

Before we start discussing the specifics of blending in Bordeaux, let's look at different factors that strongly influence the vine growing and winemaking in this region, this should allow us to better understand the reasons behind the blending options.

Bordeaux is a French wine region, one of the most famous in the world and one of the biggest ones (about 112 000 ha of vines in planted there). It lies on 2 main rivers: Garonne and Dordogne and the Gironde estuary. The estuary flows to the Atlantic ocean and the ocean brings strong maritime influence to the climate. This influence, together with the moderating effect from the rivers and the pine forest to the south west create a unique mesoclimate for the vineyards. Part of this uniqueness brings variability of vintages. Some vintages are warm, dry and long, others can be dry, cool and short. This means that the growers need to distribute their risks and in order to do that they plant different grapes with different growing characteristics, e.g Cabernet Sauvignon ripens a late and it needs more warmth to fully ripen than other grapes. Merlot on the other hand ripens earlier, so it can be a safer choice for the growers, however, Merlot can suffer from coulure during wet spring, which means that growers can lose some of the crops. Cabernet Franc is similar to Cabernet Sauvignon (but with lesser structure though) but it is easier to ripen. Similarly, white grape varieties have different characteristics, e.g. Semillon had thinner skins than Sauvignon Blanc and is more susceptible to the noble rot development which can be critical to some of the producers.

Another factor that needs to be taken into account are the soils in the Bordeaux region, with the left bank being based more on the gravel (especially in the Haut-Medoc and Graves) and the right bank being more based on the clays. The gravel provides more drainage for the wet weather of the region, it also keeps heat so much needed to ripen the Cabernet Sauvignon grapes, which are more popular on the left bank. The clay from the right bank keeps the water and cooler the mesoclimate of the vineyards, hence, Merlot is more popular over there.

All of these brings us to the whole range of different varieties available for the wine producers in the Bordeaux regions. For reds, Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon Cabernet Franc, Malbec, Petit Verdot and Carmenere are used (the last one is extremely rare though). For whites, Semillon, Sauvignon Blanc and Muscadet Sp are usually used (however, Merlot Blanc, Colombard and Uni Blanc are also allowed). Each of these grapes bring different characteristics, e.g. Cabernet Sauvignon brings the structure, high tannins and longevity to the wines, with the black fruit character. Merlot adds body, red fruit flavours and makes the wines more lean and smooth. Cabernet Franc can add some leafy and vegetal characters and Malbec can add some spiciness to the wines. In white wines, Semillon brings the body and richness, with the aromas of stone fruit and honey, while Sauvignon Blanc brings the freshness, high acidity, some green and herbaceous elements. Muscadet can add perfumed aromas. These different characteristics of these various varieties give a lot of flexibility in terms of the style they want it produce, add complexity and make the producers more protected from different vintage conditions.

Grapes conditions are only part of the story though. **This is the point of the question.** There are other choices to be made in the winery. E.g. how much oak to use and what oak to use (new vs old)? Different batches are aged in different ways and the winemaker makes a choice of the final blend. It's the same case for both reds and whites (e.g. often part of the white wines from Pessac-Leognan or from Sauternes are aged in new oak, and most of the red wines from the high level producers use some percentage of oak, not always new though). Oak usage can help change the style of the wine but can also influence the cost and the price of the final wine, so that's another variable that the producer needs to take into account.

When it comes to sweet wines of Bordeaux, especially those made in Sauternes and Barsac, the producer also needs to consider the amount of botrytized grapes to use. This is going to depend on how fast the noble rot is spreading, which parts of the vineyards are affected, the style the producer wants to create but also on the weather conditions (harvesting botrytized grapes is much longer than harvesting normal grapes, hence, it gives less flexibility to the growers if the weather suddenly gets worse) - how much the grower wants to risk to get more botrytized grapes?

Another option that needs to be taken into account when it comes to blending in Bordeaux is the timing of the en primeur **Sp** event. Normally, wines would be blended before bottling. En primeur, which happens in the spring following harvest, requires the producers to create their blends much earlier if they want to make their wines to be available for that event. So this brings another option to the producers - when to create their blend? Earlier if they want to be available en primeur or later if they don't care about that so much. I am not sure this is such a driver. The event coincides with the usual period the wines spend ageing. En primeur wine is still in oak.

Another option that can be taken into account is blending grapes from different parts of the region. As mentioned above, Bordeaux is a really large region with the overarching Bordeaux AOC appellation and many smaller appellations which are inside other appellations, etc. This gives some flexibility to the producers in terms of which appellation they choose to use. And this can depend on the availability of the fruit from different parts of the region, on the style but also on the scale the producers want to achieve (e.g. appellations like St-Estephe or Pauillac are below 1000ha so it's going to be hard to produce large amounts of wines from these appellations).

Although this style of answer is good, it is not efficient in exam terms. Unless an essay format answer is required, go straight in to the bare bones of the question. There is no time for scene setting.

The approach the marking key envisaged and which is prompted by the question, is as follows :

Options: Viticulture and Vinification

Reasons: Viticulture and Vinification

Options:

You discuss different varieties well but remember that as little as 5% can have a major influence on style.

Different parcels of grapes may be selected - vineyards, communes, villages, producers and growers.

You mention the importance of soils but grapes grown in different soils may be selected.

Different pressings such as free run or first press juice may be blended.

You mention oak but wine which has undergone various different oak treatments may be blended. Which source of oak, age, size of vessel, duration, toasting level, etc?

Think of any of the techniques which take place in vinification - reverse osmosis, chaptalisation, period of maceration to name only a few. Separate parcels and grapes may be vinified separately, too.

Vintages may be blended and different wines may be blended such as a negociant may choose in say, Entre-Deaux-Mers.

Reasons:

You mention some of the reasons for blending varieties but in addition, there is the opportunity to select or deselect characteristics.

Different parcels of grapes can produce various quality levels. Particular brand styles can be created or terroir may be expressed.

The choices in the winery do influence cost, something you mention. Long cool fermentation of white wines can retain varietal characteristics. Oak fermentation adds complexity to top sweet white wines. Blending across vintages can form the basis of bulk generic wines.

Much of what you say here is correct but you need to take your lead for the answer from the question. In the exam, take a few minutes before you start writing to ensure you have understood exactly what is required.

This last point may seem petty but, whilst this is not a language exam, you do need to be able to spell subject specific terms correctly.

The point of these practise questions is to help candidates see what is required in the exam and how to approach questions. There is plenty of time to practise till the exam itself.