

## **Abstract Thesis: Brexit in Bordeaux by Victor van Kommer**

**4 January 2025**

My dedication to wine as part of our cultural heritage is the foundation of this thesis. Bordeaux exemplifies this in many ways: it is at the heart of French history, a nexus of international relations, and rich in architecture, art, and stories. Additionally, Bordeaux's maritime climate results in diverse harvests each year. My political engagement stems from the belief that wine shapes our society, and thus, themes like Brexit and Bordeaux are intertwined.

My research method involves reading and analysing primary literature sources, supplemented by interviews with prominent representatives of the Bordeaux market. This thesis challenged me to organise my own research, particularly in creating an inventory of ownership over the past 225 years, which was a painstaking but rewarding exercise. I must admit that I occasionally used artificial intelligence, but the results were often generic, inaccurate, and limited in scope. Writing a thesis requires an open mind for new insights, and through this journey, I have realised that my initial conclusion that Brexit was the main game changer in the Bordeaux market is no longer accurate. Brexit is just one of many significant developments in an evolving landscape.

This thesis starts to examine the long-standing relationship between Britain and Bordeaux and assesses how Brexit fits into the broader set of structural shifts affecting the Bordeaux wine industry. While the historical ties between England and Bordeaux are deep—originating with the 12th-century union of Eleanor of Aquitaine and Henry II—this study shows that British influence has always been strongest in trade and media rather than in ownership or winemaking itself.

A review of historic developments reveals centuries of fluctuating trade conditions shaped by wars, treaties, and tariff regimes. Despite periods of embargo, the English market remained pivotal. Bordeaux wines even reached high-status consumers through indirect channels such as privateer auctions when the trade was under embargo. Yet ownership records from 1800 to 2025 demonstrate that only about 3.6% of Grand Cru Classé 1855 in Medoc, properties were ever in British hands, with overwhelmingly French stewardship persisting across centuries. Winemaking and wine-consultancy, too, are exclusively French domains, with technical directors and consultants trained in local viticulture and tied to the region's terroir-driven identity.

The functioning of the Place de Bordeaux is analysed through its key actors—courtiers, négociants, owners, media, and importers. Interviews with producers, importers, and industry professionals highlight the resilience and constraints of this system. Courtiers continue to play an essential cultural and logistical role between châteaux and négociants, while the négociants themselves ensure global distribution and financial security for estates. British importers remain important commercial partners, but their relative influence has declined as market dynamics shift.

The thesis identifies a convergence of crises now affecting Bordeaux. Brexit has raised import costs, administrative burdens, and delivery complexity, especially impacting lower-priced wines. However, Brexit is only one factor within a broader landscape of challenges: declining global wine consumption, changing consumer preferences toward "less but better," uncertainty around U.S. tariffs, reduced demand in China, and financial pressures from rising interest rates. Small estates are particularly vulnerable; vineyard uprooting and business closures illustrate the severity of the situation.

Possible solutions identified in interviews include reinforcing authenticity and biodynamic practices, enhancing hospitality, highlighting the story behind the wine, moderating pricing strategies, revitalizing the En-Primeur system, and pursuing structural reforms such as consolidation or professionalized ownership models for struggling small estates. What I write here is a rough summary of the underlining problem of the Bordeaux region. When the top-chateaux are considering a new direction, as described above, this is even more challenging for the segments below. Here comes in my political association: interventions are needed to regulate a market; otherwise, big parts will disappear in the free and open environment of demand and supply.

The British secondary market—auction houses, fine-wine exchanges, specialist merchants—remains a global powerhouse, but London's dominance is weakening as trade shifts toward Hong Kong, Singapore, and Switzerland. Meanwhile, British influence continues to be strong in wine journalism, education (especially WSET certifications and the Master of Wine), and global communication thanks to the reach of English-language media.

The thesis concludes that while Brexit has had a clear negative impact on trade, it is not the primary cause of Bordeaux's current challenges. The deeper story is a structural transformation driven by global consumption patterns, financial pressures, and shifting market centres. British influence remains significant in shaping the narrative and distribution of Bordeaux wines—but far less in the physical and operational fabric of Bordeaux itself.