

## *Bonjour les Graves*

May 21-22 2005

We all love Bordeaux, and a good few of us have heard of the “Graves”, an appellation that runs in a 50-kilometre strip from just near Bordeaux itself towards the south east, along the west bank of the Garonne. Well, in that appellation within an appellation, there is another one: Pessac-Léognan, created after an almighty brawl in the 1960s, to which I will return. All in all, it’s a rather good reflection of the French wine industry, with its geographically bewildering and unpronounceable *terroirs*, in which there is always a major fracas or two fermenting away.



Gravel soils in the Graves, at Malartic-Lagravière

**Graves** is the only appellation I know that is called after its soil, gravelly, as you might have guessed. Limestone, gravel and clays are considered best for winemaking as, for various reasons, they inhibit plant growth at ripening time, allowing the grapes to get the lion’s share of those wonderful products of photosynthesis. Although essentially gravel, the area has all sorts of soils, which explains the mixed fortunes of its estates, but the best places produce some of the finest wines on the planet.

Pessac is little more than a suburb within Bordeaux’s busy *rocade*, a dire piece of freeway engineering with which we were to become familiar that cool and blustery weekend in May. The big Pessac attraction is Château Haut-Brion, one of the five first growths in the 1855 classification with the likes of Latour and Margaux. We didn’t go there, sadly. But we did step into the nearby Château Pape Clément.

Gilles Pacquereau, a handsome fellow in a black leather jacket, shook hands habitually, then led us to the garden where we stood under an alley of majestic old oaks near the large white 19<sup>th</sup> century mock gothic chateau. Minutes into his chat, he uttered the words “Our good friend Bob”, the first mention of God this trip. We were soon to discover why he is so fond of Robert Parker.

Normally I take our hosts’ erudite descriptions of winemaking as a necessary prolegomenon to a bit of slurping. But because my friends over here recently, by way of a present on a significant birthday, bought me a course down at a Wine University in Provence, I was straining to do some homework. Gilles had two subjects in particular to cover: *égrappage* by hand and *pigeage*.



Gilles Pacquereau with his *pigeage* tools

What? Well, at great expense, Pape Clément employs some 120 workers we might call “de-grapers”, whose job is to pull each grape off the bunch before they are hurled into the vat. A machine normally does this by ripping off the stems and sending the rest to a conveyor belt where deft hands remove the leaves, sticks and low quality grapes. The winery is so proud of this hand plucking process that it even got Gérard Depardieu to “godfather” the process when they first used it in 2001. I don’t quite see the advantage. In any event, despite the two euros it adds to the price of a bottle, its PR benefits are obvious.

*Pigeage* is the second technique up Pape Clément's sleeve. During fermentation, the solids are borne to the top of the vat by the CO<sub>2</sub>, so something needs to be done to keep them in contact with the wine. The standard technique is *remontage* in which the juice is pumped from the bottom of the vat and spread over the *marc* that sits on the top. *Pigeage* involves getting someone to stand above the vat with a funny tool several times a day and stir the whole thing up.

Whatever. Pape Clément seems to leave no stone unturned. And a sure way of turning stones is to employ Michel Rolland. If the world's leading wine critic, Robert Parker, floats over Bordeaux the way that God floats over the Bible, then Rolland is his archangel. Based in Pomerol, which produces some of the most powerful wines in the world, the ever-affable Rolland seems to push his clients' wines (and wallets) to the limit. This approach doesn't always thrill the purists, who bemoan Parkerised Pomerols from Margaux, but those big reds sure sell.



Gilles Paquereau at work



Pierre Wagniar up to his usual tricks!

So, how do they shape up? Pacquereau first served us a 1994 red, the last of the Château's previous style. I guess the idea was to highlight the advances they have made since, but as 1994 wasn't the best of years anyway, this was a rather easy test. The wine was OK, but austere. The 2003 he then gave us almost jumped out of the bottle in comparison. It was a brutally hot summer that year, bringing high alcohol and sugar, and the grapes would have been terrific for the Château's turbo-charged approach. It had great dark colour, a fabulous nose, powerful fruit and a more than credible finish. We all put our political correctness aside and relished this one. It was voted the best of the day that evening. I loved it, but this drink seems to have had every milligram of value dragged out

of it. Simply put, it feels stressed. In the end, though, Pacquereau proved that he is not just a pretty face, but also a talented poet. We left Pape Clément with his delicate verses about wine ringing in our ears and his 2003 lingering in our throats.

### Seeing the countryside

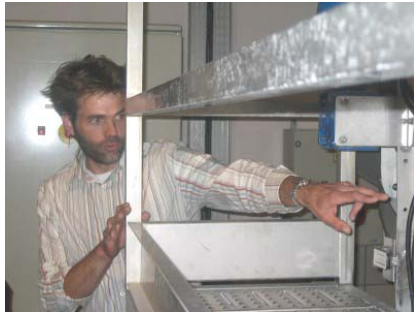
As navigator, I took our troupe of cars straight to our next place, the Château Rochemorin, as marked on the map. It was deserted and rather forlorn, and as I fumbled around, Daniel took off to try to find it. Twenty minutes later we were back at the old place, and eventually someone spied the huge bunker through the trees at the end of a dirt track.



