

## **WSET STUDY TOUR TO BORDEAUX WITH L'ECOLE DU VIN 23-26 JANUARY 2008**

Our tour began, in the tasting room of the centrally located L'Ecole du Vin. Here our 24 strong multinational party was given an introduction to the work of the school, which trains thousands of people worldwide, including accreditation weeks for tutors.

### **THE CONSEIL INTERPROFESSIONNEL DU VIN DE BORDEAUX (CIVB)**

The Marketing Manager of the CIVB, Thomas Jullien, then gave a presentation on current issues influencing the promotion of Bordeaux wines, particularly in the context of what he referred to as the 'Crisis in Bordeaux'. Naturally, he began his presentation by outlining the mechanics of Bordeaux's unique internal market, 'La Place'. Negotiants buy wine from the growers via brokers and wine is then sold to merchants, who supply the consumer, a seemingly long trail from the châteaux to our glasses.

The CIVB represents 6,400 growers and 400 shippers and in Bordeaux there are no big merchants on a global scale. Many growers have a limited economic outlook, so the CIVB has its work cut out to represent such fragmented interests. It has a very broad aim, which is to counter a trend for retailers to delist Bordeaux wines. Until quite late into the last century, ordinary Bordeaux traded on the reputation and price of the region's first growths, but with the reputation and price of these two classes of wine growing further apart, the CIVB has focussed its attention on wines, which make up 60% of the Bordeaux market and typically retail for 5-15 euros, ex-cellars.

The concept of 'the Château' has been the foundation of the CIVB's recent promotional campaigns, especially in encouraging estates to open up their operations to visitors. The public has been encouraged to visit the city of Bordeaux and discover its attributes and press trips have been organised to reinforce the idea of a changed attitude amongst Bordeaux growers and merchants. The Ecole du Vin, now ten years old, plays a part in these campaigns, as does the internet, with its user-friendly [www.bordeaux.com](http://www.bordeaux.com) site. However, to gauge how slowly Bordeaux has taken to develop and implement these changes, we have only to take the example of the Ecole du Vin, which has had an international focus for only two years. Its wine bar, open to the general public and providing a good introduction to Bordeaux wines is of a similar vintage, years behind the opening of similar operations in Paris.

Thomas had only skimmed the surface of his subject, in the limited time available and his audience was itching to delve into aspects of his presentation in more detail, particularly in relation to competition for Bordeaux wines, overproduction and the perceived need to focus more on the female consumer. However, we were booked in for dinner at 'Chez Dubern', where our hosts from Cordier and Ginestet were waiting to show their wines and engage in friendly rivalry.

### **BRANDED WINES**

Both Ginestet and Cordier have been established for over a century and have developed a range of branded wines, aiming at a very broad market. Ginestet is, perhaps, best known for recently launching Vins de Pays d'Atlantique, covering the departments of Gironde, Dordogne, Charente, Charente Maritime and some parts of the Lot-et-Garonne. Ginestet's stated aim was to create a trendy and affordable wine, aimed at young consumers, with modern packaging, highlighting the varietal base of

these wines. Although Cordier appears to present a more traditional image, emphasising its long association with classed growths, there is no doubt that its Agate brand is aiming for the same young consumer market..



*At 'Chez Dubern', with Laurent Dupin from Ginestet*

Whilst the two red wines we tasted from Cordier, one from its L'Exception range and one from its Prestige range and the Mascaron Bordeaux Rouge from Ginestet were all Merlot dominated wines, the two whites were more contrasting. The white Bordeaux from Cordier's Collection Privée was pure Sauvignon, with skin maceration and low temperature fermentation used in vinification, whilst the Mascaron Bordeaux Blanc was 50/50 Sauvignon/Sémillon, vinified in oak barrel.

