

Hubert de Bouard

You get the feeling that Hubert de Bouard, owner of Saint Emilion's Chateau Angélus, would feel perfectly at home among the bright lights of Hollywood. Not just because his '82 Angélus featured in the last Bond film, *Casino Royale*, nor because of his perfectly coiffeured mane of white hair or unerring charm, although neither would look out of place on Rodeo Drive. It is rather his uncanny ability to pick the plum roles – at last count he was President of Conseil des Vins de Saint Emilion, president of the regional board of INAO (Institut National des Appellations Contrôlée), Vice-President of the St Emilion Jurade, partner in Bordeaux négociant BVS, owner of four wine estates in France and abroad, and wine consultant to 15 high profile properties including Pauillac's Chateau Pichon Comtesse de Lalande and Chateau La Pointe in Pomerol.

On asking about him, the majority of people fall over themselves to be positive, something which is not always the case in the small, rather overheated world of classified Bordeaux. He works tirelessly and is absolutely dedicated to being an ambassador for the region, came one comment. He keeps his numbers of consultancies small because he likes to really be present with every one, to only take on projects that interest him, was another. But one thing did keep recurring – the ruthlessness that just might lie beneath the charm. 'You get the feeling he would run over you if he was in a hurry to get somewhere', said one keen observer of Saint Emilion. They also said, and de Bouard would be the first to agree, that he is unmistakably a product of Saint Emilion, just as fellow consultant Michel Rolland is a product of Pomerol. Not only was he born in the town, on July 1, 1956, but he was born 200 metres from Angélus, in his grandparent's house. He was seven when he started pruning the family vines. 'Like Obelisk,' he says, 'I fell into the cauldron'. The cauldron in this case was full to the brim with wine, in which his family has been working for approaching 200 years. In the late 19th century, Maurice de Bouard de Laforest acquired the three hectare plot of Chateau Angélus, adding it to the adjacent vineyard - Château Mazerat - which had been in the family since 1850. In 1985 he became part-owner of Château de Francs in the Côtes de Francs appellation, and in 1998 purchased Château La Fleur St Georges in Lalande de Pomerol where he is producing La Fleur de Bouard. Today, de Bouard runs Angélus alongside his cousin Jean-Bernard Grenié. Two of his four children work with him, and the other two can not be far behind. But no one is in any doubt who is ultimately in charge.

De Boüard joined the family business in 1980, having graduated from the Bordeaux Institute of Oenology, where he studied under Emile Peynaud and Pascal Ribereau-Guyon. He then started working under his uncle, before taking over as managing director in 1985.

Those five years were versed 'in family diplomacy' as he terms it, learning the ropes but also realising the mistakes that were being made. To increase his own knowledge, he also worked at Chateau Thieuley in Entre deux Mers, and made frequent trips to Burgundy, accompanied by journalist Michel Bettane, 'who really helped me to discover the region'.

'When I returned, I didn't try to blanket apply their methods, but I saw certain things that used to be widespread in Bordeaux, that we had stopped – such as lees stirring and ageing on lees, working with whole grapes, respecting individual plots of land. The culture of Burgundy is really that *terroir* is linked to a particular piece of land, which encourages the idea of plot-by-plot selection. I had often heard that St Emilion was the little Burgundy of Bordeaux, because of similarities such as a network of small family owned properties, and our classification of *terroir* rather than names. These trips really brought that into focus for me.'

What this meant was that, in 1985, he changed almost everything; introducing stainless steel, new barrels, climate controlled cellars, malolactic in barrels and ageing on lees, as well as far closer work in the vineyard. As with many of the new breed of Right Bank winemakers (at the same time, Jacques Thienpont and Jean Luc Thunevin were also starting to practise longer maturation, heightening of green cover, sorting tables, and close crop selection), de Boüard was heavily criticised for many of his innovations.

Everyone wants to claim ownership of a good idea of course, but it is certainly true that these methods are now widespread across the region, and de Boüard was among the first to see the potential. He was also among the first, in 1987, to introduce a second wine, Carillon d'Angélus, that freed up only the best grapes for the first wine, and began the ascendancy of the estate through the Saint Emilion hierarchy. Ever one to see the bigger picture, this rise was also no doubt helped by his presidency of the Association des Grands Crus Classés de Saint-Émilion for much of the 1990s. He resigned his post in 1996 to allow for the promotion of Château Angélus to Premier Grand Cru Classé B status, and today is unabashed at talking about his desire for it to join Cheval Blanc and Ausone as Premier Grand Cru Classé A. This is where you start to see his single-mindedness, and just perhaps his Road Runner-like ability to run down anyone in his way.

'I am of course working towards becoming Premier Grand Cru Classé A. We

have a unique *terroir* here – the only chateau besides Cheval Blanc to use so much cabernet franc (approx 47% is usual), and are in an uncontested position where we do not have to rely so heavily on individual notes each year, but have a loyal customer base. But my aim is to take Angélus to the next level of recognition. Today it is perhaps perceived as being the third cru of St Emilion, but that is not the same thing as being on the same level as the only two Classé As.'

