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I pick most of the reserve club quarterly selections weeks, and sometimes months, in advance of release. For this reason, I rarely get to write about them when the information is so fresh in my memory. While I did select all three of these wines in early March, I wrote this while in route back from attending the Union de Grand Vins (UGV) Bordeaux Premier in 2018. During this past week, I tasted over 600 wines, visited 37 Chateau and 6 negociants. To say the wines of Bordeaux are fresh in my mind is an understatement.

Even before my trip, I wanted to show you the character of Bordeaux through the lens of the appellations. As you may be aware, the region of Bordeaux lies on both sides of the Gironde River, often referred to as either being “right bank” or “left bank.” The perspective is taken from looking north from the town of Bordeaux. Famous right bank appellations include Pomerol, St. Emilion and Fronsac. The best-known left bank communes are Margaux, St. Julien, Pauillac and St. Estephe. It is worth noting that the Graves and Pessac-Leognan, lie south of the city but are categorized as left bank. These are just a few of the fifty different appellations within Bordeaux, but they are the most famous. This quarter we will look at three different communes, compare their growing conditions and soil through their wines.

Our first in the spotlight is the commune of St. Estephe, and **2010 La Devisse de Lillian St. Estephe (\$39)**. The commune of St. Estephe is the most northern of the left bank communes and home to consistently over-achieving chateaus including Montrose and Cos D’Estournel. This is generally one of the cooler areas of the left bank, but with fantastic sun exposure as much of the vineyard land faces south and east. If you travel north from the border with Pauillac, the soils show considerable gravel to the east and more clay to the west. In 2017, a year noted for a devastating frost, most of St. Estephe was unscathed; the vineyards almost all lie within a kilometer of the warm Gironde River. With the exception of Cos D’Estournel, whose wines show an almost California-like ripeness and alcohol content, most of what is produced in St. Estephe shows a great balance between power and structure. For this region, you will notice that most estates display more red fruits, such as cherries, plums and raspberries, as well as slightly spicy notes.

My first selection may not yet be known to many Bordeaux buyers, but the origins of Chateau Ladouys began in 1564, when the property was established by Jacques de Becoyren. He was the lord of Lafite, a fiefdom that included much of the northern Medoc. Becoyren built a stately garden and small building on the property, at which he gazed from the balcony of his home at Lafite. The two properties lie next to each other, divided by the small stream and estuary that separates the communes of Pauillac and St. Estephe. In the 1700s, the Barre family acquired the land and built the majority of the current chateau. During their 150-year ownership, they also developed almost 200 acres of vineyards. By the time of the Classification of 1855, the chateau was in disarray and therefore omitted. Then, in the 1980s, the estate was rescued by Christian and Lillian Thieblot, who updated the name and renovated the cellars, winemaking facility and some of the non-producing blocks of vines. Through their efforts, the property started to gain a lot of buzz with consumers, recognizing that great wine is in the DNA of this area. In 2008, the estate was acquired by Jacky & Francoise Lorenzetti, who have taken this estate to even greater heights. During this process the Lorenzetti’s have also purchased Chateau Pedesclaux in Pauillac and Chateau D’Issan in Margaux.

The 2010 La Devisse de Lillian St. Estephe is the second wine of this estate. I have featured several second wines in the Euro Reserve Club in recent quarters so I will not take too much space to define this now. I will say that after this trip, I am even more convinced that second labels offer amazing value and quality for buyers. Every producer or negotiant I spoke with reinforced my belief that these wines receive as much attention as the Grand Vin of the chateau. The difference is they are built to drink younger, so the winemaking approach and vine selection is different.

For the Devisse de Lillian, the property uses blocks that have a higher clay content, and less sand and gravel, than those for the Grand Vin. All of the vines for both wines are farmed the same way, with extensive pruning throughout the year to increase air flow between the vines and prevent mildew and rot. The only difference is that they leave a few extra clusters of grapes per vine, eliminating them later if conditions are not perfect for their ripening. All of the grapes for their wines are hand-harvested and manually sorted before, and after, destemming. This ensures only the perfect berries go into the stainless steel fermentors. The wines are fermented and left in tank for up to five weeks before being racked to barrels. The wine is left in barrel, roughly 20% new, for 12 months before bottling. The blend of the 2010 is 50% Merlot, 40% Cabernet Sauvignon and 10% Cabernet Franc.