Day two began with our Bordeaux based tour leader, Jane Anson, outlining the history of the Bordeaux wine trade, from the Dutch arriving in the seventeenth century to the present day. Those who are signed up to Decanter.com will be familiar with Jane's news about current events in Bordeaux and we heard about current moves to determine AOC status closer to bottling, rather than picking. We also heard how the Côtes de Bordeaux classification, will reduce the number of AOCs from 57 to 54 by encompassing Franc, Blaye, Castillon and Premières Côtes de Bordeaux, but not Bourg. Bourdeaux gained a reputation for oenological research and innovation in the 1970s and 1980s and this has continued, with improved viticultural practices, such as green harvesting and experiments with hang time, particularly on the left bank. Today there is evidence of increasing use of Petit Verdot, Malbec and Carmenère, all currently planted in very small quantities. To give us a practical example of how the blend of grapes influences the style of red wine in Bordeaux, we were invited to make our own blend, in the classroom, from samples of Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Petit Verdot and Cabernet Franc. Particularly significant was how even a small percentage of Petit Verdot, with its spicy characteristics, could 'lift' a blend.



### *Blending in the classroom*

#### **THE RIGHT BANK**

Our first visit of the day was to Château Chèreau in Lussac-St Emilion, where we received a presentation of Right Bank appellations from the owner, Sabine Silvestrini, who is also an oenologist. We heard about the evolution of the St Emilion appellation from the nineteenth century until its creation in 1974 and the only double appellation in Bordeaux (St Emilion and St Emilion Grand Cru) created in 1984. The appellation is subject to revision every 10 years, the last one being in 2006. With the decisions on promotion or demotion of properties between the different levels of the appellation meaning so much in terms of status and economic prosperity, it is not surprising that the 2006 results caused some controversy. Generally, in contrast to the Médoc, properties in St Emilion are small, between 8-10 ha. and family owned. Apart from Figeac and Cheval Blanc, which are based on siliceous gravel, the best properties are found on the limestone plateau. The continental climatic influences and lack of gravelly soil do not suit Cabernet Sauvignon. Merlot is the predominant grape variety grown to provide a soft elegance to the wine and this is usually blended with Cabernet Franc, which can provide tannin for ageing. Both are usually vinified separately before blending.

The predominance of Merlot continues through the appellations of Fronsac and Canon Fronsac, which can produce powerful wines for ageing, the St Emilion ‘satellites’, which can produce supple aromatic wines and Pomerol, where holdings can be very small, as we saw on our journey through the area. We had intended to taste a range of wines, but lunchtime approached and the samples were transported the short distance to our restaurant, Logis de la Cadène, in St Emilion. Here, as part of an excellent lunch, our tables were hosted by local producers and we were able to taste the following wines, which showed the range of quality to be found from ‘satellite’ wines to St Emilion Grand Cru.

**Puisseguin St Emilion, Chateau Haut Bernot 2002 and Lussac St Emilion, Chateau de la Grenière 2002.**

The former exhibited the supple red and black berry fruit, referred to earlier by Sabine, while the latter showed more concentrated black berry fruit, backed by soft tannin.

**St Emilion Grand Cru, Chateau de Pressac 2003 and St Emilion Grand Cru, Chateau Grand Corbin-Despaigne 2001.**

Both these wines were immediately aromatic, with spice and plum from the former and more complexity from the latter with spice and hints of liquorice. These contrasts were carried over to the palate with the former giving elegant ripe fruit with menthol undertones and the latter giving rich blackberry and chocolate.

**St Emilion Grand Cru Classé, Chateau Canon la Gaffelière 2000.**

Whilst the Grand Corbin-Despaigne had hints of brick red at its rim, there was no hint of age in this wine's deep ruby. The nose was elegant with black fruit and vanilla and the elegance continued on to the palate, with rich concentrated blackberry fruit, with oak and ripe tannin; a wine which was drinking well now, but would keep.

