen different soil types. After purchasing the estate, the different vineyard plots led them to create two separate labels, Lassègue and Chateau Vignot.

Chateau Vignot (\$45) is made from vines on the lower foothills of the estate. A trio of recent vintages illustrates the role nature can play in diversifying the same wine. The 2007 has a fragrant, forward nose; it is bright and fresh in the mouth, with good acidity amplifying the fleshy blackberry fruit. By contrast, the 2006 is more classic---compact, angular and structured. The 2005 is a classic wine that combines the best aspects of the other two; poised and ripe, it is infused with hints of cedar, anise, truffle and rich black fruits.

Chateau Lassègue (\$70) bears a distinct family resemblance to the Vignot, although it is made from hillside fruit that receives far more exposure to the sun. Their 2007 is also vibrant and fresh, marked by good acidity and tart berry fruit. By contrast, the 2005 is deep and rich, packed with herbal accents and resonant flavors of plums and blackberries. These wines come alive with food, and go very well with fish as well as the beef and lamb dishes that helped make Bordeaux so famous.