

Sylvie Cazes

The news wouldn't raise an eyebrow in Napa, or the Barossa Valley, but in Bordeaux, the election of a female president to the region's most high profile wine body has got everybody talking. The Union des Grand Cru Classes de Bordeaux (UGCB) has represented the most well known properties in the Bordeaux region since 1973, and there have only been six presidents over the 35 years, counting among them high profile names such as Jean-Bernard Delmas, Peter Sichel, Alain Reynaud and most recently Patrick Maroteaux.

Into this close knit group has stepped a woman – and not obvious Bordeaux royalty such as Corinne Mentzelopoulos at Chateau Margaux, or Baroness Philippine de Rothschild at Mouton, but a woman who until recently would have been regarded with respect, but as distinctly second fiddle to her more famous sibling. Sylvie Cazes-Regimbeau has been instrumental in the success of Chateau Lynch Bages and the Cazes' Bordeaux empire for over 20 years now, but the plaudits have been by and large reserved for her older brother, Jean Michel. Until now, he would have been the obvious subject for an interview encompassing both the family business and the future of the classified growths of Bordeaux. So why has it taken so long for this elegant, slight woman to be recognised for her achievements? Is it the fact of being a woman in a notoriously traditional wine region? Or has having such a well-known, well-loved brother made it difficult to establish her own professional identity (think Dorothy Wordsworth, Maggie Gyllenhaall, Martha Wainwright...)?

'Being a woman in Bordeaux wine has never seemed difficult to me,' she replies, giving the impression very effectively that the thought has never crossed her mind that it might be a drawback. 'If anything, for navigating through the politics, and building up the public-facing side of our business, it has been an advantage. For me, the harder thing has been having a family and balancing work and home life - I didn't travel as much as I would have liked for a long time. But working in your own family company makes things easier, and I have always concentrated on getting on with the job in hand.'

Today, she is in nobody's shadow. At a very youthful 53, she is president of the Board of Directors of Chateau Lynch Bages and all Cazes family wine and wine tourism holdings, new president of the UGCB, and newly elected member of the Bordeaux City Council, with a mandate to promote economic development through the wine sector.

'I felt that this was the right time for new challenges,' she says with some understatement, acknowledging her brother's gradual retirement from the family business, and his son Jean-Charles' new role as director of Lynch Bages. 'I have always been interested in the associations surrounding wine – I have been on the board at the UGCB for a number of years, and worked with the Cru Bourgeois Exceptionnel association through Les Ormes de Pez. My father was mayor of Pauillac for 40 years, so it has been part of my background to be surrounded by politics.'

So what is she expected to bring to the presidency of the UGCB? Many would say this is the perfect time to inject a fresh dynamic into the region, particularly on the back of the difficult and often antagonistic 2007 *en primeur* campaign, with its high prices causing a renewal of the ill-feeling towards the region that has plagued it at various junctures over the past decade. Her response to the question displays an expected diplomacy, with any hint of frustration at the way things have been in the past hidden behind layers of compliments. 'Firstly, the UGCB is not a political body, it is a promotional one. And my main priority will be to continue with Marotoux's work for the past eight years. He has built an incredible tool for Bordeaux that gives visibility to all of its 130 members and to the area's wine in general.'

Practically, that means continuing to develop not only professional tastings in key markets, but encouraging the trend of going directly to the consumer with events such as the Weekend des Grands Amateurs in Bordeaux itself, and public tastings with leading retailers such as Enoteca in Japan and Wally's in the US. 'The principle behind our events is that the producer should get involved, to put a face to the chateaux, but the difficulty for some is finding the time, fitting it all in. Many don't want to work weekends – but if you do things with the consumer, you have to do them when the consumer wants, and we need to concentrate on building that up.'

'I also hope to get figures and key insights into new markets distributed around all members. The world of wine is moving fast and we need to equip ourselves with the tools to keep up.'

In her other new role at the city council, Cazes will be working alongside mayor Alain Juppé to raise the profile of wine-related things in a city that has been curiously lacking in wine museums, wine bars, even signs pointing the way out to the vineyards. She has two roles – one to promote wine tourism projects, and the other to promote wider economic links between wine and the city of Bordeaux. A working panel has been put together to develop ideas, with initial briefs including protecting vineyard land from the threat of urban development, and the development of new projects such as a Wine Cultural Centre, and a fine wine storage capacity similar to Octagon in the UK. As the

city tries for European City of Culture 2013, these initiatives will become more and more important.

'I believe Bordeaux has a role in developing creative industries around wine, not just following trends but creating them. For me, I see this very much as an economic role, in what wine can do the region of Bordeaux, and vice versa.' It is undoubtedly her experience in wine tourism that made her such an attractive prospect for the municipal council. Since 1987, when Jean Michel started working with insurance company AXA across a number of their properties, Sylvie took a – permanent as it turned out – break from her job as an English teacher, and from raising her three children, to begin working with him at Lynch Bages. 'We have always been close, despite the 20 year age gap, and I wanted to help out. Plus I had always been surrounded by wine, so in many ways I was more at home in this than I had been in teaching. The English language skills, of course, have been put to good use...' She began with creating a wine school in 1989 and building up the Cordeillan Bages hotel, then extended to organising tours and establishing commercial avenues outside of the wine production.

Today, under the holding company of Bordeaux Saveurs, wine tourism activities include the Relais & Chateaux Cordeillan Bages hotel, a Michelin-starred restaurant in central Bordeaux, the restored village of Bages with its bistro, bakery, wine store and art workshops, a tour company and wine school, plus the growth of activities in the Languedoc and elsewhere. Overall, wine tourism accounts for around 20% of overall turnover, and is growing every year. 'When we started developing these ventures, no one thought they would work, most of our neighbours thought we were wasting our time. Perhaps it is not the most efficient return on investment of all our activities, but for us it is absolutely essential to take consumers into our world, to show how for us wine is part of a wider lifestyle, and to create loyalty. Our customers need to be confident that they can rely on us, and proving that we can receive them anytime is an important way to prove that.'

This is an approach that she will be extending to her work with the city, and with the UGCB. 'I want to ensure that for all visitors, the idea of Bordeaux as a city of heritage, and as a city of wine is perfectly linked. We have all the tools for making this one of Europe's most dynamic cities, and wine should be a key part of that.'

If any of the old guard is alarmed at the thought of a woman in charge of the world's most prestigious wine body, they can relax; the new president of the UGCB is not only a safe pair of hands, she's way ahead of the game.

