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The New Bordeaux

Posted on [July 17, 2016](#)

Something had to be done to help everyday Bordeaux be more successful on international markets. Olivier Dauga has taken up the challenge. For publication in week starting 18 July 2016.

The 1982 vintage in Bordeaux is generally regarded as the one that brought world attention to Grand Cru Classe wines. In fact, the success that year, and in successive acclaimed vintages, may have had little to do with perfect climatic conditions but a range of other factors.

Perhaps 1982 was the first vintage during which Michel Rolland began to advise clients on how to make wines which would garner sales-generating and profit-enhancing Robert Parker points. (As an aside, it will be interesting to see what emerges in the points pecking order now that Wine Advocate's Bordeaux taster is no longer RP but Neil Martin MW, who is British).

In any event, the interest in Grand Cru Classe may be on the wane, or at least to be levelling out, with prices subsequently stabilising. Meanwhile much of the rest of Bordeaux, on the lower rungs of the classification system, has been left floundering. An awful lot of wine is made in Bordeaux; an awful lot of wine that needs to be sold in an ever more competitive global market.

This is where someone like Olivier Dauga comes in. Dauga is the champion of the "New Bordeaux". A wine-making consultant, his commitment is not only to maximising the potential of each separate terroir, such as making sure that the right grapes are planted in the right places. He is also committed to crafting wines with consumer appeal and export potential; and in helping chateaux owners communicate their wines to the public. "Every chateau is different; every soil and every owner is different. I make the wine with the owner: it is very important for me to deliver this [philosophy] behind the wine-making."

He looks at whether the wine is too "strong", if the price is too high or too low, at whether to blend or not. Even whether a special bottle or label might be required. His philosophy is how to adapt vineyard material to the needs of the market. He makes changes, and he provokes. "In Blaye, they say, this is our wine?" he jokes, when he launches something uncharacteristic. He wants to help make wine which consumers will actually want to drink – not the wines which have always been made in such a way, just because they have.

If Dauga and others are leading a movement away from new oak, heavy extraction and that micro-oxygenation made so infamous by Rolland, there's one massive improvement on the pre-1982 wines. Grapes are now fully ripe, as far as possible, and that fruit is encouraged to sing. "New Bordeaux wines are dynamic, fresh, fruity and not aggressive. These wines represent a new image for Bordeaux," Dauga said.

His wines are delicate too – a sense exhibited beautifully in Chateau La Pirouette 2014 (a Cru Bourgeois). A blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot with a touch of Petit Verdot, it is fruity, soft and mellow with long, elegant tannins and a subtle spicy finish. The Chateau Cantinot Orbite 2010 from AOP Blaye Cotes de Bordeaux, made from 100 per cent Cabernet Franc, is floral on the nose. On the palate it offers a sense of gorgeous summer fruit and is fine and elegant, and shows soft tannins.

If Dauga is Mr New Bordeaux, he's also Mr Malbec. This grape was originally a natural part of the Bordeaux blend but was not re-planted after the phylloxera crisis of the late nineteenth century. Because it was a difficult grape to work with? Dauga thinks it was not replanted because it had never shown very well. But, he says, if one controls yields it can deliver some marvellous components in a blend – or even be bottled on its own.

At Chateau Relais de la Poste in the Bourg Cotes de Bordeaux, Les Collines des Barrails 2015 is a fascinating wine made with 100 per cent Malbec from old vines. Dauga uses new American oak – but dries the wood for the barrels for 54 months to achieve a wide grain. This brings out spicy notes on a deep and savoury wine uplifted with fruit freshness, plus a touch of sweet vanilla on the fine tannins.

Chateau Cantinot Orbite 2015 is a 50:50 blend of Malbec and Merlot, vinified separately. The wine shows an extraordinary amount of summer fruits – raspberry, loganberry, plums and cherries – on the nose. This is a new style; fermentation is done in used oak with 20 per cent of stalks included to achieve a tinge of green freshness.

Dauga's other passion is rugby. He has played with Gerard Bertrand, who owns a massive wine operation in the Languedoc-Roussillon, and with Bertrand Girard, owner of the Vinedeis co-operative (previously known as Val d'Orbieu) in Corbieres. The revolutionary work Dauga is also doing in these southern parts of France would be an ideal subject for another column.

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