



August 24, 2010

The Soulful Side of Bordeaux

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ST.-JULIEN-BEYCHEVELLE, France

COMPARED with the grand chateaus of the Médoc, the tiny Domaine du Jaugaret may seem irrelevant. The critics don't score its wines, it's barely mentioned in guides, it doesn't play in the futures game. The winemaking facility is no more than a series of stone sheds with floors of dirt and gravel and walls covered in a mushroomlike mold. Calling it rustic would be putting it kindly.

Yet for me, the importance of a place like Domaine du Jaugaret in St.-Julien cannot be overstated. In globalized, commercial Châteaux Bordeaux, a world of brand-name products sold like luxury goods, where too many wines seem polished and lustrous yet lacking in character, Jaugaret brims with soul. Its proprietor, Jean-François Fillastre, epitomizes the French vigneron, one who tends the vines and makes the wines.

Vignerons like Mr. Fillastre make up the backbone of wine regions all over France, from Burgundy to Languedoc to the Loire, embodying the essential truth that wine is both agriculture and culture, a centuries-old expression of French character. (Indeed, Jaugaret has been in Mr. Fillastre's family for more than 350 years.) But in the famous terroirs of the Médoc like St.-Julien, Margaux, Pauillac and Sauternes, such vignerons are the rare exception.

You can still find a few, like Bruno and Pascaline Rey of Moulin de Tricot in Margaux or Francis Daney of Cru d'Arche-Pugneau in Sauternes. They are slightly more common in areas of lesser status, like Canon-Fronsac, where Bénédicte and Grégoire Hubau operate Château Moulin Pey-Labrie, or in Bordeaux Supérieur, where Pascal and Chrystel Collotte make delicious straightforward claret and an excellent rosé at Château Jean Faux. In the wines of vignerons like these, and none more so than Mr. Fillastre's, you can taste another side of Bordeaux, one grounded in the fields and the cellars, in cultural tradition rather than in commerce. Yet because of the way the Bordeaux business works, the odds are stacked squarely against small family estates like Jaugaret, which work outside the established mode of commerce.

"I use the methods of my father, natural, no manipulation, no chemicals," Mr. Fillastre said, as we stood in a room where three vintages sat aging in old oak barrels, illuminated by lamps wreathed in cobwebs. Using a pipette made of glass that he blew himself, he pulled samples from the barrels, wines that were fresh, alive and aromatic.

“I’m not making wines for consumers,” said Mr. Fillastre, who, at 67, still shows in his shoulders and forearms a hint of the decathlete he was in his youth. “I’m making wines for my own pleasure.”

These words might well have been spoken elsewhere by other idiosyncratic winemakers who have gone their own way, like Gianfranco Soldera of Brunello di Montalcino, Bartolo Mascarello of Barolo, Anselme Selosse of [Champagne](#) or Henri Bonneau of Châteauneuf-du-Pape. While they are celebrated for their very personal expressions, Mr. Fillastre is lost within a region that many younger American wine lovers perceive as stodgy, dull and lacking authenticity.

If only they could try a bottle of Jaugaret, even from an unacclaimed vintage like 2002, they might feel very different. The 2002 Jaugaret St.-Julien is classically structured yet graceful and elegant, with gorgeous aromas of violets and minerals. These wines have haunted me since I first drank them a little more than two years ago. They recall an era when, as Jaugaret’s American importer, Neal Rosenthal, has said, the Bordelais were modest and the wines were grand.

Even as many estates in the Médoc have planted more [merlot](#) to make softer, fruitier and easier wines for drinking young, Jaugaret’s blend is dominated by [cabernet sauvignon](#), which gives the wine structure and freshness, but demands aging before it will show at its best. Mr. Fillastre keeps his wines in barrels for 30 months, far longer than most, and he primarily uses older barrels, which won’t add oak flavors but allow subtle aeration over time.

“I don’t demand of the wine, it demands of me,” he said, dismissing the culture of enologists and consultants who employ the latest in technology to achieve the wines they desire.