The more pressing question right now, however, is how the annual vintage is going to be received – not so much the quality (Angélus has been praised as one of the best wines of a difficult vintage), but the financial climate in which it is being released. 'The exchange rate issue, the global economic crisis and the US elections all contribute to an instability that we can't ignore. There are always two people in a purchase – the person doing the selling, but also the person doing the buying. If enough of the buyers are constrained by global conditions, the Bordelais will have to take note.'

'I believe this year in particular, the usual bankrollers (meaning the négociants and also to a large extent the UK merchants) will be more resistant. They have been prepared to bankroll the chateaux for many years, but may be less willing to do so now.'

'The pool of serious brands that will be able to sell easily this year may shrink to around 30, who can sell at prices close to, or the same as, 2006. But I believe there will be others who will release too high and then find merchants saying, 'at that price, I am not buying.' Perhaps there will be some reappraisals of prices if they do not find buyers. Many owners are too disconnected from the rest of the world.'

'I don't think consumers will be prepared to spend as much this year, and at the end of the day, we can forget that these are the people who count. At the same time, 10 years ago, it was all about whether the Americans were going to buy or not, but today this is less important as there are other markets for our wines.'

De Boüard is well placed to talk about this, as he travels widely and has done since the 1980s. It is perhaps inevitable, therefore, that his focus has been slowly but surely turning away from Saint Emilion to a wider stage. His consultancies take him to a variety of appellations in Bordeaux, as well as further afield in Spain and the Lebanon. In 2006, he bought, together with Bruno Prats, a 50% stake in the 42 hectare South African winery Anwilka. And he does not rule out the possibility of future international purchases.

'I am not in a period of buying at the moment, but perhaps I will be in a few

years, and I can say that I would buy in South America; more precisely in Argentina. In Chile so much has already been done, but Argentina is full of potential for growth. Maybe in a few years it would be interesting to invest in China, but right now I will concentrate on selling there, rather than buying vines.'

In 2007, he was named regional president of France's wine regulatory body, the INAO, where his responsibilities cover Bordeaux, Bergerac and the Lot et Garonne. This has meant that he is finally stepping down from his presidency of the Saint Emilion Syndicate. He appears to have been trying to do this for a few years, but other members have been less than keen to let him go – it's that Hollywood effect again, the reflected dazzle that he brings with him that no one wants to lose.

His new role, however, is clearly one that he relishes, and one that he intends to focus on more and more. 'I enjoy the intellectual challenge of INAO as well as the practical aspects,' he says, 'and the scope of the task. The AOCs need updating. I believe we should keep one family (*his predecessor* René Renou talked about splitting them up), but that internally there should be differences for different appellations. Overall, we make 25 million hectolitres of AOC wine in France; we need exacting rules for some, less exacting for others, and a more supple compromise between the two for the rest. I believe a three tier system would work.'

Warming to his theme, the orator in de Boüard comes through. 'For the smaller AOCs, territory rather than *terroir* should count, while for the guardians of the kingdom, *terroir* is key'. He has thrown his weight behind the idea of allowing new techniques at certain levels, such as reverse osmosis, wood chips, increasing the residual sugar allowed in some appellations to make the taste profile more 'internationally appealing', or taking out sugar in hot years to keep alcohol levels down.

This last point is in response to the future threats to Bordeaux wine in the form of global warming. 'I see this as perhaps the most pressing issue facing Bordeaux today. We made many appellation rules years ago, well before climate change and global warming. We need to be able to respond to these changes, and things such as density of planting, rules governing canopy management, pruning, rootstocks and clonal selection should not be set in stone. But in the end, the consumer is just as important as the legislator, and I believe they will drive many of the green changes in wine.'

Wherever INAO takes him, however, he is never going to leave the few square miles of Saint Emilion entirely behind. Not only is there Angélus, but his personal family project, La Fleur du Boüard. 'Angélus has been in my

extended family for centuries, but La Fleur de Boüard is the Hubert de Boüard family.' Typically, there are no small ambitions here. 'It is not in the most prestigious appellation, but we are absolutely focused on quality. First my daughter Coralie was working there, and now my son Mathieu is about to start. If we could become the Sociando Mallet of the Right Bank, I would be very happy – that is the ultimate aim.' Any other pretenders might just as well step aside.

BOX:

OWNER/ CO-OWNER of four properties

Chateau Angélus

Chateau La Fleur St Georges (La Fleur de Boüard / Le Plus de la Fleur de Boüard)

Chateau de Francs (50% with Dominique Hébrard, former owner of Cheval Blanc)

Anwilka, South Africa (50% owned with Bruno Prats, formerly of Chateau Cos d'Estournel and Lowell Jooste from Klein Constantia)

CONSULTANT to 15 properties

Domaine Jean Massoud, Libanon

Château La Pointe

Château Chantegrive

Château de Fieuzal

Château Pichon Lalande

Massaya, Libanon, until 2003

Clos La Madeleine

Vieux Château Palon, Montagne Saint Emilion,

Clos Chaumont, 1eres Cotes de Bordeaux

Clos des Jacobins, Grand Cru Classé

Château La Commanderie, Grand Cru

Château Haut Corbin, Grand Cru Classé

Le Jurat, Grand Cru

Château Lyonnat, Lussac Saint Emilion

Bodegas Ostatu, Rioja, Spain