

Chateau Puy Lacoste Estate 5th Growth Pauillac

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It's fair to say that not all northern Médoc property owners seem to be shooting for the title of 'Best Value for Money' when pricing their wines. So it comes as something of a refreshing surprise to hear Francois-Xavier Borie declare that he is proud that his Château Grand Puy Lacoste has taken Top Value spot in the Liv-ex *en primeur* survey for two years in a row.

It's even more surprising when you take a quick glance at a map, and see that Château Grand Puy Lacoste, or GPL as it is affectionately known, stands among some pretty challenging company. On one of the higher spots of Pauillac (15 metres above sea level at its highest point), and in a single block of vines, its 1855 Fifth Growth vines overlook Château Lynch Bages on one side, Château Batailley and Château Lynch Moussas on the other. The vines of Château Mouton Rothschild are not far away. This is classic Pauillac territory – with great homogeneity to the gravel *terroir*, heading down to 5 metres in depth with some limestone of St Estephe underneath. Good drainage is afforded by the rising and falling slopes that support the vines.

Max Lolondrelle, Fine Wine Buying Director at Berry Bros, is clear as to the potential of the property. 'Grand Puy Lacoste has a massive potential and until recently was quite understated. Over the last few years, mainly due to the massive influx of money a lot of local rivals have invested enormously into their estates and started to produce more consistent wines. As far as GPL is concerned, they have taken a more subtle approach to their wine making, they indeed moved on with technology but have let the *terroir* express its self rather than catering for new generation drinkers. Some might say that they produce old fashioned Bordeaux and this might be why some of the critics never score their wines very highly, but as a true wine lover these wines better represent what Bordeaux is all about.'

Grand Puy Lacoste is one of the few long-standing family estates in Pauillac, where the family still lives on the property. FX Borie lives in Pauillac, in GPL. 'For us, it's important to be part of the community here. Our children went to school in Pauillac. His father always lived in Durcu, and now Bruno does. And local ties are strong: Nephew Emmanuel will marry Melanie Tesseyron in

September, and his other daughter (is?? Will??) marry Frederic Castéja!! – so Batailley-Pontet Canet-GPL-Haut Batailley all firming up their links!!!

It is also one of the very few to have 55 hectares of vines which are unaltered in size or location since the 1855 classification. Even the harvesters here show the value of tradition and continuity – different generations of families from Valdepeñas de Jaén in Andalusia have been bringing in the grapes for over 50 years. Borie's father found them by chance when he was having difficulty finding good harvesters, and a Spaniard happened to arrive at GPL and said he could provide a team. 'They offer us both continuity and skill,' says Borie.

In the park outside the estate, three statues of herons attest to the fact that there are three Borie siblings, but only Francois-Xavier is now in charge at GPL, with 100% of the shares between him and his own three children. He also runs Chateau Haut Batailley, which is owned by his aunt. While his brother Bruno Borie shares the Second Growth Chateau Ducru-Beaucaillou with his sister Sabine. The only concrete link between the two sides of the family business today is the harvest team – the Spaniards work across all three estates.

When Jean-Eugene Borie bought Grand Puy Lacoste, he was looking to buy a *cru bourgeois*, unsure that he could afford a classified wine. But this was the 1970s, way before the price explosions, and the *notaire* insisted that he look at GPL. He shared various lunches with the previous owner Raymond Dupin (he was a known gastronome, who raised his own flock of Pauillac lambs for the table), and they discussed safeguarding the chateau's reputation and assuring its succession. Dupin was also president of the Conseil des Cru Classés du Médoc for a while, and while he has no children, he wanted the chateau to go to someone who would treasure it, and who did have a family to pass it down to. In 1978, the sale to the Borie family was confirmed, and it immediately became a family concern, and Francois-Xavier was present at the signing, and immediately began running the property.

Unlike Bruno, who tried his hand at several different careers before returning to Ducru, Francois-Xavier seems to have always been steadfast in his desire to join the family desire. He studied oenology, and was present at the signing of Grand Puy Lacoste in 1978 with his father. The two worked alongside each other for almost 30 years, out of their offices at Ducru, and a photo of them in the office still hangs above his desk at GPL. He does, however, admit to having wanted to be an architect when he was younger, and has been instrumental in the design of the new underground bottle cellar. New project for 2012 is to create an underground cellar for bottle storage, double spiral of stored, for 50-60,000 bottles. A double-revolution, interior and exterior spiral.

