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THE WINE INDUSTRY THINKS ABOUT
ITS CARBON FOOTPRINT

THERE'S MORE TO BORDEAUX
THAN GRAND VINS

THE OLD WORLD'S GRENACHE OBSESSION

THE ISLE OF ISLAY "DRAMBULANCE"



SECONDS, ANYONE?

by Michael Apstein

The one-percenters in the U.S., along with burgeoning wealthy classes in China, Russia and other countries around the globe, are determining what wines the rest of us drink. Their seemingly insatiable appetite for the top names in Bordeaux have driven prices of those wines into the stratosphere, making them unaffordable for the vast majority of wine lovers. Fortunately for us, there is a silver lining. It's called second wines and, indeed, it's a lining that is shining brighter than ever.

The Bordelais have been turning out second wines since at least the early 20th century, and likely before. The practice really took off and became widespread in the early 1980s, as producers strove for higher and higher quality — in part, no doubt, to capture higher ratings from reviewers. With prices of first, or Grand Vins not likely to fall, and the leap in quality of the second wines, they are here to stay.

John Kolasa, the former managing director at both Château Rauzan-Ségla in Margaux and Château Canon in Saint-Émilion, once told me, “Today they [second wines] must be good because they are a true and authentic introduction to the estate. You must make good second wine even if it means selling off bulk wine to maintain its integrity.” And, he added with a smile, “Your name is on the label.”

In Bordeaux, after harvest and fermentation, winemakers have multiple barrels of wine made from Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and the other grapes used in the red Bordeaux blend. Or in the case of dry or sweet white wines, from Sauvignon Blanc, Sémillon and Muscadelle. It is easy to imagine how these barrels will vary in quality depending on the age of the vines or the location of the plot from which the grapes came, and how the individual variety — Merlot or Cabernet — developed during the growing season. When making their final blend for the Grand Vin, winemakers will exclude wines from barrels they don't think measure up. These wines will be destined for second wines or, now that producers have seen the enormous financial success of second wines, to third wines.

Though associated with the wines of Bordeaux, the practice is used around the world, albeit under a different name. In parts of Italy, for example, a rosso could be considered a second wine. Count Francesco Marone Cinzano, owner of Col d'Orcia, an excellent estate in Montalcino, told me that all of their Rosso di Montalcino comes from younger vines planted in vineyards that carry the higher Brunello di Montalcino classification. As vines in those

vineyards reach 15 years of age, which he believes is when they are capable of producing consistently high-quality fruit, the grapes are candidates to be included in Col d'Orcia's stylish Brunello. With the characteristic twinkle in his eyes, Cinzano quips, “Maybe someday I'll make no Rosso, just Brunello.”

One of the great advantages to consumers of second wines is that they mature sooner and, when compared to the Grand Vin, are far more approachable when young. That said, as the accompanying tasting notes show, they, too, can develop marvelously with bottle age. In my mind, texture is a major difference between the second wine and the Grand Vin. The tannins of the second wine are typically a touch coarser, which helps explain why the Grand Vin from a Bordeaux estate can be so suave. These days, a barrel that shows even the barest hint of roughness goes into the second wine. That is not to say the second wines are rough and unpolished. Far from it. They are just slightly less suave — think lambswool rather than cashmere — than their big brothers. You see, or feel, it when tasting them side-by-side. Indeed, you'd be hard pressed to complain while drinking a second wine from a top estate on its own. In addition to the textural differences, the second wines never have the complexity, nor the price, of the Grand Vin.

Sometimes it's the style of the Grand Vin rather than a textural element that determines what goes into the second wine. For example, in creating the blend for the 2005 vintage of Château Margaux, the late Paul Pontallier, the managing director at the time, told me that he included more Merlot — which was of very high quality and could have been included in a blend of Château Margaux — in its second wine, Pavillon Rouge, because its higher alcohol content would have altered the balance of the Grand Vin.

All wine estates replant some of their vineyards regularly, either to replace vines that are diseased or too old, or if the winemaker decides a variety just does not do well in the location that had been selected for it. Depending on the estate, some of what



