



STILL MORE ON FRENCH WINE

by Charles M. Bear Dalton



Are you tired of me writing about French wine yet? This is what happens when I spend four out of seven weeks in France. I get really focused on all things French. I even cooked magret de canard (duck breast) and confit de canard (duck legs slowly simmered in duck fat)

along with potatoes roasted in duck fat a few days after I got back from my latest trip. (Of course, that was after a few margaritas, some chips and salsa, and fix of tacos de carnitas.) Now properly recharged, I am focused on Burgundy (which we drank with the duck-fest) but am obsessing over Bordeaux and specifically over the late start to the 2010 futures campaign.

2010 Bordeaux Futures Offers – When?

Sure, A number of Sauternes producers and a bunch of petite chateaux (smaller properties without the famous names of the classified growths of Bordeaux) have opened. I've even bought a few hundred cases of wine. But where is the flash and the sizzle? Where are the exciting wines that everyone is waiting for? Here it is, the first of June (Wednesday) and only four notable wines – Gazin, Beychevelle, d'Armailhac, and Ferriere - have opened. And June 2nd (Thursday) is the Feast of the Ascension so France is closed (while France is not an overly religious country, they do treasure their religious holidays). And, as France has a 35-hour work week, June 3rd (Friday) is normally a half day - so all the businesses that can be taking the 3rd off too as a "bridge day" between the holiday and the weekend. So the start of the 2010 futures offering period drags on. Why are the chateaux dragging their heels on releasing their pricing? Partly it's a game of "you first". No one wants to release their pricing first as they are afraid the market will under subscribe or that they will come out too low and leave money on the table. Meanwhile, customers are calling and emailing asking "when?" And I am logged into my email by 6am every day checking for overnight offers from Bordeaux. Do I sound just a little frustrated? That may be because I am.

In any case, conditions (the holidays passing and VinExpo – Bordeaux's semi-annual trade fair – is rapidly approaching) are now such that "everyone" thinks that the chateaux will get serious next week (the week of June 6th). So I anticipate putting out Spec's first offering by the end of that week. I say "anticipate" because there is no guarantee that the top chateaux are ready to go. Nevertheless, we are ready.

Why all the who-hah? Well, the wines are pretty good. Actually, most of the classified growths are at least Excellent. Of course with what is anticipated to be strong east Asian demand and the dollar weaker against the Euro, the most sought after wines will be more expensive than the 2009s. For my initial thoughts on the vintage, please go online to http://web.specsonline.com/pdf/bear_thinkingaboutBORDEAUX.pdf

If you'd like to receive our 2010 Bordeaux offers as quickly as possible, please send an email to [Bear@specsonline.com](mailto: Bear@specsonline.com) with Bordeaux Futures in the body of the email. We'll send you by email a .pdf of the latest offerings as they come out. You can also go to specsonline.com and click on Bordeaux Futures to find our offers - but you'll get 'em first if you sign up for email.

MANAGING THE CAP

Pigeage, also known as punching down or punch cap, is the oldest form of cap management and is the technique most commonly used for fine Pinot Noir. For pigeage, the must is pumped into a tank (usually open-topped) no taller than it is across. When the cap forms, it is periodically broken up to mix it back into the wine. Pigeage may be mechanical or manual. A pole with a plate on the bottom may be used to break up the cap or a hydraulic plunger may serve the same purpose. In a large tank, the cap can get firm enough overnight that a man can walk across it. Breaking up this sort of cap manually is quite laborious. If the tank is small enough – like the one-ton fermenters used for many Russian River Valley Pinots - pigeage can be accomplished by leaning in and using the arms to break and turn the cap. The traditional means of pigeage was to get into the tank and use the human body to break up the cap. Of all the cap management techniques, pigeage gives the fermenting wine the least exposure to oxygen. Used exclusively, pigeage can be highly extractive.

Pumping Over (or *remontage*) is the most common cap management technique used in making red wine today. Typically the ripe grapes are de-stemmed and crushed and this must - the combination of juice, pulp, skins, and seeds - is put into a tank about twice as tall as it is across. As the ferment starts in the tank, the juice separates from the solids and the cap forms. As many as five times a day, juice is drawn out from the bottom of the tank and pumped up and sprayed over the cap so that it wets down the cap as it works its way back down and through the cap like water seeping through coffee grounds in a percolator. Most non-Pinot Noir based red wines are made in this manner. Pumping over can introduce a lot of oxygen into the fermenting wine.

Delestage, also known as Rack & Return, is a modification of pumping over utilizing a similar tank but ideally one with a sloping bottom. Once the cap forms, the tank is emptied through a smaller vessel with a screen into another tank. The screen catches any seeds swept out as the tank drains so they are not pumped back in with the juice. Once the tank is completely drained, the drain valve is closed and the juice/wine is pumped from the holding tank and sprayed over the cap in the fermentation tank. This higher pressure spraying breaks up the cap somewhat. In any case, as the tank is refilled, the cap is moistened and extraction of color, flavor, and tannin begins again. Jean Michel Cazes of Ch. Lynch Bages has devised a frame that he erects inside the tank so that when the cap falls, it is broken into pieces across the bars of the frame. The frame also prevents the cap from rising cleanly as the tank is refilled. Delestage, due to its double opportunity for air exposure both during the draining and the refilling, exposes the fermenting wine to the most oxygen of any of these techniques.

