

## Food &amp; Drink

Bordeaux's  
quiet masters

**Jancis  
Robinson**  
Wine

Now that the last grapes have been gathered off the vines in Bordeaux and are currently fermenting into what looks like an extremely promising 2009 vintage, this is the busiest time of the year for the most important father and son in wine, of whom you have probably never heard.

Jacques Boissenot, 71, and his 40-year-old son Eric "make the greatest wines of the world", according to Bruno Eynard of Château Lagrange in St-Julien, one of their 150 clients. They are the Médoc's leading consultants, responsible for the great majority of the region's famous classed growths, and all the first growths, yet they never court publicity and rarely receive it, so entrenched are they in this, the greatest concentration of fine red wine estates in the world.

Frédéric Engerer, director of first growth Château Latour, and not known for his humility, admits: "I can honestly say that, in my view, after working 10 years with [the Boissenots], their value in optimising the selection of our lots in order to make the best possible *assemblage* (blend) is very clear."

The Boissenots operate from a modest house in the sleepy village of Lamarque in the viticultural buffer zone between Margaux and St-Julien. Like the more famous wine consultant Michel Rolland in Pomerol, across the Gironde, they also run a laboratory whose two employees conduct the analyses of all those tanks, vats and barrels full of purple liquid.

Jacques Boissenot became an oenologist by accident. He failed in his initial attempt to become a vet but a friend recommended the oenology course at Bordeaux University and his initial job was looking after the official lab for the Bergerac region. In the 1960s he was invited to set one up in Pauillac, where

he did a bit of teaching and consulting. In 1971 he struck out on his own and met up again with the late, great Professor Emile Peynaud, "the father of modern oenology", who had taught him at university. Peynaud already had some clients in the Médoc and recruited Jacques to act as his right-hand man until he retired in the 1990s. There could hardly have been a better training, nor a better calling card.

As Corinne Mentzelopoulos of first growth Château Margaux explains: "When Emile Peynaud told me he was going to retire, it was only natural for us to start working with his 'disciple', Jacques Boissenot. We feel it is very important to have an outsider's objective point of view for the blending process. After many tastings, the final blend is decided together with Jacques and Eric. I have known Jacques for quite some time now, and I appreciate his low-key attitude and his respect for the *terroir*. There is no 'Boissenot' style, just like there was no 'Peynaud' style - although there was much talk about it."

Listening to Eric Boissenot talking about their work in his small, paper-strewn office, I was struck by his unusual combination of sensitivity and humility. He, too, qualified in oenology at Bordeaux, but from the age of 14 he had been helping his father make wine on their two hectares of vines near Lamarque. Both father and son would be the first to admit that, however great their winemaking skills, the quality of their wine is forever marked by the limitations of the land that produces it.

"Our philosophy is difficult to explain but it's first of all to understand the *cru*. I need two years to understand a new property. You must capture what there is in that *cru*, its *terroir*, its expression, its

faults and qualities, and then handle it delicately, to guide it to its most beautiful expression. We keep stressing finesse rather than power. We concentrate on the quality of the tannins. Sometimes you can accentuate the faults by having too low a yield; balanced vines are more important."

The Boissenots do far more than zoom in and out at fermentation time. "First, we look at the vines and decide when to pick with the director, or *regisseur*. We

### Bordeaux according to the Boissenots

**1999** Can be very good, especially in Margaux. It rained during the vintage. Lots of alcohol.

**2001** Undervalued. People are discovering it now.

**2002** Undervalued. There are some good wines too.

**2003** Too hot. It has evolved rapidly.

**2004** A classic year; people were prejudiced because of the high yields. Not exuberant.

**2006** Very firm.

**2008** Very fruity, surprising. Very long season.

discuss a lot and then we agree on the best date, taking into account not just the state of the vines and the weather forecast but the picking team, the equipment and so on. Then we go and taste all of the *cuves* [fermentation vats] just after fermentation. We advise on exactly how the extractions are done, temperatures and so on. Then, from December to the end of February, there are all the tastings for the final

*assemblages*. And then we re-taste at the end of March for the *primeurs* season."

Some days they will taste from 8am until 10pm ("it's so interesting it passes very quickly. There's a new story at each place.") Having tasted brutal young wine all day, I assumed Eric wouldn't want wine in the evening. "Oh yes I do. I spit after all. Wine is my great pleasure with a good meal," he assured me. But it would seem that the Boissenots are so wedded to the Médoc (they have only a handful of clients across the Gironde in St-Émilion and Pomerol) that this is also what they drink. According to Eric, they typically drink the second wines of their grander clients, or wines from Bordeaux's more modest vintages. I asked him, probably stupidly, what proportion of white wine he drank. "Not much," he said evasively. "I exchange wines with properties in Burgundy, but I don't drink them."

Has he travelled much outside Bordeaux? "Oh yes," he assured me. "As a student I went to Alsace and Roussillon."

I asked him what was the sign of success for them, wondering whether it was something as quantifiable as prices or points. It would seem not. "We're not the only actors, it's a team thing. Perhaps we're more important than some others - you can never attribute a wine to one person. But the fact that we see so many properties means that we have more of a vision than someone who knows only their property."

"Sometimes I come across wines where I know the team didn't follow my advice; they're usually over-extracted. I sense it and tease them. Eventually they learn. You can't go against nature."

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