CHÂTEAU DUCRU BEUCAILLOU

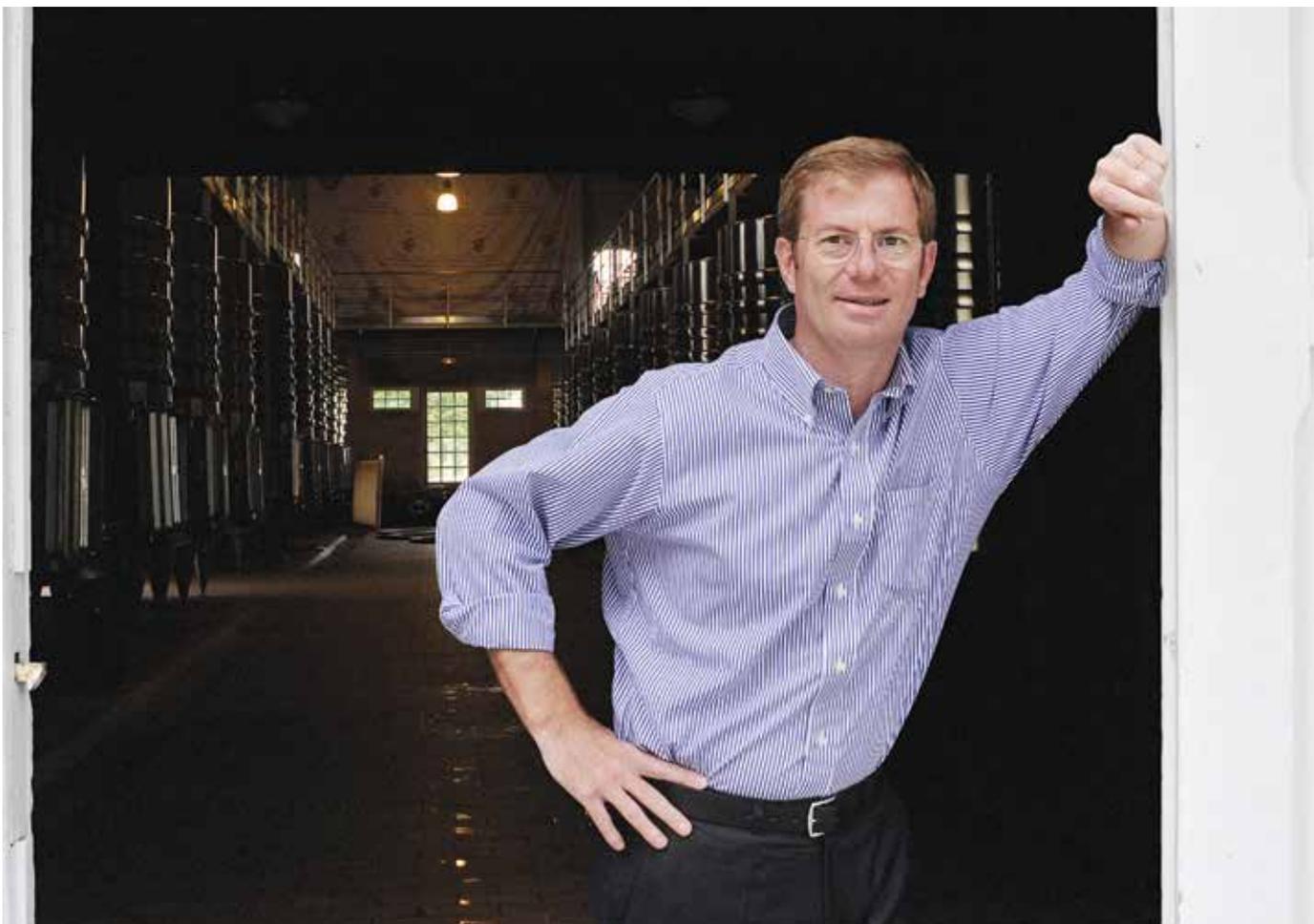
is included in second wine comes from younger vines, the definition of which is highly individual. Emmanuel Cruse, owner of Château d'Issan in Margaux, for example, told me that he considered vines less than 18 years old as "young."

Complicating the matter for consumers is the practice of some estates producing another label from different vineyards that they own, which currently is not a second wine, but which may have started out that way. The Domaines Delon owns both Château Léoville Las Cases and another distinct property a stone's throw to the west called Clos du Marquis, which was the second wine of Léoville Las Cases beginning with the 1902 vintage. Batches of wine from Léoville Las Cases that were not up to snuff went into wine bottled under the Clos du Marquis label, at least until 2007. Since then, however, the wines from the two properties have been kept entirely separate, according to Pierre Graffeulle, the managing director of Domaines Delon. Léoville Las Cases still uses less than half of its production for its Grand

Vin, according to Stephen Brook, a world expert on Bordeaux and author of *The Complete Bordeaux*, relying on its newly — since 2007 — christened second wine, Le Petit Lion, for a substantial portion of the rest. And the Clos du Marquis now has its own second wine, La Petite Marquise.

Then there are those second wines, such as La Croix du Beaucaillou, that are almost exclusively from a separate terroir, comparable to the Léoville Las Cases Clos du Marquis situation, but still can include grapes from the mother ship (Château Ducru Beaucaillou, in the case of La Croix du Beaucaillou).

THERE'S NO FORMULA FOR MAKING A SECOND WINE. At some estates, such as d'Issan, fruit from younger vines plays a major role. At Léoville Las Cases, much of their excellent old-vine Merlot, in fact, goes into the second wine because it otherwise would throw the Grand Vin out of balance, according to Graffeulle. There is a lot of Merlot planted at Las Cases; it's



EMMANUEL CRUSE, OWNER OF CHÂTEAU D'ISSAN IN MARGAUX

needed to soften the final wine because Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc have often had difficulty achieving full ripeness in the past. Now with climate change, the Cabernets get plenty ripe, according to Graffeuille, so there's less need for Merlot in the blend.

