

## Jean Christophe Mau (Ch. Preuillac, Ch. Brown)

I have an abiding image of Jean Christophe Mau on water-skis on the Bay of Arcachon, behind a motor launch belonging to Chateau Smith Haut Lafitte (yes, Bordeaux winemakers really do get to live this kind of life, at times), perfectly in control of his skis, then getting back on board with hardly a hair out of place. Tall and elegant, and always impeccably turned out, Mau seems to have been born to be an owner of a classified growth.

But there is much more to Mau than this easy generalisation. For a start, Gironde sur Dropt, where he was born, couldn't be further away from the smart chateaux and easy wealth of classified Bordeaux. A largely agricultural area in the far south of Entre deux Mers, where the Bordeaux region morphs into the Lot-et-Garonne, Mau went to the local school until he was 18, with well over 2,000 other pupils. His father owned the local negociant Yvon Mau, and no doubt employed the parents of many of his schoolmates, as the company was and is the area's biggest employer, but Mau had no intention of following in his footsteps once he had finished his studies.

He had taken the science option for his *baccalaureat* exams, but after school, didn't know what he wanted to do, 'except that I didn't want it to be in wine, or in my father's company. My father was very strict, and the thought of working for him didn't appeal when I was 18.'

Instead he took further education in finance, then a masters in economics, this time in Bordeaux city. By the time he had finished studying, he was 27 years old, and ready to start working. He had obviously had a change of heart by this time about where his future lay, as even the six months that he spent stretching his wings in London and San Francisco were spent working with Yvon Mau's chief importers.

'My father then insisted I started doing some proper work, which meant back to Gironde-sur-Dropt.' The wine bug hadn't fully bit him yet (perhaps because most of his stint in England consisted of holding tastings of Yvon Mau wines in regional supermarket stores), and he went into the accountancy department, but after six months he knew that wasn't right either. Cue another parental intervention – either start selling wine, or look for work elsewhere.

With this in mind, he enrolled in the faculty of oenology in 1998 to do the prestigious tasting diploma, the DUAD; and spent a year at Yvon Mau owned Chateau Ducla in Entre deux Mers, painstakingly learning the practical side of winemaking, from pruning to vinification. He credits the female oenologist there, Corinne, with not only helping him to pass the DUAD, but also to develop a true love of winemaking; 'There was something in the precision of the pruning that made me respect the complexity of making a good wine, and the skill that is needed to do so.'

He has never looked back since, and the fact that he tells you all of this without any hesitation is just part of what makes Jean Christophe Mau such an unusual figure in Bordeaux. He, as I said, looks every inch the part, and today is the owner of two well regarded properties – Chateau Preuillac in the Medoc and Chateau Brown in Pessac Leognan. But his early upbringing in a far more down to earth part of the region has stayed with him, and he has an honesty that is disarming (even, it has been suggested, a little alarming for his neighbouring chateaux owners, who no doubt wish he didn't tell the truth about Bordeaux just quite so frequently). He can always be relied upon to give an unflinching verdict on vintages and politics that other winemakers would run a mile from. Often after he has spoken I think, 'Did you really want to tell a journalist that?' swiftly followed by 'Thank god you did.'

He also acknowledges that family connections have helped him at every stage. In September 1998; his father bought Chateau Preuillac in the northern reaches of the Medoc. This was the first property that the family owned (Yvon Mau negociants work with a variety of petit chateaux and also produce brands such as Yvecourt). Armed with his DUAD, he told his father that he wanted to run it, to combine his business skills with his newfound interest in wine. His father, Jean-Francois, no doubt deeply relieved that this moment had arrived, agreed.

In 2001, Jean-Francois sold Yvon Mau to Freixenet, a powerful Spanish drinks company. 'He at first assumed that I would run it after his retirement, but I said no. So he asked if I minded if he sold it, and again I said no.' Jean Christophe has two sisters (he is in the middle; younger one works in Yvon Mau marketing department, and the eldest one works in finance in Paris), and none of them wanted to take it on. Did that upset their father? 'No, he never imposed what he wanted onto us; it was always our choice in the end.'

