

BORDEAUX VINEYARD'S respect for organic tradition  
yields complex vintages that remain vigorous decades later

## Go ahead – guess the age of Château le Puy wine

I must admit that I have a love/hate relationship with the wines of Bordeaux. One cannot deny the region's pedigree, with a tradition of making fine wines that dates back to the 18th century. Its grapes, especially cabernet sauvignon and merlot, are arguably the most recognized red grapes in the world of wine. And when Bordeaux is great, no other wine can match its blend of power and finesse. A Bordeaux wine at its apogee is indeed a beautiful thing.

However, the Bordeaux can be a bit annoying. The prices of the grands crus skyrocket every time there is an acclaimed vintage, to levels that are simply out of reach for most wine lovers. What I have also noticed, and this is perhaps even more troubling than the prices, is that the styles of many of these wines have changed over the last decade.

One of the criticisms of the "old" Bordeaux was that the wines were at times a bit green, with astringent tannins, and that not enough attention was paid to picking fully ripe grapes. Many Bordeaux wines of today have gone in the opposite direction. I have tasted a number that could almost be confused with Napa cabernets with their dark stewed fruits, low acidities and oak domination. While these wines are arguably more accessible in their youth, my experience is that they don't age nearly as



BILL ZACHARKIW

gracefully. And besides, if I want a very ripe, big wine, Napa Valley does this style of cabernet and merlot to perfection.

The end result is that I don't drink a whole lot of Bordeaux at my house. But every now and then I come across one that brings me back, and reminds me why these wines are still part of the pantheon of classics.

At this year's Montreal Wine and Spirits Show, I ran into Jean-Pierre Amoreau, owner and winemaker at one of my favourite Bordeaux wineries, Château le Puy. Château le Puy is a 25-hectare vineyard in the Côtes de Francs region of Bordeaux. It shares the same rocky plateau as St. Émilion and Pomerol, with the winery sitting atop the Côteau des Merveilles, a name that pays homage to the quality of the wines produced at the château, which has been in operation since 1610.

The region of Bordeaux is divided in two by the Gironde River and its tributaries. The "left bank" is home to the cabernet sauvignon-dominated Médoc wines, known via such famous

communes as Pauillac, St. Julien and Margaux. The "right bank" is dominated by merlot and cabernet franc country, best known via the appellations Pomerol and St. Émilion.

While I sat with Amoreau, we tasted his 1959 and 1967 vintages. Both were still full of vigour, which is remarkable considering the age of the wines – even more so when you consider that those bottles probably cost only a few dollars back in the day. The 2004 vintage that is currently available costs under \$25, which is very inexpensive considering the longevity of these wines.

This was not the first time I had tasted older vintages of Amoreau's wines. Four years ago I had an opportunity to taste six vintages, dating back to 1955. To this day, a bottle of his 1970 vintage ranks as one of the greatest wines I have tasted. To think that this must have cost under \$5 a bottle back in the day I have tasted a number of much more expensive wines that have not fared nearly as well.

So what is le Puy's secret? Not only do its wines age exceptionally, but if you try the 2004 vintage, you will find it absolutely delicious. Amoreau's wines are ripe, but they don't seem to fall into the trap of too much oak, or the lower acidities that affect so many "modern" Bordeaux.

The first difference is that Amoreau works biodynamically.

Biodynamics, like organic farming, relies on organic materials for enriching the soil and shuns the use of pesticides, fertilizers and herbicides. Many of the critics of biodynamics see this as a marketing scheme, capitalizing on a sector of the market that wants more organic wines. They doubt that many of its principles, such as harvesting and working the vines based on a calendar that tracks the position of the moon and stars, actually do anything positive for the vines.

Amoreau doesn't see this as anything new, but rather as the way agriculture has always been done – at least before the advent of modern, chemical-based agriculture. I found out from this recent chat that the way he makes his wines is a testament to the way things were done in the past, which is profoundly different from the way wines are made in modern Bordeaux.

Modern winemaking is about control. In regions like Bordeaux, where the wines are blends of different grapes – in this case, merlot, cabernet sauvignon and a touch of carménère – the vast majority will harvest, vinify and age each varietal separately, and then blend them together once the wines are around a year old. Most winemakers use cultured yeasts, as opposed to the natural yeasts that come on the grapes from the field to the winemaking facility.

Amoreau has a much more organic approach to making his wines, using indigenous yeasts, little or no sulphur dioxides, no fining or filtration. But the real

difference is that many of his wines are blended not after they have been aged, but rather before they are even made.

At le Puy, up to 60 per cent of the final wines are blended before they even arrive at the winemaking facility.

"We harvest up to 60 per cent of our merlot and cabernet sauvignon at the same time and crush and ferment them together," Amoreau explained. Part of the reason for doing this is that they harvest all their grapes by hand, and by the time they get halfway through the merlot harvest, the cabernet sauvignon is ready to be picked.

This means some of Amoreau's merlot grapes are picked with an advanced maturity, while other are "just ripe." He said this technique allows for more complex textures and flavours. "In Bordeaux, there used to be co-plantation of the different varietals, so they were often picked together," he said. Amoreau explained that complexity for him includes a spectrum of maturity.

It seems that the old-school method, whose techniques are shunned by the modern Bordeaux, had a method to its madness.

"You will find different yeast strains on different grapes, and from different parcels," Amoreau said. "True complexity starts with the yeasts, and by co-fermenting all these grapes and their terroirs together, the result is a wine with much greater complexity."

So the reason le Puy's wines are so different, it seems, begins in the field.