Rochemorin (the new one)

To continue my Biblical metaphors, if Parker is God and Rolland is Gabriel, then the Lurton family is the area's heavenly host. There are two entire tribes of them, the countless children of Lucien and the offspring of André, who has done as much as anyone to bring the Graves back from the brink after its crises

several decades ago. Both Rochemorin and our next place, Château Couhins-Lurton are in the André Lurton stable.



Vincent Cruège and his sorter

As a group we are always on time when it comes to being late, but Vincent Cruège was waiting for us patiently in a vast and deserted gravel carpark. The women in our group immediately perked up: one later described him as tragically gorgeous. The tasting was going to happen over at Couhins, but Vincent took us inside the massive building to show us his new sparkling playthings. We were appropriately impressed by his sorter, a prototype that separates out the good grapes from the bad in part by floating off the unripe ones, and admired the way that the winery's 48 vats are at a lower level than the reception area and its emblematic sorter, so that the wine doesn't have to be pumped, which apparently it doesn't seem to enjoy much.

Wine was produced at Château Couhins centuries ago, but like so many others, the estate degenerated between the wars and afterwards. Lurton re-planted it about 20 years ago. They have waited 15 years before producing their wines. We started with a Château Rochemorin 2003 white, which was OK, but quite thin, and moved to a 2001 Couhins-Lurton which was better, although my notes contain a suggestion that I try it next to something more powerful. The Rochemorin 2002 red, a 50/50 Cabernet Merlot blend was very tannic, but pleasant. The 2000 from Couhins was not released with that name, as they thought that the plants were too young, but was fine. Better, though, was the 2002, the first year the wine was sold as Couhins. A good, solid Pessac-Léognan.

### Technique and more technique...

Our afternoon was even more interesting. Château Malartic-Lagravière (have you noticed that these names are not exactly designed to make life easy for non-French drinkers) is now owned



Sébastien Blastre in control

by a Belgian investor, who has obviously taken his investing role very seriously. The vast circular winery features a highly organised system designed, again, to avoid pumping the wine. This time they use stainless steel vats that can be wheeled around the floor and, thanks to bars around their top edges, lifted by a system of cranes and moved along suspended rails that snake in two concentric circles above the main vats. Sébastien Blastre, the assistant winery "master", explained it all

admirably, this toys-for-boys paradise. When I asked about manual de-graping, he looked a bit blank for a second. "Why?" he asked. "The machine does it fine." Once the grapes are separated, they roll along a series of parallel slats that can be moved closer and apart, to regulate the size of the smaller fruit, which falls through and is rejected. I also spied a monstrous thing (to get a feeling for it, close your ring and third fingers and thumb together – your second and little fingers will stick out like prongs – then point your hand downward) which must have been a robotic pigeager. There's no need to send someone up to the top of the vat here – they just crank the monster up to the roof, drop it into a vat, and turn



The Malartic-Lagravière monster

it on. To top it all off, the oak barrels are slightly higher here than the vats, so at the end of the process, when they are assembling the wine before bottling – you guessed it – they don't need to pump it. The result? I don't know. We were too late to taste any of it.

Gilles Maligne, at the nearby Château Fieuzal made up for it soon enough. I admit I felt hesitant about this one. Gilles's title is "Communications Director" for a start. My fears were confirmed when he received us by the main road, in a sort of Godard film sequence in which the characters move their mouths without being heard. But once we started drinking...

I'll come to that. Fieuzal belongs to an Irish industrialist and – how can I say this politely? – well, the place shows it. Entirely unnecessary columns in gruesome mock marble support wide barrel arches of a kind of tadelakt in the large salon. I think that he's been done by his builders, too. The flagstones outside are already cracking. But back to the wine. For the whites, he changes the barrels every two years. After crushing, the juices are put directly into those barrels: from vine to barrel takes less than ten hours. Oxidation is the main enemy of whites, after all. The wine stays in there for 18 months. The *sémillon* grapes go into the new barrels, the *sauvignon* into the used ones. They do something they call *batonnage*, which involves stirring up the barrel to keep the "lis", the solids in the wine that fall to the bottom of the barrel, alive. For their reds, they don't do any *pigeage*, as it is "a hassle", but do the more traditional *remontage*.



Maligne, happy to communicate

I've never seen a host take to the tasting as Gilles did late that afternoon. My notes are in disarray, and all I can glean from them is "nuance of apricot, quince", "great", "great fresh mineral finish", and for the reds, "full, fruity, peppery." He opened a 1999 white, and a second one. "C'est vachement bon", he said, which translates literally as "It's cow-ish good", an expression often used by the polite who would like to use a stronger word, but you get my drift. If you're not supposed to get pissed at wine tastings, all of us except the drivers failed the test.