After our lunch, a short walk took us to **Château Clos Fourtet**, a 1er Grand Cru Classé property situated on the limestone plateau, opposite the landmark church of St Emilion. Here we were met by Véronique, wife of the owner Philippe Cuvelier, a businessman, who bought the estate from Pierre Lurton in 2001. 19 ha of the 20 ha estate is vineyard, planted with 80% Merlot, 15% Cabernet Sauvignon and 5% Cabernet Franc. The estate aims for a yield of 40 hl/ha, 10 hl/ha below the regulations and employs the techniques of aeration and leaf thinning to reduce rot and green harvest to control the yield. Grapes are selected and hand picked, then sorted and destemmed in the cellar before a second sorting and final destemming by hand. Fermentation is in temperature controlled stainless steel tanks. The must is then macerated for between 20-30 days before racking and malolactic fermentation, which is encouraged by warming the cellar. Maturation is in oak, the majority of which is new oak, for 15 months. There is then a second racking before a light fining, but there is no filtration before bottling.



*Vineyard at Ch. Clos Fourtet*

Our tour of the cellars, which had been updated by the previous owner, took us into a maze of limestone galleries. 70 ha. of limestone have been excavated under St Emilion over several centuries to use for building materials, 12ha. of which are in Clos Fourtet. We ended our visit with a tasting of the 1999 vintage: a wine tasting of elegant red fruits, with low, ripe tannin. The wine was ready to drink and opinions were divided as to how long it might keep. M. Cuvelier joined us in the tasting room, but he may have had other things on his mind, such as the purchase of Château Poujeaux, at Moulis in the Médoc. He has, with the help of a strong team, including the wine consultant, Stephane Derenoncourt, built on the resurgent reputation of Clos Fourtet, established by Pierre Lurton and the future development of his Médoc property will be viewed with interest.

Before heading back to Bordeaux for a free evening, which gave many of our party the opportunity to try the selection of local wine and food on offer in the wine bar in L'Ecole du Vin, we had time to wander *the cobbled streets of St Emilion, without the tourist crowds.*



### **DRY WHITE WINE**

Friday morning in the classroom concentrated on white wine. Dry white wine consists of only 8% of total Bordeaux production, but sales are increasing. It is important in Graves, where it is 40% of total wine production, with Pessac-Léognan, in particular, developing a reputation for quality. The renowned oenologist, Denis Dubordieu, produces quality dry white wines, with capacity for ageing, at three of the properties he owns and manages: **Ch. Doisy-Daëne**, in Barsac, **Ch. Reynon**, in Beguey and **Clos Floridène** in Graves.

Another renowned oenologist, Prof. Peynaud, helped develop a modern approach to white wine making, through his work at Bordeaux University, where he applied a rigorous scientific approach to challenge the haphazard methods in place right up until the 1980s. For example, grapes were traditionally picked early to avoid botrytis,

whether they were ripe or not, but Peynaud advocated the picking of only selected ripe grapes. He also encouraged cellar hygiene and temperature control in winemaking. Those of us who avoided dry Bordeaux whites, 25-30 years ago, are now encouraged to revisit the current product. Today, with a better understanding of the way to handle the delicate Sauvignon Blanc, in particular, the judicious use of oak with Sauvignon/Semillon blends, ageing on the lees and battonage, the market has started to respond in a positive way. Other recommendations given to us by our tutor for the morning, Jane Anson, were from two properties in Entre Deux Mers, **Château Thieuley** and **Tour de Mirambeau**. The former is owned by a Professor of Viticulture and the latter, by an oenologist, influenced by Prof. Peynaud.

## **OAK**

Our first visit of the day was to the **Demptos Cooperage** at St. Caprais de Bordeaux. The cooperage supplies Ch. D'Yquem, but sees itself as more than just a supplier of barrels. It works in partnership with its prestigious clients to get the right product for specific wines. We heard that the cooperage sources mainly French oak from Allier in central France. The trees grow slowly and the wood comes from trees with a minimum of 150 years age. This wood, which is not easy to source because of strict governmental control, has a light grain and a spicy character, with around two barrels coming from one tree. The wood is, initially, split by hand and the resultant staves are then kept for 2 years and we walked around the yard, between stacks of staves, which need humidity to develop the microscopic fungal spores, which improve the surface of the wood.

