



POUR



Chateau le Puy makes an atypically Burgundy-like red.  
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# Bordeaux estate makes fine wines naturally

Grower: Wine should be refreshing, digestible, make impression.



**By Eric Asimov**

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ST.-CIBARD, FRANCE — The French have a notion that has no real counterpart in English for discussing a delicious wine. It is *digestibilité*, digestibility in English, a single word that, like *terroir*, connotes something far more complex.

*Digestibilité* begins with deliciousness, but it also indicates wines that are easy to drink without weighing heavily in the gut. It's an immediate, unmediated pleasure that nonetheless may be complex and contemplative.

The term is often used for natural wines, those produced with only minimal intervention. That is one reason you rarely see the term applied in Bordeaux, a wine region where the best wines, regardless of price, ought to be among the most digestible wines in the world yet are too often weighed down by excesses in viticulture, wine-making and reverence.

But here on a rocky plateau near this small town, just east of Pomerol and St.-Émilion, sits Château le Puy, where the Amoreau family has grown grapes for more than 400 years. The winery produces superb Bordeaux that epitomizes the notion of *digestibilité*.

Indeed, digestibility is in a way part of Le Puy's charter. Jean Pierre Amoreau, the current custodian of the property — along with his wife, Françoise; son, Pascal; and daughter, Valérie — told me on a visit to Le Puy this spring that he has three requirements for a good wine.

First, wine must refresh. Second, the first sip must make a good impression. And third, it must be digestible.



## Wine

As with the best Bordeaux wines, those of Le Puy are marked by purity, precision, lightness and drinkability that encourages taking another sip. They also have an intensity of flavor despite their grace, a combination more often associated with that other great region in the east of France.

“It’s the best Burgundy wine from Bordeaux,” said Steven Hewison, Amoreau’s son-in-law, who is in charge of production.

Le Puy’s approximately 125 acres of vines, 50 years old on average, are planted on a mixture of limestone, clay and flint soils that are certified biodynamic. Le Puy is no recent convert to this now fashionable form of organic viticulture.

Almost all agriculture was organic until after World War II, when chemical agriculture became the norm. But not at Le Puy, where the soil has never felt the sting of fertilizers and herbicides.

Now, Amoreau is among the most passionate advocates for biodynamics in the true sense of the theory, which calls for farms to be independent, diverse estates in which everything that is required for a healthy growing environment is one ecosystem. This is not the compromised version that many grape growers are compelled to practice.

In most wine regions, especially prosperous areas like Burgundy where biodynamic viticulture is revered by top producers, you see almost nothing but a monotonous

tableau of vineyards.

A true biodynamic farm must be a polyculture, made up of not only diverse crops but also untended wild areas, where beneficial birds, insects and mammals live. This biological diversity theoretically creates symbiotic relationships on the farm in which pests and diseases are kept in check naturally rather than through artificial means.

Amoreau believes it is crucial to maintain the soft airiness of the soil, which he says directly affects its microbial life and, eventually, the quality of the wine. Worms, microbes and bacteria weave passages in the dirt permitting the roots to plunge deep into the limestone bedrock, which he said contributed elegance and finesse to the wines. To that end, Le Puy has worked closely with Claude and Lydia Bourguignon, who are among the world’s leading experts on soil and its relationship to wine.

In an effort to maintain the soil’s lightness, Château le Puy now uses four horses for plowing about a third of its vines instead of heavy tractors, which can compress and harden the earth.

Le Puy relies on indigenous yeast and easy fermentations, avoiding extracting too much in the way of tannins and color from the grape skins and seeds, which can make powerful but tough wines, in a phrase, less digestible.

Emilien, the estate’s workhorse cuvée, is aged in foudres – big, old oak barrels that impart little flavor. The wine receives a small dose of sulfur dioxide, the wine stabilizer used almost uni-

versally except in the most natural wines.

The limited production Barthélemy, from a single parcel, is aged in small old barrels and receives no added sulfur dioxide, yet in each of my experiences with the wines, it has seemed completely stable.

At dinner in the town of St.-Émilien, we drank the 2011 Barthélemy, deep, pure and energetic and still light and graceful; and the 2010, vibrant and richer than the 2011, with an added element of mineral complexity. Best of all was the 2001, with an aroma of violets, silky and complex, fine and intense.

The Emilien is a little less dense than the Barthélemy and no less pleasing. The 2011 was fresh, direct, pure and precise, with flavors of red fruits and minerals. It ages well: A 1982 Emilien that I drank in 2016 was lovely, complex and bright, while a 1970 displayed complex secondary flavors of tobacco and bramble.

As with almost all of the properties in the Right Bank regions of Bordeaux, Le Puy’s reds are dominated by merlot, with lesser proportions of cabernet sauvignon and other grapes. As Le Puy is not within the borders of the most prestigious appellations, Pomerol and St.-Émilien, it is less expensive than equivalent examples of those wines, around \$40 a bottle for the Emilien. The rarer Barthélemy is expensive, costing about \$150, which, in the rarefied world of fine Bordeaux, is about the price of a good St.-Émilien from the same vintage.