

Pomerol May 2004

Spring has been dreary this year, but everyone is still talking about *la canicule*, the heatwave that seared France last August. The consensus, often expressed with a shrug - after all, it's the Americans' fault - is that we'll have another scorcher this summer.

This would not be good news for Pomerol, although its winemakers may not make the same mistakes twice.

Our tippie trips, organised by debonair wine guru Daniel Berger, always start from Paris Montparnasse station at Saturday dawn. It's a rough way to begin two days of hard work. So fellow *dégustateur* Pierre, my neighbour, planned an *avant-garde*, as he called it, for the Friday afternoon.

We stepped from the TGV, blinking, into the blaring sun and pulled off our jackets and jumpers, wondering whether the doomsters were indeed right.

The *avant-garde* of six dined that evening at the Hostellerie de Plaisance, on the edge of the medieval town of Saint Emilion. Our table, straight out of the Arthurian knights, was right at the narrower end of the v-shaped restaurant. It was just like being in the prow of a ship that had beached above a long view of vineyards turning gold in a long sunset.

It would come across as pretentious and crass to describe that meal. You had to be there. Aficionados among you of fine food and wine - please contact me for the menu and wine list.

It was already hot the next morning as the bus picked us up en route to the Libourne station to pick up the others. So, where are we exactly? St Emilion is roughly thirty kilometres east of Bordeaux. If you go inland, you come to the Dordogne with its castles, the Lascaux caves and half of Britain and Holland in summer. Pomerol is a non-descript plateau a few kilometres northwest of St Emilion. Non-descript, that is, except for the fact that the 130 chateaux on its 800 hectares produce some of

the best and most expensive wines on the planet.

A little more vino-geography is in order. The wide Gironde river estuary divides the Bordeaux wine region into the left and right banks. Wine lovers tend to argue the merits of each endlessly, especially after they have thrown a reasonable quantity of either down their throats. The left is famous for Chateau Margaux, Mouton Rothschild, Lafite and dozens of others. The right bank has a couple of iconic Saint Emilions and the Pomerol biggie, Petrus, as well as hundreds of other wines that help to make life pretty good.

The soils are different on the other side. The weather, wind; everything is different, at least relatively. But the big difference in difficult years is this: the left bank has more cabernet sauvignon (which is great for structure, longevity and finesse), while the right is stronger on merlot, which gives wonderful fruit. In general. But merlot grapes are thinner skinned and ripen earlier. A certain amount of time is required for maturation, though, and the heat can cook the grapes before they mature. To make matters worse, a lot of chateaux remove the leaves from the top of the plant to encourage grape maturity. Not a good move in 2003. And the other problem was the low acidity (wines need it, otherwise they are "flat"), so many places added it last year, only to discover that the acidity levels rose naturally during fermentation! Even the better places made mistakes. The inimitably trendy, minuscule boutique Le Pin winery won't be selling its astronomically expensive drop this year, as it was such a failure.



At the Croix de Gay

Back to our trip. The others joined us, rubbing their eyes, and within minutes we were listening to Frédérique Guillot, of Chateau Croix de Gay, enthusiastically explaining soil types, barrelling lengths, and all the other things that go into a fine wine. Once we got down to the real work of drinking, she worked us up, as they always do, from newer wines from less favoured plots to older ones on the best plots. Unfortunately, we were already late and had to leave before her 1999 Fleur de Gay! We'd been through her 2003 (taken from the barrel for us) which was already rich, but so new and tannic it was hard to envisage how it would turn out, and her 1999 Croix de Gay, which was pleasant and fruity, but still a bit tannic and with little scope for further ageing, I thought.

We arrived in time for a lecture, tasting and lunch at La Conseillante, one of Pomerol's more venerable places. Marie-France d'Arfeuille, who had recently inherited it, was managing the business with the help of a "family executive". I felt that there had been a lot of politics lately there. She was remarkably candid with us about the problems with the 2003; we may have been the first group she had guided through. At one stage, someone asked why she hadn't irrigated. What a question! "We're not allowed to," she answered. Then she stiffened. "Unlike the Australians. They're allowed to do whatever they like."