That evening we had a good meal washed down with magnums of 2001 Château Langlet, generously provided by Tristan Kressmann, which leads me nicely to the next day, one of the best days of tasting I've done. Indeed, Tristan had put this entire weekend together for us, calling the other wineries and convincing them that we were OK. He had commitments on the Saturday, but dedicated his entire Sunday to us.

### A day with Tristan Kressmann

His grandfather had come over from Germany early last century as a wine merchant, but he bought a property in 1929 and started making the stuff as well. Tristan's father took over both trades, and now Tristan and his brother own a few wineries as well as the merchant business. He took us on a car tour of the area, visiting beautiful, stately Château Carbonnieux, another *cru classé*, and passing many other places whose images appear on bottles in wine shops across five continents. Back at his Latour-Martillac Château, named after the 12<sup>th</sup> century tower which overlooked the old roman and medieval trade route that crossed the small plain before descending into the valley, he leaned on a stone wall and took us through a relaxed and measured history of the Graves, and how rivalry between the better, bigger estates in the north and the masses of



Tristan Kressmann

small producers in the south burst out into open warfare in the 1980s after the southerners staged a coup in the growers association and started to sideline the northerners. Reading between the lines, the northerners, who would have had a lot of political support, managed to get the new Pessac-Léognan appellation created, and established a permanent mark of superiority over their southern rivals. Apparently the wounds have healed after all these years, but the memories linger...

Tristan had prepared a real treat for us: we were joined by Professor Denis Dubourdieu, one of France's most respected oenologues. He advises Tristan and many others, and owns several chateaus himself. I was taking notes so hard that I forgot to take his picture: he looks younger than his title would suggest, not tall but fit and tanned, somewhat typical of the Mediterraneans he mentions frequently. Continuing Tristan's quick history, he discussed life before the 1960s, when the grapes took forever to get from the plants to the wineries. They were crushed in vertical presses and the juice was put into large barrels to let nature take its course. Then hydraulic crushers arrived, and stainless steel vats, which facilitated temperature control of the fermentation process. These new wines were made quickly and were drunk rapidly for the fruit, and sold well through to the early 1980s.

The entire chemical process has been analysed in such detail in the last few years that they now know just about all the aroma and taste precursors that go into making a great wine. The precursors from the pulp get released first, which was all that those popular wines delivered. We now know that many other precursors, often of more subtle sensations, are closer to the skin and need to be teased out slowly, which is what used to happen in the days of horses and carts and vertical presses. The idea these days is to deliver the fruit to the winery quickly and as undamaged as possible, and slow down the magic, which now happens in the vats.

All that attention to the process over the last decade, and now they are going back to the *terroir*. I find it hard to believe, but apparently a lot of knowledge that developed over centuries has simply been lost. As varieties became fashionable, then lost their appeal, parcels were torn up and replanted, to the extent that we don't know what was grown where historically. Experts like Dubourdieu are trying to reconstitute that empirical knowledge with experimental plantings, and although they have a pretty good idea of what they are doing, it will take some time until they have understood the *terroir* as well as they do the chemical processes.



Anne Wagniard, Geneviève LeCaër and Rob Tixier-Guichard, Bénédicte and Jérôme Ségur, Agnès and Guy Lainé  
working at Latour-Martillac

All this time we were sipping their 2004 Latour-Martillac white, which I could not really appreciate. We then zigzagged back in time from Tristan's "first" wine (the Latour-Martillac) to his "second" (Lagrange Martillac) and back. Highlights included the white 1996 Latour-Martillac, already quite golden, in which Dubourdieu helped us find the minerality, smoky sensations, sense of preserved lemon, toast and marmalade, nuances of chocolate, and that

little dry sense at the end that all good wines seek. As a comparison, we attacked a 1966 white, which emphasised senses of resin, beeswax and honey – the tastes that come from slow oxidation.

Over to the reds. A “horizontal” tasting of the 2002 Lagrave Martillac against the Latour-Martillac had me noting the second wine as “fine” and the Latour-Martillac as “excellent” and flattering – surprisingly ready to drink. We then hopped into a carafe of 1975. This was one of those “quick” wines – Tristan’s mother loved it! – light and fine with the slight brick colour around the rim that comes with age, but without the structure that we seek in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

After that wonderful lunch, we heaved ourselves up to walk next door to the Château La Garde, another of Tristan’s places, where Guillaume Poutier showed us around. As you must have guessed, my capacity to follow the vagaries of winemaking was as exhausted as yours must be by now, so I will stop here with my only real memory of the afternoon: Daniel truly getting his head into the process.



Any time you like, Daniel.

*Lincoln Siliakus  
July 10 2005*