### *Toasting the barrels*

At its inception in the nineteenth century, the cooperage was run on artisan lines, but a modern scientific approach is now essential for this business. Research and Development is at the forefront of its operation and the company organises conferences for its customers to



present its latest findings. However, a tour of the factory showed us that traditional skills have been retained to complement the scientific approach. For example, the barrels are sealed with just a mixture of flour and water. I found the combination of heat, noise and smell in the factory too much for me to remain in for the length of our visit and have nothing but admiration for those who work there. We saw barrels with famous names, such as Cloudy Bay, ready for despatch and Demptos barrels are exported to South America, Italy, Spain, Portugal, South Africa, the Lebanon,

Australia, the US and New Zealand. It also has operations in Hungary and California. Each barrel can cost 5-600 euros.

## THE CÔTES

Onward to our next destination, **Ch. Ste Catherine in Paillet**, around 30 km SE of Bordeaux. Many of the vineyards here are found on the slopes, which look out towards the valley of the Garonne. The château is within the boundaries of an old priory and the reception room was formerly a Romanesque chapel. Our focus was the Côtes de Bordeaux and we were given a short presentation before tasting a range of wines over lunch, to illustrate the variety to be found from the Côtes.

The Côtes are spread over a wide geographical area and the red wines are usually Merlot based. However, our first wine was a Sauvignon based white, **Ch. Tutiac, Premières Côtes de Blaye 2006**, with just 10% Sémillon, which is typical of this appellation: intense 'cat's pee', elderflower and citrus on the nose, with grapefruit and clean minerality on the palate. Moving away from the temperate influence of the Gironde in Blaye, the **Côtes de Francs**, with 500 ha. of vines, has a continental climate, with soils based on clay/limestone. Our red wine from this area was a **2004 Ch. Vieux Saule**: mid ruby, with aromas of oak, cedar and black fruit, with flavours of red and black berry fruit, backed by soft tannin. The neighbouring **Côtes de Castillon**, with 3000 ha. of vines, is closer to the Dordogne, which results in a mild climate and alluvial and gravel based soils close to the river and clay/limestone as the land rises. **L'Âme de Fontbaud 2004** was intense purple, with aromas and flavours of oak, vanilla and dark spicy fruit. Our **host château**, based in the **Premières Côtes de Bordeaux**, gave us the **2003** vintage, (60 Merlot/25 Cabernet Franc/15 Cabernet Sauvignon % split, from limestone based soils): medium ruby, with a clear rim; nose of fresh red fruit and violets, with soft red fruit and soft tannin on the palate. Another example, from the **P.C. de Bordeaux, Ch. De Foucaud 2000**, shared the violet aromas and soft red fruit flavours of the previous wine, but differentiated itself with a cedarwood character, perhaps reflecting a more equal proportion of Merlot and Cabernet Franc in the blend. Two more reds from the **2000** vintage followed: **Ch. Mondésir-Gazin, Blaye** and **Ch. Haut Mondésir, Côtes de Bourg**, both properties sharing the same owner. Both wines shared a colour of dark ruby, but the similarities ended there. The Blaye wine had aromas of blackcurrant and blackberry, with chewy, spicy, dense black fruit on the palate, whilst the Bourg wine showed more complexity, with a sweet nose of coffee, chocolate and cigar box, rich dark berry fruit on the palate, drinking well now, but with acidity and tannin providing the structure to keep the wine a little longer. Finally, **Ch. Ste Catherine** gave us a **2006** sweet wine from the **Cadillac AOC** on the right bank of the Garonne: a nose of white flowers, apricot and marmalade; sweet, barley sugar flavours and medium acidity.

## SWEET WHITE WINE

We had a full schedule today and our next visit was to **Ch. La Tour Blanche**, about 40 kms. south of Bordeaux, a **Ier Cru Classé** property, given to the state by a philanthropic banker, after his death in 1907, on condition that a wine school was established. Our host was Didier Fréchet, PR Manager, who took us to the edge of the sloping vineyard to explain the importance of the cool waters of the Ciron stream, in the valley below, draining down from the Landes, meeting those of the Garonne to give morning mist. Combined with afternoon sun, this particular microclimate provides ideal condition for the creation of noble rot. Vine cultivation is roughly 80% Sémillon, 20% Sauvignon, with a small percentage of Muscadelle. Vines are 30 years old and pruned short to leave 4-8 buds and the soil is based on a mix of gravel, clay

