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Bordeaux Estate Makes Fines Wines Naturally

By ERIC ASIMOV

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, winemaking 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,



Horses plowing the Château le Puy vineyard. The chateau uses horses on about a third of its vines to maintain the soil's lightness. Credit Rodolphe Escher for The New York Times

ter, 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. 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, Mr. 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.

"My grandfather was too stingy to buy chemicals," Mr. Amoreau said. His grandfather, he said, was influenced by André Birre, a mid-20th-century agronomist, who urged farmers to look after the health of their soils and recommended methods not unlike biodynamics.

"Nobody in wine really talked about biodynamics until the 1990s," Mr. Amoreau said.

Now, Mr. 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 many top producers, you see almost nothing but a monotonous tableau of vineyards end to end.

A true biodynamic farm must be a polyculture, made up of not only

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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.

Along with the vines, Le Puy has another 150 acres devoted to forests and, among other things, fig trees, hazelnut trees and beehives. About 100 pounds of oak-blossom honey were harvested last year.



From left: Jean Pierre, Françoise and Pascal Amoreau, and Harold Langlais. Credit Rodolphe Escher for The New York Times



Two Château le Puy wines.
Credit Rodolphe Escher for The New York Times

“The ecosystem is even more important than biodynamics,” Mr. Amoreau said. “When you work in a monoculture, it changes the fauna. You end up with more parasites than predators. The wild areas have more predators. You have to have wild areas around the vines to maintain a balance.”

Bordeaux has been slow to adopt organic and biodynamic viticulture. Slowly, though, several top chateaus like Pontet-Canet in Pauillac and Palmer in Margaux have begun to adopt the philosophy. Le Puy has been there all along.

Mr. 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 pas-

sages 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. In those plots, every third row is left unplowed so that tractors have a path for spraying biodynamic preparations made of ingredients like ground quartz and stinging nettles. The unplowed row is changed each year to minimize soil compaction.

Eventually, the chateau hopes to use the horses over its entire property.

“You need life in the ground and life in the environment to get life in the vines,” said Harold Langlais, an associate winemaker who is also a partner in Le Puy.

Asked to describe his overall philosophy, Mr. Amoreau replied, “We have one guy in the cellar, 20 people in the vineyard.” Nonetheless, the winemaking process is important as well. 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.

“We prefer infusion to extraction,” Mr. Langlais said.

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 universally 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. Le Puy also makes small amounts of a sweet white wine, Marie-Elisa, entirely of sémillon. Remarkably, it, too, is made without sulfur, particularly difficult for a sweet wine as the residual sugar beckons seductively to the sort of microbes that can ruin a wine.

The entire production from 2011, one barrel, is still resting in the cellar, having been nursed along by Mr. Hewison until he thinks it can withstand the rigors of shipping and storage.

Tasted from the barrel, it was luscious with sweet flavors of flowers, honey and lanolin.

“I think it’s finally stable,” said Mr.

Hewison, who is planning to bottle it in September.

At dinner in the town of St.-Émilion, 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.

“We have one guy in the cellar, 20 people in the vineyard”

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.-Émilion, 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.-Émilion from the same vintage. Currently, the Le Puy estate falls within the Côtes de Bordeaux appellation, but the name of this particular region has been shuffled frequently over the years. Previously, it has fallen under Bordeaux, Bordeaux Supérieur, Côtes de Francs and Francs-Côtes-de-Bordeaux.

Mr. Amoreau shrugged. “We’re just Château le Puy,” he said.



A bull grazing by a menhir (standing stone) on the Château le Puy vineyard.
Credit Rodolphe Escher for The New York Times