Submerged Cap refers to a fermentation in which the cap is kept below the surface of the fermenting juice by the use of header boards or a lattice through which it cannot rise. Submerged cap is the rarest of these techniques but it is hard to argue with the results both Ridge and d'Arenberg get with submerged cap fermentations. Submerged cap ferments usually include at least some pumping over. The amount of oxygenation that takes place during a submerged cap ferment is a function of how much pumping over is used and how carefully it is done.

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Burgundy 101

My last trip to Burgundy taught me a few things. Learning new things is not unusual; I learn every day but I have been going to Burgundy for at least a week every year for the last fifteen years. I have tasted in numerous cellars and offices and talked to seemingly countless winemakers, grape-growers (vignerons), proprietors, negociants, agents, brokers, etc. I like to think that I know a little bit about Burgundy. Most of what I learn just clicks into the framework or what I already know but these two pieces of information, one dealing with red wine and one with white, really surprised me. Both are counter-intuitive but both, on reflection, make a great deal of sense.

Punching versus Pumping: One of the key differences in wine making between Burgundy and other wine growing areas (or between Pinot Noir producers and most other wine producers) is that Burgundians (and other Pinot Noir winemakers) generally manage the “cap” of their fermenting grapes by pigeage (punching down the cap – please see box “Managing the Cap”) and most of the others use remontage (pumping over).

It is accepted wisdom that Pinot Noir is best made in open top tanks using pigeage and that most other reds are made in closed tanks using pump overs. And then – on this trip to Burgundy – several winemakers intimated that they use both punch downs and pump overs. Some allowed that they are using as much pump over as they use punch downs. Some even referred to the combination of techniques as “punch-overs”. The reasoning is that pigeage is a more extractive technique so it is more suitable for the first part of the Pinot Noir fermentation (in an aqueous environment when color is being extracted from the grape skins) but pumping over is gentler so it is better for the second part of the Pinot Noir fermentation (in a more alcohol-rich environment when tannins are being extracted from the grape skins). Makes sense when you think about it. One of the challenges in making good red burgundy is getting enough color but you don't want excessive tannins to dominate the sometimes delicate fruit. Ah, well. One of the great “either/ors” of wine is now no longer such an absolute. With trends like this, bipartisan political cooperation could be on the horizon.

The “PremOx” debate: Beginning with the 1996 vintage, some of the great white wines of Burgundy have had a big problem. The problem likely has been around a bit (or maybe a lot) longer but with the 1996 vintage wines, it came to a head. The problem? Many of the great white wines of Burgundy were/are prematurely oxidizing. And no one knew for certain why. One area of speculation was that the producers weren't using enough sulfur-dioxide when they bottled.

Sulfur-dioxide (SO₂) is both an anti-microbial and an anti-oxidant. I subscribed to this theory – in part because a lot of winemakers are cutting back on how much SO₂ they use (because a lot of consumers think SO₂ is bad due to the misinformation about sulfites). While at dinner with Pierre Rovani (who formerly covered Burgundy for the Wine Advocate and now oversees Remoissenet), I happened to ask him what he thought about the “premoX” problem and its causes. Rovani is convinced that, while some SO₂ is necessary, most wineries are using enough. The problem, he says, is that too many of the most quality oriented producers are not using anything but free run juice (the cleanest and least cloudy cut) or very lightly pressed juice to make their best wines and so were/are not getting any of the protective phenols found in the grape skins that only make it into the wine with some pressing. Rovani says these phenols are the most effective protection against oxidation. This practice of using only free run juice for the best wines really took hold around 1996. It all makes sense. In the quest for increased quality, nature set a roadblock. Others have other theories about the cause of premoX. Currently, I favor Rovani's. For more on this, go to <http://oxidised-burgs.wikispaces.com/General+Discussion>

Proximity - or The Value of a Good Address (Back to Bordeaux)

What makes Ch. Margaux great? How about Ch. Latour, Ch. Le Pin, or Ch. Cos d'Estournel? These are all famous names making wines that attract sometimes shocking prices. A lot of factors come into play but one factor everyone agrees on can be thought of as “location.” Location implies certain types of soil and sub-soil, climate and exposure. All of these taken together begin to define the concept of terroir. Each of these great chateaux is specifically located (has a specific terroir) and each has immediate neighbors who share at least some if not most or even all aspects of that terroir. Some of those neighbors are famous in their own right but some are much less well known. In many cases, those less well-known neighbors offer some of the best value drinking in all of Bordeaux.

Here are four of those lesser-known but nevertheless nifty neighbors. Ch. Haut Bages Liberal, which is located adjacent to the northern border of Ch. Latour, between Latour and the town of Pauillac. Ch. Pontac Lynch, which is located adjacent to and between Ch. Margaux, Ch. Palmer, and Ch. Rauzan Segla. Ch. Lafon Rochet is located to the west of Ch. Cos d'Estournel and to the north of Ch. Lafite Rothschild, its immediate neighbors. And Ch. Croix St. Georges, Pomerol which is located in very good company to the south and west of Ch. Le Pin, often the most expensive of all Bordeaux reds.

All of these wines offer classic expressions of the terroirs for which their appellations are famous. All are “insiders' wines” in the sense that they are wines drunk by many of the more value conscious members of the wine trade. Take a hint from the real estate industry – “Location, Location, Location.” And take a hint from the best-informed folks in the wine trade – you'll be glad you did. ✱