and limestone. The property is close to Barsac, but Barsac has more limestone, which helps account for a different style of wine to those from Sauternes. Because of the humidity caused by the morning mist, it is important that the grapes on the vine are allowed to dry in the sun before picking. Usually 4-6 triages are undertaken in the vineyard before the grapes are put on the sorting table for final selection. These may be bunches, parts of bunches or individual berries. A refractometer is used to track the rise in sugar concentration as the grape develops and a 22% level of potential alcohol is aimed for with the first wine and 19% for the second wine. Here, Sémillon is put into barrel for vinification, whilst Sauvignon and Muscadelle are blended and vinified in stainless steel. Having visited the cooperage earlier, it was interesting to hear that La Tour Blanche sources barrels from different suppliers and uses the different barrels to help create a house blend or style. In years where the must is dilute, La Tour Blanche resorts to cryo-extraction to concentrate the must and maintain quality. The current cost of installing the necessary machinery is now prohibitive and it is used sparingly.



*The vineyard and winery at Ch. La Tour Blanche*

We moved to the classroom for an off beat view of sweet white wine making and the place of sweet wine as a drink, from Fabrice Dubordieu. Below are some of the key points he made.

- ? Appellations were not designed with consumers in mind, but to avoid conflicts between producers.
- ? Botrytis is an agent, which causes quick concentration of sugar, so acidity and aromas are preserved.
- ? Botrytis means no polyphenols, which, though desirable in red wine, are undesirable in white wine.
- ? Noble rot is not uniform and only hand picking can adapt its operation to what is on the vine.
- ? Fermentation for sweet wine is higher, at 20 degrees, than for dry white, because the yeast needs more assistance.
- ? Use of sulphur has diminished in recent years because of improved picking practices and winemaking.

Fabrice is keen to encourage the drinking of sweet white wine and he reiterated a theme highlighted in Decanter's Bordeaux 2007 supplement by Olivier Bernard, one of the new owners of Ch. Guiraud, who said 'Drink a glass when you want an aperitif, with the cheese, before the dessert, maybe with dessert or with a cigar. You have a long time to drink this wine. You only need two glasses at a time, maximum' Later that evening, we were able to test his ideas, apart from the cigar!

After Fabrice's presentation, we tasted a range of sweet white wines, starting in the **Premières Côtes**, on the right bank of the Garonne, finishing on the left bank of the Garonne. The **Duchesse de Graman 2005**, although harvested in a traditional way, was not made from botrytised grapes and was matured in stainless steel. This resulted in a light fresh style, medium acidity, with barley sugar and apricot on the palate. **Ch. du Mont (AOC, Ste-Croix du-Mont) 2004**, made from botrytised grapes from 60 year old vines and aged for 15 months in oak, had high acidity, with a straightforward honeyed style. A wine from **Loupiac, Ch. de Ricaud 1996**, with an average yield of 22hl/ha, unsurprisingly, had a colour of medium gold and complex flavours of rich apricot and marmalade.

Our final four wines were a comparison of the wines from La Tour Blanche and châteaux owned by the Dubordieu family and Fabrice was, naturally, interested in our feedback. We also compared the first and second wines from La Tour Blanche, although from different vintages. **La Charmilles de Tour Blanche 2005** was from a vintage, which had sufficient September rain to start the noble rot. Harvest was from September 19 to 27 October, with a high yield of 20.5 hl/ha of good quality grapes. The wine had concentrated pastille like apricot fruit, but to my taste it needed to develop further for more fruit to emerge from a mask of sugar. The **1er Cru Classé La Tour Blanche 2004** came from a more problematic vintage, where the growth of undesirable fungus prompted the need for rigorous sorting from a yield of only 11.5 ha/hl. This wine was very aromatic, with orange and medicinal hints and flavours of sugared grapefruit, honey and barley sugar. It was interesting to read press reviews of **Ch. Doisy-Daëne, 2me Cru 2004** and the range of fruit flavours listed. These included: orange, pear, melon, pineapple, elvas plum, candied greengage and peach. On my palate, I found rich pineapple and concentrated honey, with oak giving some spice to the flavours. The **Ch. Cantegril 2004** was particularly aromatic, with spicy orange peel coming through, with rich orange flavours on the palate. The Dubordieu wines, able to use both the Barsac and Sauternes AOC, are grown on the Barsac plateau and experts are able to distinguish these wines from those of Sauternes.