Have planning permission and will begin building after the 2012 harvest. 55 hectre, approx 100 plots of varying sizes, in the cellar that translates into 40 vats from 60hl to 180hl. Since taking over in 2004, he has created a new wing to the chateau, and fully redone the winery and barrel cellar between 2004 and 2007.

From 1992, he was named as managing director across the three vineyards. His offices were at Ducru and Haut-Batailley. His brother and sister were also equal shareholders but Bruno at Lillet and sister in Limousin, not in wine. When his father died in 1998, he realised they would have to find a solution, to keep all the estates in the family.

'I saw more and more chateaux around me being sold, by families that I never thought would sell up. I remember being particularly struck by Bruno Prats. He loved Cos d'Estournel, but there were three sons, and two of them were not interested in working there, and a financial agreement had to be reached. Equally, Beychevelle, Lagrange, Gruaud Larose, so many other old Bordeaux families had to sell.'

'It was sad, but it brought home the reality to me of what we had to avoid.'

Bruno was by this point back working with the family after making a success of Lillet, and he at first wanted the three siblings to take joint decisions across the three properties. Francois-Xavier had three children of his own (Bruno now has one three year old, but at the time did not), and felt the only way to protect future transmissions of property was for the estates to be divided. He reminded Bruno of the end of the 1930s, when their grandfather Francis Borie, had given his brother, Marcel, what became the fifth-growth château Haut-Batailley and two minor châteaux in return for the funds to start a company that would purchase Ducru-Beaucaillou. Eventually, after much discussion, Bruno is now managing director of Ducru, and owns the estate equally with his sister. Their aunt, Francoise de Brest-Borie, owns Haut-Batailley, but it is run by Francois-Xavier. To manage the two estates, he has created Domaines Francois Xavier Borie.

'Yes, I would like to buy Haut Batailley one day, of course, but the price today of one hectare of Pauillac is so crazy. Because prices are set largely by the most recent transactions in the appellation, and recent purchases by owners such as Pinault have driven up prices to an average of €2 million per hectare. The pressure on land in Pauillac is now immense.'

Eric Boissenot, oenologist for Grand Puy Lacoste, explains, 'Grand Puy Lacoste is a wine which needs time, often promising when young, but not too powerful, on the fruit. But over time it gains in complexity, takes on its

personality after the ageing process in oak barrels. At first I often think it is fruit and finesse, but the more powerful personality has been fully realised by the time it makes it to the bottle.'

In an understated way, things are changing at GPL.

Since April 2010, Francois-Xavier's eldest daughter Emeline Borie works alongside him, as director of marketing. She is a trained oenologist, with a masters from the Organisation Internationale de la vigne et du vin (OIV) and spent two years working with a wine importer in Vietnam, as well as a stint with Piper Heidsieck in Champagne.

Borie recently hired a new research and development manager, to be in charge of fine-tuning technical decisions, called Christelle Spinner, who trained under Eric Boissenot, and who comes over from director of Chateau La Tour de Mons in Margaux. She will be looking at the security of any treatments used in the vineyards and winemaking process, at the effects of global warming, of ensuring sustainable viticulture uses the least possible amounts of treatments, and following internal oenology decisions. Boissenot will continue as external consultant, but this is the first time GPL has had a full-time onsite oenologist, and signals an intention to build on the progress made in recent vintages. For sorting the 2011 grapes, pickers were given sheets with nine different photographs of unripe berries they were to avoid placing in the basket. For 2011 Grand Puy Lacoste, they used two tables to sort in the cellars. Never used weedkiller, but works the soils manually, very precise sustainable viticulture, looking into organic and biodynamic, will be starting trials, but often a little disappointed at how people assume organic means no treatment – which of course is not true at all. Has increased canopy cover a little (he is pretty vague on all this).

'Despite our best efforts, things are always changing, from climate to technology,' says Borie, 'and we realised we needed someone in our team whose entire remit was to keep us on track of these changes.'

They left the UGC in 1986 (all three family chateaux), with Bruno Prats and a few others at the time, because felt the UGC were letting in too many people, so they left. Didn't agree with the politics. Montrose also left.

But today, feel that the internal politics of the UGC are better, and there are so many new markets, find the Union offers a real benefit for chateaux.

Boissenot on Borie. 'He is not swayed by fashion, really thinks hard before making any decisions. This is more and more rare nowadays. Very present on the estate, he takes all major decisions.'

'I am fairly independent, and feel able to resist the pressure of neighbours to match or otherwise their prices. But it's easier in Pauillac – we have three first growths who take the pressure off the rest of us!'