Château Palmer, always in competition with neighbouring Château Margaux to produce the best wine from that commune, takes a slightly different approach. They have identified parcels in the vineyard that produce grapes suitable for their style of Grand Vin and other parcels that produce grapes for a differently styled wine. The latter wine is more forward and fruitier; since the 1998 vintage, it's been bottled and labelled as Alter Ego de Palmer. A third set of vineyard parcels produce grapes for either style, depending on the vintage.

However, Château Palmer insists they produce two differently styled wines from their estate and no second wine. Consistent with their philosophy, they produced no Alter Ego in 2018 because the character of the grapes did not fit that style, but they did produce Château Palmer that year. The suave 2015 Alter Ego sells for \$120, while the same vintage of Château Palmer, which still needs cellaring, will set you back \$460.

The now-retired Marcel Ducasse, who was responsible for the incredible turnaround at Château Lagrange in the 1980s, was emphatic when he told me, "selection is the key for making good wine." He described how when he took over at Lagrange, the Château made only one wine. Referring to the practice as a fosse commune (or, everyone in the same grave), he described how everything, including the rough-and-tumble press wine, went into the blend.

Currently, under the very capable leadership of Matthieu Bordes, Lagrange produces three wines, with the Grand Vin representing less than half of the total production. Lagrange's second wine, Les Fiefs de Lagrange, and wine that fails to make the cut for Les Fiefs, which they sell off in bulk, accounts for the other half. Ducasse pointed out that while selection may be a costly technique for improving quality, it can be done quickly, unlike improvements in the vineyards, which could take a decade.

THE FOCUS ON SELECTION HAS ALSO FUELLED THE CREATION OF THIRD WINES. High-profile châteaux, such as Château Latour and Château Margaux, are now bottling third wines, taking advantage of their status and extraordinary selection cri-

teria. Château Latour first bottled Pauillac de Latour in 1989 as a way to increase the quality of their already excellent second wine, Les Forts de Latour, which they introduced with the 1966 vintage. The decision likely helped their bottom line as well. The 2010 Pauillac de Latour currently sells for \$180 a bottle compared to \$370 for the same vintage of Les Forts de Latour and up to \$2,000 a bottle for Château Latour. In 1997, Château Margaux starting culling wines to improve their second wine, Pavillon Rouge du Château Margaux, but instead of bottling that wine, they sold it off in bulk. Then, starting with the exceptional 2009 vintage, they bottled it as Margaux du Château du Margaux. Look for more châteaux to follow with third wines as prices and quality of their Grand Vins and second wines continue to escalate.

A quick look at Ducru Beaucaillou shows how second wines can be a boon for the consumer. Since 2003, when Bruno Borie took over management, the production of Ducru Beaucaillou, the Grand Vin, has been cut in half, while bottling of La Croix du Beaucaillou has doubled. The quality of Ducru Beaucaillou, always high, has climbed even higher. The addition of wine from the better located mother ship has simultaneously increased the quality of La Croix du Beaucaillou. The consumer can buy the 2011 La Croix, which is beautiful to drink now, for \$66, instead of \$150 for the 2011 Ducru, which still needs time in the cellar.

Les Forts de Latour, 1970: This, the second wine of Château Latour, is simply amazing and marvellous at nearly a half a century old. Still fresh and lively, it has developed beautifully, without a hint of fatigue, and delivers the Latour combination of density and power. Its tannic structure is still present, but neither

aggressive nor coarse. Its silky texture is particularly surprising for a second wine and acts as a counterpoint to its power. It actually expands in the glass over an hour or two. This gorgeous wine destroys the notion that all second wines are meant to be drunk young and won't develop.

Château Bahans Haut-Brion, 2000: The second wine of Château Haut-Brion carried this label until the 2007 vintage when it was renamed Le Clarence de Haut Brion to honour Clarence Dillon who acquired the property in 1935. Still youthful at nearly 20 years of age, this quite powerful wine delivers the alluring, ash-like quality of its big brother. Merlot typically accounts for only 25 percent of the blend compared to 45 percent in the Grand Vin, which might explain why it's not as plush. Nonetheless, it's a delight to drink, but there's no rush because there's not a hint of tiredness here.

Les Fiefs de Lagrange, 2015: The second wine of Château Lagrange in Saint-Julien, the 2015 Les Fiefs is surprisingly suave. Just the barest hint of granular tannins in the finish give it away as a second wine. Its main difference from the Grand Vin is its more forward and fruity focus rather than a firmer mineral quality. Though perfect for current drinking with a steak, I know how Les Fiefs develop so, again, there's no rush.

Blason d'Issan, 2000: Château d'Issan and this one, its second wine, are perennial over-achievers. Though not as silky as the Grand Vin, the 2000 Blason d'Issan is remarkably suave. It opens with air to reveal a captivating earthy character. Lively and fresh, it's a joy to drink. This second wine has developed beautifully and will continue to evolve given its balance. ✦



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