With the money from this sale, the family bought its second chateau in 2004. This was Chateau Brown in Pessac Leognan which they bought with the Dutch liquor Dirkzweiger family, with whom they also own Preuillac. The original owners Barthe retained a 20% stake, and today this is where Jean

Christophe lives with his wife and two daughters. 'At the time I didn't even want to keep working for Yvon Mau, but they asked me to stay and develop the cru classe part of the business'. Today he runs both chateaux and is buyer for both Yvon Mau classified wines and Grand Cru Diffusion, a separate negociant house owned by Friexenet that specialises in classified wines in the on-trade. All of this makes Jean Christophe quite a powerful figure – he has large budgets at his disposal for buying wines during en primeur, and also has the seal of approval that comes from owning a classical chateaux such as Brown.

It would be easy, given all of this, to assume that his current position reflects the inevitable garlands due to a wealthy son, but it hasn't been an easy route to get here – and his honesty and sense of fair-play has got him in to difficulties at certain times. Chateau Preuillac was right at the heart of the court case launched by 77 chateaux against the cru bourgeois 2003 classification – a case that was successful and had the classification overturned. At the time, Mau told me, 'I can't say that I'm happy that this has happened, but there is a commercial imperative at stake here that can not be ignored. I do feel sad for the classification, and for all the hard work of Thierry Gardinier and his team, but if he puts himself in my shoes for a moment he'll see that I run a business and I have to put my wines out on the market. If I get less for my wines because of an incorrect and badly managed decision, then I'm afraid there are consequences. We can no longer ignore the effect on the wider market, because there is too much at stake.'

Three years later, and now that a reworked cru bourgeois is trying to find its feet, I ask if he has any regrets. 'I can't regret it, because for us it was a good result. I have had a few remarks from people about what we had done, but nothing serious; most people know it was a legitimate legal challenge and nothing personal against other chateaux.'

His belief in the quality potential of Preuillac is also being proved right, as he is at the end of a major investment that includes total renovation of the winery, including a switch to stainless-steel fermentation tanks, and the wines are receiving no small attention for their rich, plump fruit and depth of flavour that easily rivals other more prestigious Medoc names. A similar programme of renovation has been undertaken at Brown, an estate which produces about 8,000 cases of red Bordeaux (a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Petit Verdot) and 2,000 cases of white Bordeaux (Sauvignon Blanc and Sémillon) per year.

Stéphane Derenoncourt is overseeing production of Brown's red wine, as well as Chateau Preuillac, while Brown's in-house enologist, Philippe Dulong, continues to make the well regarded white wine.

These are not easy times of course to be selling expensive Bordeaux wine,

but Mau looks at the current financial crisis with typically insight. 'Right now I feel a slowing down in activity of course, and 50% of our balance sheet at Yvon Mau comes from exports, so that is worrying. But I find it amazing that some negociants are panicking and trying to drop stock and so bringing down the general price. I don't think it's time to panic yet and this kind of reaction isn't helping. But from 1997 to 2007, the prices have gone up 100% - so certainly there is room for a readjustment.'

'We live in a world of supply and demand, it is that simple. If there isn't the demand, you need to drop the price. Compared to the 50s or 60s, the chateaux owners are doing very well - but perhaps not compared to 2006. It's all a matter of perspective. The 2005 prices were of course understandably high, but what they did from 2006 was less understandable. Why didn't they drop back down to 2004 prices? At Chateau Brown, I didn't even raise the price in 2005 (or only slightly, from 9.50 euros to 10.10 euros). '2004 prices really weren't high – then the owners got to almost double them in one year, and clearly they didn't want to drop them back down. Who knows why. Perhaps snobbery, what other reason can there be?. But for whatever reason, that is what they decided, but now the consumers are not there to buy it. Chateaux can and will still do what they want, but they have to be prepared to accept the consequences.'

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