

# Encore Bordeaux



Château Pontet-Canet

AFTER OUR WINE GROUP'S VISIT to Château Margaux on the morning of May 18, 2012, we had lunch at Le Lion d'Or in Arcins. This is a well-known restaurant in Bordeaux and after a nice repast, we had largely settled down from our opening experience.

For our second stop, we went by motor coach to the very small hamlet of Bages in the Pauillac region of Bordeaux after passing by the beautiful Châteaux Palmer, Beycheyelle, Pichon-Longueville Comtesse de Lalande, and Pichon Longueville Baron, as well as the Medoc's greatest restaurant and hotel, Cordellian Bages.

Château Lynch-Bages has long been a favorite Bordeaux of the English, as well as Americans, and it historically had Irish ownership. The current owners, the Cazes family, have been in charge since 1938. The hamlet is a charming place to visit. The few buildings include a store, art gallery, old restored historical houses and, of course, the chateau. Although Château Lynch-Bages is officially a fifth growth in the Bordeaux Classification of 1855, it often performs at a higher level. The vineyard consists principally of Cabernet Sauvignon (73 percent) with 15 percent being Merlot, 10 percent Cabernet Franc, and 2 percent Petit Verdot. The Château produces a second label (Echo de Lynch-Bages), as well as a third label called Pauillac de Lynch-Bages.

We did a quick tour of the facilities which were very impressive, especially the winemaking artifacts. First, we tasted 2004 Lynch Bages. The Grand Vin was medium-bodied with notes of tobacco, graphite, cassis, and dark fruits with a creamy finish. We finished our visit with a tasting of 2005 Les Ormes De Pez, a wine from the St. Estephe, which the Cazes own. It was full of minerality, with mild tannins and a core of smoky black fruits.

Our final destination was Château Pontet-Canet, also a fifth growth and in the commune of Pauillac. The chateau is located immediately next to Château Mouton Rothschild, one of Bordeaux five first growths. For many years, this was a bona fide conundrum: how could Pontet-Canet be situated so close to Mouton-Rothschild, and not perform any better than it did historically? Fifth growths are not expected to perform at first growth levels, but the difference between these two chateaux wines was profound. This was to change, however.

Beginning in 1994, the current owner, Alfred Tesseron, succeeded his father and began to

focus intently on raising the quality of the wines. He has succeeded beyond all expectations. Focusing on improving the vineyards drainage, green harvesting (mid-season cropping of fruit) and improving the cellars, especially using gravity to fill the fermenters, concrete as well as wooden vats, he demanded ever stricter selection of the grapes to go into the final blend of the Grand Vin. Recently, he has moved from green harvesting to earlier reduction of fruit crop and has assigned small vineyard plots to small teams so that in effect, each individual vine is receiving individual attention.

As a result, he believes that with such attention  
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*Horses assist the biodynamic method of managing  
Château Pontet-Canet's vineyards.*



PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO

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and devotion, after the vines reach 15 years of age, the production of each vine can go into the Grand Vin. Over the past decade, he has ventured into an uncanny realm for the bordelais. He focused on converting his vineyards' status to organic. While this is not unknown in Bordeaux, his next step to convert the vineyards to biodynamic practices is rare anywhere in the world, and especially in Bordeaux. For those who are not familiar with the term "biodynamic", it was first used by Rudolf Steiner of Austria in the second decade of the 20th century. Essentially, it assumes that all steps are taken to ensure that the vineyard is farmed organically, but applies principals of astrology to the applications of fertilizers, organic pest controls, etc. Steiner lost some of his audience when he allegedly gave an example of how to fertilize in this methodology, stating that it was not good enough to use organic fertilizer per se, but that one should apply it 'just so' around the vine, scraping it out of hollowed-out cows' horns by the correct lunar phase. In fact, worldwide, where owners have made the commitment to go biodynamic in their vineyards – the wines have generally improved and been very good – albeit usually more expensive. For all the above reasons, Château Pontet-Canet has been producing wines near the top of all Bordeaux producers since the late 1990s. In fact, Robert Parker rated the current 2009 vintage of Pontet-Canet a perfect 100 points.

We toured the vineyards by golf cart and got a first-hand look at the property from the roots up. One point of detail serves to illustrate how committed Alfred is to quality. He and his team discovered the vineyard soil is less compacted by using horses versus tractors, and thus is able to be treated using less additives, so horses are

*Top left: Château Lynch-Bages fermenting vats.  
Top right: Weighing the barrel, and a wheelbarrow (above) for transporting wine; both artifacts are preserved in the museum at Château Lynch-Bages.*

gradually replacing tractors. This began in 2008, with 30 percent now farmed only by horses. And not just any horse by the way, but one which has been bred to have a larger hoof print relative to strength (shire) so that this horse compacts the soil less than others of the same strength. Talk about attention to detail! All I know is that it pays off in this case.

I have been buying all the great vintages of Château Pontet-Canet starting with the 1996 vintage and I believe it is one of the, if not the greatest, high-quality Bordeaux values. I read that Alfred once wrote that Château Pontet-Canet is a fifth growth wine which drinks like a second growth, which one can drink while waiting for the first growth wines to mature.

We finished the tour with the tasting of the 2008 Les Hauts de Pontet-Canet, the second wine made from vines 10-15 years old, followed by the 2008 Grand Vin. Both were young at this age. The Grand Vin was robust, with tasty, vigorous black fruits, firm tannins, and a big finish. The second wine was cut from the same cloth, but less robust and will drink over the next 20 years while the Château Pontet-Canet will evolve for 20 and last 40 more years. Bravo to Alfred Tesseron for being so dedicated to this great ground. À votre santé! U