What makes the estate so compelling does not end with what’s in the glass. In a land of vast scale and tremendous output, where a great chateau like Mouton-Rothschild farms 280 acres of vines and produces maybe 170,000 bottles of its top wine each year, Jaugaret is a mere 3.1 acres, divided into a half-dozen parcels, making no more than 6,000 bottles of St.-Julien a year.

Setting it further apart, Jaugaret operates outside the *négociant* structure that dominates Bordeaux commerce. In almost every other region, producers sell their wines directly to importers, who then market the wines in their home countries. Bordeaux still depends on middlemen, *négociants*, who buy wine from the chateaus and market it worldwide. They sell much of the top Bordeaux as futures, to which importers must commit money as far as two years in advance of delivery.

The system works great for the big chateaus, and for the *négociants*. But the large upfront expense means that much of the Bordeaux in the United States has been imported by big, wealthy companies.

Small, groundbreaking importers like Mr. Rosenthal, Kermit Lynch and Louis/Dressner Selections don’t have access to the classified growths or, with a few exceptions like Jaugaret, to producers in the most famous terroirs. They confine themselves to a few small estates in satellite appellations of Bordeaux that meet their quality standards and will deal directly with importers.

Instead, they have focused on building intense followings for wines from Burgundy, the Rhone, the Loire Valley and other, more obscure areas. An entire generation of Americans has learned about Old World wines by examining the importer's label, looking for names they trust enough to take chances on obscure producers. For the most part, Bordeaux has been omitted from this educational process.

This is one reason that the region, particularly among younger drinkers, has become something of an afterthought. Is this a crisis for Bordeaux? Hardly, at least not for its upper echelon. A worldwide audience seems ever-ready to pay whatever rates are required to accumulate bottles.

And to be fair, many people buy Bordeaux because they love it. But many wine fanatics, especially those of a contrarian bent, have turned on Bordeaux as representing all the pomp and pretension they dislike in the wine world.

Sadly, they would miss the wines of Bruno and Pascaline Rey, the fourth generation of their family to operate Moulin de Tricot, which has about nine acres in Margaux and four in Haut-Médoc. Their 2009 Margaux, still in barrels, is rich, pure and light in texture. The 2005 is beautifully perfumed and intense with fresh acidity, while the 2005 Haut-Médoc has great purity but is a bit rougher, befitting the different terroir.

They do most of the work themselves. "It's a very hard life, working seven days a week with no vacations," Mr. Rey said.

What's the motivation? "Once you start to care about the vines, you don't think about doing anything else," he said. "It's not feasible for a small vigneron not to have passion."

The Reys have two children, 25 and 21, but they don't want to push them into the business. The lack of a plan for secession threatens vignerons, particularly in top terroirs like Margaux.

"Grand chateaus are looking for estates to snap up, for people who have nobody to leave it to," Mr. Rey said. "In 10 or 15 years there may not be any more small producers in the Médoc."

The sweet wines of Sauternes are no longer fashionable, short of the big names like Château d'Yquem, but to taste the Sauternes of Cru D'Arche-Pugneau is exhilarating. A 2001 is honeyed by botrytis and is complex, balanced and perfectly refreshing rather than cloying.

The 2009, still in barrels, is lovely, delicate and alive. Mr. Daney, the vigneron, is the third generation of his family to run the estate. He is a former rugby player, and with his old comrades still gathers to sing folk songs.

Standing behind his small winery, he looks across fields of vines and points at neighboring chateaus.

"That one is owned by LVMH, that one by AXA, that one by Rothschild, that one by Crédit Agricole and that one by Credit Suisse," he said. "Corporations seek to buy more and more. They have all the money."

That's not so much the issue in the area southeast of Libourne, the so-called Right Bank, where the wines are labeled Bordeaux or Bordeaux Supérieur. Many vigneron in these areas of lesser status are struggling, and corporations are not so interested in buying, which leaves openings for couples like Pascal and Chrystel Collotte, who bought and restored the chateau after success in the barrelmaking business.

