

The Sainly Garage Cult of the Côte

Four hundred wineries on the border of bankruptcy (albeit lesser ones), a 1.65 exchange rate on the Euro and a style of wine which has fallen out of flavour with the consumer. Yup, times are hard for the aristocracy of French wines- Bordeaux!

Twenty years ago the wines of France and Europe dominated most markets and there was little need for change. Then something strange happened, the pendulum started to swing the other way, as a new player by the name of California began to produce fruit driven, ripe wines with soft mouth feels at very reasonable prices. This style was a complete departure from the thin, acidic, under ripe wines of France.

The French response was, well, typically French-they were right and the consumer was wrong, and the “brilliance” of their wines would soon be vindicated. Fast forward 10 years and enter Australia, the country always on the “go”. It juiced things up and inundated markets with jammy wines that were even more reasonably priced than the ones from California.

The French response was-“Well maybe the consumer was right-maybe”. If Australia was all about “go”, France was all about “slow” and any change has been measured.

To help boost “escargot speed” sales this past February, the LCBO launched a month long campaign of French wine awareness dubbed “Oh La La”. Its long term influence will undoubtedly be as successful as the “UN Oil for Food Program”, (An iffy political comment, if you want I can change it) as long as the present mind set dominates.

Change in The Garage

Luckily, there are some who are willing to challenge the status quo. In the 90s, the first wave of “Vin de Garages” from St Emilion hit the market. These small batches of super concentrated wines were made in garages or rooms of equivalent size, from vineyards equally as small. Buoyed by the quality and high scores given by Robert Parker Jr., some of the stubborn Bordelaise started to rethink and rework their holdings. Lower yields, new oak, leaving the grapes on the vine for total ripeness became the mantra for wineries with the financial means to afford change, which might also be one of the reasons why the lesser houses are in the red.

The “Garage” philosophy soon ballooned, engulfing wineries much larger in size, in effect putting them in the same league as California “Cult Wines”-which follow the same quality principles but on a larger scale.

Chateau Pavie

By far, the wine which has garnered the most attention, both positive and negative is Chateau Pavie, which was purchased by Gérard Perse in 1998.

With his arrival, a brand new cellar was built, harvests were pushed back to October to assure supreme ripeness, yields were slashed and the wines were aged for an unheard of 30 months in new barrels. These new measures, coupled with a great year for Merlot in 1998, created the

first of an ultra concentrated wine which many of the locals panned as un-Bordeaux, while most of the wine world ordained it as one of the finest from the region.

Having visited the winery and seen the work and, most importantly, having tried all the wines from 98 to 02, I can say without a doubt that Pavie is exceptional. My two favorites to date are the 98 which I rated 95+ points and the 00 which garners 98 points. The 02, tasted from the barrel, received a tentative score of 93-96. All are destined to age for a long time.

Perse also produces a wine in partnership with Alain Reynaud of Quinault l'Enclos fame, in the up and coming Côte de Castillon region, which borders St Emilion. Produced from 35 year old vines, Clos l'Eglise is made using the same fanatical methods that are used to produce its more famous, bigger sibling. The 00 is a concentrated mouthful of plums, spice, licorice, black cherries and chocolate with serious tannins to take it until 2017 (91 points.) The 01 doesn't lag far behind. They are still affordable as Bordeaux goes, so stock up before market demand forces prices to sky rocket.

On the subject of Quinault, Alain Reynaud has elevated his property to cult status among Bordeaux afficianados since purchasing it in 1997. The wines usually contain 80% merlot and are dense, yet elegant with excellent length. The 2000 (92 points) is still tight and needs 3 years before broaching. Drink it until 2020. Prices aren't cheap but the quality is paramount.

La Mondotte

One of Bordeaux' greatest and most expensive wines is La Mondotte. This 10 acre property owned by Count Stefan de Neipperg is at the top of every millionaire's blue chip list.

As the story goes, Neipperg wished to amalgamate the vineyards of La Mondotte

with his other property, Canon- La-Gaffèliere in the early 1990's. The powers that be kyboshed (refused?) his request due to the wines having different levels of classification. Canon was a Grand Cru Classé and Mondotte was not. More than a little miffed, he set about to prove the authorities wrong. He built a wine making facility, throwing more money at it than Canada's annual defense budget. The results starting in 1996 were instantaneous- rich, opulent wines.

I had the chance to taste a barrel sample of the 02 at the chateaux with brilliant winemaker Stéphane Derenoncourt, whose jean wearing/guitar slinging persona is his knock at the suit wearing, old school/stuffy Bordeaux establishment. The wine was a purple/black, concentrated mouthful of blackberries, vanilla, spice, kirsch and black cherries (94 to 97 points.) Ironically, the quality of La Mondotte now surpasses the quality of most Cru Classés

Like Perse, Nieppberg has seen the glory that is the Côte de Castillon. His wine, Chateau d'Aiguilhe is better than many wines at twice the price, from more prestigious appellations. The first vintage in 1999 was a solid 90 pointer, the 00 garnered 91 points and the 01, 88 points. All displayed saturated colours with intense aromas of chocolate covered coffee bean, plums, figs, dark cherries and smoke. Well priced and age worthy, these are wines to be chased after.

Péby-Faugères

Chateau Faugères is a star on the rise, but not a new name in St Emilion. While the property has been in the Guisez family since 1823, it has only been since 1987 that quality has become paramount. It was in that year that Péby Guisez stopped selling his wines to a négociant and started to bottle his own. A decade later, the hard work came to bear fruit as the accolades rolled in. Unfortunately, it was also a time of sorrow at the chateau as Péby died tragically at the tender age of 52.

It was at this point that his wife Corinne decided to create a wine in memory of her husband. Made from her best 8 hectares of land, Péby Faugères is a super concentrated luxury cuvee made of 100% Merlot. The 98 was the first vintage and instantly become a collector's item. Alas, prices have shot to stratospheric levels.

Having tried all the vintages between 98 and 01, I can say with confidence that this is great juice. The wines are thick and rich with oodles of plums, coffee, chocolate drenched cherries and spice, which coat over an abundance of tannin. My favorites in order of preference are the 00 and 98; 96 points each, the 99 which gets 95 points and the 01 with a score of 92 points. All are long term cellar candidates.

Whether we say Cult or Garage, one thing is for certain, the fanaticism of a few always influences the many. In this case it is all for the good.