A short journey took us to the elegant **Ch. Guiraud**, a **1er Cru Classé** estate, where we were met by Didier Galhaud, Communications Manager. The estate was recently bought by a quartet of Bordeaux 'names' and industrialists and this is reflected in the newly designed label. With 35% Sauvignon and 65% Sémillon grown on the estate, the wine has a much higher proportion of Sauvignon than the average in the AOC. Average yields are around 12hl/ha, but in 2006 and 2007 was 8hl/ha. The estate's wine making has a clear focus, with gentle pressing, juice fed to tank by gravity and after 24 hrs. at -5 C. the juice goes into new barrels. Fermentation starts naturally and the decision to end fermentation is decided by tasting and may be, typically, at 14 degrees alcohol, with 125 gms. of residual sugar. The wine is then put into tank at -4C. while the barrels are cleaned with sulphate. Sulphur is then added to the wine when it goes back into barrel to prevent fermentation starting again. The wine is raked and then put into the maturing cellar, where the level of the wine and sulphate levels are checked. Only now is the wine blended. My notes say that the wine is then

chilled down to  $-6^{\circ}\text{C}$  to precipitate crystals, before bentonite fining, whilst David Bird in his 'Understanding Wine Technology' emphasizes the importance of efficient fining before refrigeration. The wine is bottled two years after harvest and most is sold 'en primeur', with tasting in the April after the harvest. In comparison with the wine making at La Tour Blanche, this operation appears more traditional, with no mention of techniques such as cryo-extraction.

Our tasting and food and wine matching dinner was held in the marble floored reception room, where a log fire burned, tapestries adorned the walls and a long wooden table held the tasting glasses and *bottles of the 1996, 1998, 2001 and 2002 vintages*. My tasting notes

contain references to different shades of gold, aromas and flavours of apricots, barley sugar, orange peel, dried fruit and marmalade, with descriptive adjectives such as intense, rich, long, elegant and fresh. At dinner, I was fortunate to sit next to our host and was given the history behind the distinctive black label and was shown the recently launched new label to reflect the new ownership. Our dinner began with several types of foie gras, followed by a dish of veal in a creamy sauce, cheese and strawberries to



finish. The only wines served with this meal were the various vintages of Ch. Guiraud, just tasted. We were encouraged to find the best match for each dish and the richness and intensity of the wines complemented the first three courses very well. Only with the strawberries did I find that the wine overpowered the food. Looking at the wines tasted earlier in the afternoon, a semi-sweet wine from the Premières Côtes would have been a better match.

### **THE PAST to THE PRESENT**

Our final session in the classroom ran through '20 Years of Technical Evolution', beginning with research into vines and wines. Our tutor for this session, Rachid Drissi, emphasised that the aim of the research was to optimise the vine's reaction to natural elements, such as sun, carbon dioxide, water and nitrogen and we have seen the results of this with innovative developments in pruning, debudding, desuckering, deleafing and green harvest. Looking at disease, different parasite models have been established to predict the risk of disease and to find methods which prevent parasites finding each other, so that the level of treatment in the vineyards can be reduced. Increasingly, there is also more precise mapping of vineyards to isolate areas, which need different management.