We started with her 1997, dense robed with a slightly animal bouquet. But it was only once we attacked her 1989, which she had decanted from magnums well before, that we were really swept away. Daniel asked me to give a speech, which I did in Franglais, so in all the

excitement I forgot to note details of the wine. But it was one of the best I have ever drunk.

For the record, and at Daniel's request, here is the trust of my talk. I love being in France, I told them, because of my love of silliness. From that flying start I launched into one of the most passionate and articulate defences of French difference that I have ever heard. This Gallic originality helps the top shelf French wines, but hinders the weaker ones. How so? Well, the top ones are so good, and there is so much mystery around them, that they will always sell. But most north European drinkers, when faced with a wine they don't know from a region they have never encountered, will slide over to the Australian or American racks with their trademarked, pretty labels, clear (if pretentious) explanations and words they understand, such as "Shiraz" or "Full bodied". "Do I have a solution?" I asked. "Mais, Non!" I answered myself. "This is France and it is far more important to discuss things (passionately) than to find solutions." Anyway, it seemed to go over well.

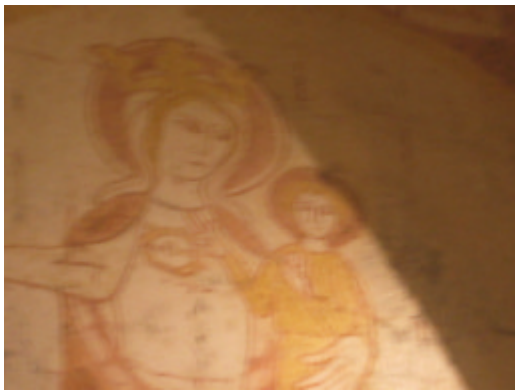
As I mentioned before, Pomerol would hardly register on the map except for its wines. Unlike the left bank with its wonderful and sometimes quizzical palaces, the chateaux here, even the richest, are little more than pleasant houses with a few trees around them. The exception is Beaugard, where we went next.



Chateau Beaugard

Hubert Fagour, casual, unhurried and in his early thirties, I guess, ran through the process for us again. Although I've heard the story of picking, maceration, fermentation (alcoholic and malolactic), barrelling, blending and all the rest so often now that during these speeches I tend to droop against something polished and

expensive, this time I was able to resist the gravitational effects of the 1989 Conseillante. In his simple, slow way, Hubert gave us the best rundown I have heard. To the somewhat abrupt suggestion that he was a bit young to be a cellar master and responsible for all of this, he simply admitted that the decisions were difficult, especially during fermentation but that he was driven by passion. He notes everything down on his pocket PC. His 2001 second wine, Le Benjamin, was fruity and not too wooded and powerful. The 2001 Beauregard was unready; tannic and astringent. Everyone told me it would age well, and I'll take their word for it.



Underground

If all of this traipsing around sunlit wineries sounds a tad indulgent, you may feel better knowing that, to assuage our guilt, we took a Tourist office tour of the recently re-opened underground St Emilion church. The story goes that, after the Saint himself turned up from Brittany in the 8th century, he lived in a cave in the rock, attracting quite a following. The holes were enlarged until the monolithic church was built. I had not expected it to be so large. We also visited a chapel with frescoes and the little crypt where Saint Emilion spent his days. As I said, punishment for our immoderation. I peered at the church, and listened, riveted, to our guide's explanations, although the other fellows seemed more captivated by the speaker than the words she uttered.

Some of us had the good luck several years ago to meet Count François de Ligneris, of the Soutard winery. A Count? Yes, and typically peasantish about it to; a guy who is proud of his links with the earth and is garrulously contemptuous of authority. Don't start me again on contradictions in this country.