Now, at Jean Faux, the Collottes live what seems to be a fantasy of the winemaking life. They fill closets with preserved fruits and vegetables, and raise pigs to make hams, sausages and charcuterie, served with their own good red wine and rosé. Mr. Collotte farms his 15 acres, largely of merlot, organically. Asked why, he looked incredulous and said, "Because I drink my wine."

His commitment drew the attention of Daniel Johnnes, the wine director for [Daniel Boulud's](#) restaurants and an importer known for educating Americans about the joys of Burgundy. Now, he has decided to add a collection of Bordeaux estates to his import portfolio. He wants to work directly with vigneron, which has put him in conflict with the négociant culture.

"All this talk in Bordeaux of classified growths and the futures market and the commerce of wine, that's not what wine's all about," he said. "But I believed there were winemakers who were connected to the traditions and the culture."

Eventually, he put together what he calls "honest wines" from about a dozen producers like Mr. Collotte, who he believes represents the vigneron culture of Bordeaux. Most will sell for \$15 to \$30 a bottle beginning this fall.

These are good wines, but it's safe to say few have the potential of offering the thrills of a Domaine du Jaugaret, which sells for \$60 to \$100 a bottle. That's a lot of money, but little compared with Jaugaret's illustrious neighbors, and perhaps a pittance given all that Jaugaret represents, and all that may one day be lost.

Mr. Fillastre is a bachelor with no children. His younger brother, Pierre, has two daughters, but Mr. Fillastre said they are not inclined to be vigneron. The future is a concern.

"If I'm sick, I could lose everything," he said. "I worry about that."

When I mentioned my visit to people in the Bordeaux establishment, not one had ever heard of Domaine du Jaugaret. Mr. Fillastre's neighbors, though, are fiercely protective. One woman, who had cross-examined me about my intentions when I arrived, accosted me again as I left.

"It's a domaine, not a chateau," she said, making sure I got it right. "Very few people do as he does. He's extraordinary."

Think Bordeaux Is Stodgy? These 10 Could Change That.

While many estates in Bordeaux are huge operations with enormous staffs, there are also small, family-run places like these 10, all of which I've found particularly enjoyable.

CRU D'ARCHE-PUGNEAU Exquisite Sauternes, \$50 to \$75. (Rosenthal Wine Merchant, New York)

CHÂTEAU ANEY Classically shaped Haut-Médoc, \$25. (Kermit Lynch Wine Merchants, Berkeley, Calif.)

CHÂTEAU BEAUSÉJOUR Fruity, earthy Montagne-St.-Émilion, \$15 to \$30. (Daniel Johnnes Selections/Michael Skurnik Wines, Syosset, N.Y.)

CHÂTEAU DE BELLEVUE Plush, mineral-laden Lussac-St.-Émilion, \$25. (Kermit Lynch Wine Merchants)

DOMAINE DU JAUGARET Profound, old-school St.-Julien, \$55 to \$100. (Rosenthal Wine Merchant)

CHÂTEAU JEAN FAUX Gulpable red and rosé Bordeaux Supérieur, \$15 to \$30. (Daniel Johnnes Selections/Michael Skurnik Wines)

CHÂTEAU LANESSAN Classic bistro Haut-Médoc, \$20. (Fruit of the Vines, Long Island City, N.Y.)

CHÂTEAU MOULIN DE TRICOT Pleasingly raspy Haut-Médoc; perfumed, intense yet graceful Margaux, \$30 to \$45. (Rosenthal Wine Merchant)

CHÂTEAU MOULIN PEY-LABRIE Plush, earthy merlot from Canon-Fronsac, \$25. (Louis/Dressner Selections, New York)

CHÂTEAU LA PEYRE Fresh, minerally St.-Éstèphe, \$40. (Rosenthal Wine Merchants)