Not surprisingly, there was much to say about red wine making and how research had laid the foundation for current practices. This is, perhaps, best exemplified by the distinction found between tannin in pips and tannin in skins, where the latter provides more complex tannins plus aromas. My summary may not do justice to the complex analysis behind current practices, but it was interesting to note the following:

- ? Destemming is now widely mechanised
- ? Sometimes grapes are sorted before destemming and machines can now separate berries by density
- ? By using a selected, rather than an indigenous yeast, the amount of sulphur can be reduced and the 'Brett' content in aromas reduced.
- ? Today the use of sulphur dioxide is 30-60% less than 40 years ago because of increased attention to hygiene in the cellar.
- ? Temperature control is now very sophisticated and cold prefermentation maceration, although costly, can improve varietal aromas and may reduce the need for sulphur dioxide.
- ? The development of methods of phenolic extraction have moved a long way from manual punching down and include
  - pumping over spray systems
  - automatic punching down
  - turbopigeur
  - ganimède, where gas from the fermentation is accumulated and then released to dissolve the caps
  - selector system, which can be used for small volumes
  - flash détente, used for high volumes (e.g. co-operatives) where must is brought to a high temperature, then back to a low temperature, very quickly to give high extraction.

Fermentation can last from 4-12 days, but 'fermentation follow up' twice a day, to avoid high temperatures, is now common. After devatting, malolactic fermentation, which is now standard for Bordeaux reds, will produce a more stable wine and micro-oxygenation can replicate barrel ageing, concentrating aromas and melting tannins.

## THE MÉDOC

Having considered the developments in red wine making, it was appropriate that we finished our tour in the Médoc, at **Ch. Kirwan, a 3<sup>rd</sup> growth Margaux**, where only red wine is made. This 35ha. estate grows Cabernet Sauvignon (40%), Merlot (30%), Cabernet Franc (20%) and an unusually high proportion of Petit Verdot (10%). The château engaged Michel Rolland, until recently, as a response to criticism of its wine and his influence is reflected in the way plantings of vines were moved to suit the grape. So, Cabernet Sauvignon and Petit Verdot are planted on gravel, with Cabernet Franc and Merlot on sand and clay. Other Rolland influences are found in the late harvest and emphasis on a high level of extraction. Kirwan re-established its reputation, but there were new criticisms that the wine was no longer typical of a Margaux wine. Now, Rolland has moved on and Kirwan has engaged Philippe Delfaut, the former cellar master at Ch. Palmer. Perhaps there will now be a return to a softer Margaux style. We were told that Kirwan likes to run its operation, particularly at harvest time, in a traditional way. For example, pruners are on piece rate, being paid by the vine. However, at nearby Palmer, there has been a move to an hourly rate to discourage pruners from cutting corners, as part of a steady drive to improve quality.

Kirwan has been happy to embrace the Rolland way, not only in the vineyard, but also in the cellar, where concrete vats have been virtually phased out in favour of stainless

steel, with better temperature control. Smaller vats also enabled different plots to be vinified separately. However, Delfaut has already begun to influence operations, lowering the fermentation temperature from 31 to 28C, using a vertical press to manage the structure of the pressed wine, which is now added to the first wine. The 2007 vintage was the first time artificial, rather than indigenous yeast was used. He is aiming for a fresher style of wine, but with concentration and structure. Delfaut favours blending early, in January and monitoring its evolution; the blend is then altered if necessary. Currently, the wine is matured in small oak barrels, 30% of which are renewed each year, but Delfaut is experimenting with different types of barrel, even those normally used for white wine and is sampling barrels from 5 different cooperages.

In the tasting room, we were treated to samples of each **vintage from 2000-2004**. The adjective, which appears most often in my notes and frequently in those of the professional press, in describing these wines is 'ripe', but 'elegance' and 'concentration' were also hallmarks. There was much discussion within our party about the merits of these wines and our own preferences. For me, it was a toss-up between the 2002, with its fresh black and redcurrant fruit on the palate, ripe tannin and an appealing mouth-feel and the slow maturing 2000, with still plenty of purple hints to its medium ruby colour, cedarwood dominating the nose, with a complex flavours of cedar, grippy blackcurrant and tannin, just starting to integrate.



Our visit ended in the elegant reception room, for lunch. Our party was served, in impeccable style, by one man only; someone, I was told, who works solely for the surrounding châteaux at events like this.

On our first morning, we were told that the concept of 'the Château' had been the foundation of the CIVB's promotional campaign. After a visit to Ch. Kirwan, it was difficult to argue with their choice.

*Peter Clayton  
April 2008*