Anyway, we had dinner in his restaurant in St Emilion village. We were joined by another long-term supporter of our tippling team, Tristan Kressmann of Latour-Martillac. Although I wouldn't rave home (as my wife Anne used to say during her first year in Australia) about the nosh, we continued our work on the bottles, starting with a Gaillac doux 2002, pitched to us as right for the foie gras some of us had ordered. Gaillac is a couple of hundred kilometres up the Garonne from Bordeaux. I found it dry for a sweet wine, but less sticky than a lot of Sauternes. Need to work on those... Then they pulled out quite a few Soutards, typically rich, but a bit young. For St Emilion, the Soutard takes a long time.

Genevieve and I were running late the next morning and they left without us. But, with the help of pills, I'm getting over it. Anyway, it was hot. We decided to walk. We were ten minutes along the Route Nationale and peering at our little map, when a car pulled up with a member of our party in the passenger seat. They'd felt sorry for us, it seems.

After the usual polite chat at Petit Village winery, which would be in the centre of Pomerol if it had one, Damien Andrieu set out a fascinating tasting for us. Bordeaux wines are blended – the wine from different parcels is aged separately in barrels or vats and is blended just before bottling. The 2003 wines are therefore still separate. Serge gave us pure merlot first; violet coloured, fruity with vanilla later, then spicy and peppery, and of course, as astringent as blotting paper. The cabernet sauvignon had a similar colour, but hardly any “nose” and was quite vegetal and even more astringent. A mix of the two had the same colour (of course) was less fruity and showy than the pure merlot, and was far from ready to drink, but had great structure. This time I'd dare to say that it should be good later! We then tried a 2001 second wine, which I forgot to note and the 2001 Petit Village with 80% merlot, 15 % Cab sauvignon and 5% Cabernet Franc. This one was good. It's starting to settle in. For the sake of science, I returned to the 2003 Merlot, which by now had a completely sweet nose and was quite nutty to taste. Wine is such a strange thing.



Pierre with not so petit Petit Villages

Nicolas de Baillencourt, an old friend of our group, wandered in. He was there to guide us to his nearby chateau. To get there we had to walk between his vines and those of Chateau Petrus's. Looking at that iconic chateau itself, with its single tall cypress, you'd never guess that millionaires fight over this stuff. But the vines themselves appeared venerable enough. Out of the heat and glare and in Chateau Gazin at last, Nicolas gave us a truly down to earth speech that I won't repeat here for risk of legal action from some of his neighbours. There is a lot of bitchiness about, and Nicolas is obviously truly sick of it. But he did tell us to watch for the big Chateaus' brinkmanship into the upcoming primeur sales. No one wants to be first to specify prices, as the others will charge slightly more, as if to say that their wine is better.



En route, Petrus on the left

Gazin is another top Pomerol. His 1997 is a serious wine for such an average year. It is dark coloured, delicate on the nose, and is still fruity but has a bit of wood coming through by

now. The 1994, another middling year, was pleasant, but not as powerful as the 97.

Gombaude-Guillot, our next and last winery, couldn't have been more different. Instead of Nicholas's old stones and elegant casual flair, Claire Laval and her muscular husband received us in the first floor kitchen of their cement and tile pavilion. Against a view of endless vines, she talked ecology rather than wine. They are an organic outfit, and I think that they are toying with biodynamics, too. Grass grows between the rows of her vines. The property has been in her family for several generations. She has been here since 1983, and has become disgusted at what people were doing to the land. "How can you say that a wine expresses the *terroir* if there is no life in the soil?" she asked. Her approach is to "rediscover what the earth expresses when it is left alone to express itself". I would venture that she applies this to herself too: she is gracious and dreamy. I quite liked her wines to start with, but less as I tasted them. It feels unfair, as a thoroughly inexperienced drinker at the end of a hard weekend, to say that. But the others agreed, too. Even the professionals differ. The American wine saint, Robert Parker, doesn't like the 2000 at all, (perhaps it is not beefy enough) but the 2004 Guide Hachette says that it is lively and striking and has a promising future.

Which all goes to show that wine tasting is an art, not a science. Anyway, it is a damned good excuse to discover new country and some of the complexities of this new country of mine.

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