I also feel strongly that the en primeur system works. Around 90-95% of our wine is sold en primeur, even in 2011. Have few wines in the cellar, which may be a problem, but I have confidence in my buyers, and I play the EP game. I believe that over the long term, that is sensible, it takes you through fluctuations in the market. My father always reference what the 'old sages' used to tell him – one of his favourites was 'You have to get on a train while it's passing'

Again, we are an agricultural business, not an industry, and we are selling a product for pleasure. Of course it is luxurious, but it is also for pleasure. The idea of speculation can add piquancy, it's a touch of salt and pepper, but it is not what we do, and it is only important for a tiny fraction of wines in the very best vintages. Too much speculation, and we all lose.

Negociants asked also said it was because Borie believes in the Bordeaux system, and has a traditional approach to things – 'I prefer negociants to tell me where the best places are for my wines, to use their expertise and market knowledge.

Borie, 'I do feel proud that we have assured the succession of our family estates. Relations are not always easy with my brother, but we both recognize that we have organised things in such a maner that we have not had to sell what our father handed down to us

Robert Lench, BWI, 'Where it is now is as a result of quite a bit of investment of time and money, they have improved their processes in harvesting and winemaking, certainly over the last four or five years. Of course these things take time, but there has been a significant improvement in the second wine, which is always a great indication The grand vin is very much true to Bordeaux, for us, and they are being true to their terroir, and to Pauillac. The pricing – I guess they have been carried along by the rest of them over the past few years, which is a tad disappointing, but you can say that about all the good name Pauillacs. Certainly the second wine we promote as being good value.'

Chateau Grand Puy Lacoste Prices

2011 price €38.40 (Decanter 17.5)

2010 price, €57.60 (Decanter 18)

2009 €48 (Decanter 18)
2008 €24 (today up 20%, Decanter 17)
2007 €31.20 (Decanter 17)
2006 €33.50 (Decanter 17.5)
2005 €45.50 (now almost doubled – Decanter 18)
2004 €21 (now up 55%)
2003 €27 (now up 50%)
2002 €18.80 (Now almost 70% up)
2001 €21 (now more than doubled)
2000 €27 (now up 177%)
Also worth noting the 1995, came out at €13, now up 650%

In Brief

Grape Varieties: Usual blend 75% cabernet sauvignon, 20% merlot, 5% cabernet franc.

Average age of Vines: 40 years, with some dating back to the 1940s.

Terroir: Deep gravel, large stones, steep slopes, good drainage.

Winemaking: Long maceration, 60-75% new oak for 16-18 months (CHECK)

Vinification: Full de-stemming of berries, double berry sorting.

Timeline

16C First owner of Grand-Puy-Lacoste was M. de Guiraud, a member of the Bordeaux parliament, at the time Chateau Grand Puy (although it went under several other names depending on the owner at the time, most usually Grand-Puy Saint-Guirons)

19C One of the descendents of the first owner, Marie-Jeanne de Saint Guirons, marries Francois Lacoste, and the estate becomes Grand Puy Lacoste.

1855 Owner Pierre-Frédéric Lacoste built the current chateau of the estate. The same year, Grand Puy Lacoste was named a Fifth Growth in the 1855 classification.

1890 Great grandfather of Francois-Xavier Borie, XXXX, buys Chateau Caronne Ste Gemme in AOC XXXX – Francois-Xavier's cousin Francois Nony still owns the estate.

1920 The descendents of Pierre-Frédéric Lacoste are forced after World War I to sell up the estate, ending four centuries of ownership by one family. The estate was bought by Raymond Dupin.

1930 Grandfather and uncle Marcel Borie buy fifth growth Chateau Haut-Batailley. Haut-Batailley still owned by his aunt Francoise (Jean-Eugene's

sister), but Francois-Xavier runs it and makes the wine.

1941 Grandfather bought Chateau Ducru Beaucaillou. Francois-Xavier worked alongside his father there since 1978, and was running it since 1992.

1978 Francois-Xavier Borie and his father, Jean-Eugene Borie, buy Grand Puy Lacoste from Raymond Dupin, who had no direct descendents to leave his chateau to.

1998 Jean-Eugene Borie dies.

2003 He took over entirely running GPL (and owns it 100%, living there with his wife Marie-Helene). And brother Bruno and sister Sabine share ownership of Ducru Beaucaillou 50/50. Bruno previously was running Lillet, which he had bought in 1984 (sold in 2008 to the Ricard family of Pernod-Ricard).

Contacts

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