Decant this wine for up to an hour before serving. Once you do, it reveals a dramatic nose of orange marmalade, cooked brown sugar, Maduro cigar wrapper and dried cherries. On the palate, it delivers a rich and mature sense of fruit, with smooth, well balanced tannins and moderate acidity. You can drink this wine now and for up to three more years.

My second selection, the **2014 La Dame de Malescot Margaux (\$55)**. The commune of Margaux is the first you travel through if leaving the city of Bordeaux and travel north up the A6 toward the Medoc. The southern-most commune, it is also the warmest. West of the commune is the vast Landes forest, which acts as a wind-break from the cool Atlantic breezes. Most of the commune lies on a very thin layer of rocky topsoils. As a result, the chateau of Margaux can excel in cooler years but struggle in those of high heat or drought. My impression of the wines of the region is that they are often some of the hardest to assess young, showing more structure in both tannins and acids. That said, they also tend to show more red fruit flavors than their neighbors to the north, St. Julien and Pauillac, where the flavors are decidedly darker.

The Chateau Malescot St. Expurey was established in 1616 by Escousses family, who were notaries to the king. In 1697, the estate was sold to Simon Malescot, who changed the name to his own. The property remained in the Malescot family until the French revolution, when it was divided between three family members. Over the next several years, the formerly robust Bordeaux wine estate of Malescot was split up. In 1813, Francois Benoit Dunogues purchased the chateau, reselling it in 1825 to Louis Pierlot. The Pierlot family resold the property to Comte Saint-Exupery, who gave it the final name. After he died, the Saint-Exupery family fell into debt and was forced to sell Chateau Malescot St. Exupery in 1853 to Mr. Fourcade. Fourcade increased the size of Chateau Malescot Saint Exupery by adding more vines from neighboring Margaux estates. One of his most important acquisitions was Chateau Dubigny, which was a Third Growth at the time of the 1855 Classification. When Mr. Fourcade died in 1866, Chateau Malescot St. Exupery was sold to a group of owners. Then in 1900, the estate was sold at auction. The French government ordered the chateau be confiscated during World War I, and it was later purchased by the Zuger family in 1955. When they bought the property it was in such poor shape there were less than 20 acres of producing vines. Today this is seen as a model estate, with winemaking directed by global consultant Michel Rolland. They retain ownership today.

For their second wine, the Zuger family apply every bit as much attention as they do to the Grand Vin. The grapes are hand-harvested and double-sorted. The fermentation is done in a combination of stainless steel and concrete tanks. Once dry, the wine is moved to barrel where it undergoes malolactic. An interesting fact, in 1870 when Mr. Boissac designed the current chateau, it was done so that all of the wine was moved by gravity. It is considered one of the oldest in the world to employ this technique. As such, there are no pumps used for the Grand Vin or La Dame. In fact, none of their wines are filtered or fined either. The 2014 vintage is a blend of 70% Merlot, 25% Cabernet Sauvignon and 5% Petit Verdot, all from 35 year old vines. It is also aged for 12 months in 20-30% new, French oak, and the balance are second-fill barrels.

What attracted me to this wine is the superb representation of both the Margaux appellation and the 2014 vintage. The nose shows a ripe bouquet of fresh red cherries, currant jam, dried red plums, cinnamon sticks, vanilla wafers and cappuccino. On the palate it is quite deep and concentrated, with very long and powerful tannins that are nicely integrated. Although you can drink this wine now, it will improve for five to seven years.

My final selection is the **2014 Ch. Fombrauge St. Emilion Grand Cru (\$59)**, and the only selection from the right bank. Being on the right bank, this area lies considerably farther east than the Medoc/left bank vineyards, so the climate and soil are very different. Here the growing conditions are much cooler, and the ripening process is slower. There is also considerably more clay in the soils, lying on a bed of limestone, which furthers slows ripening. As such the dominant variety of St. Emilion, and neighboring Pomerol, is Merlot. While we in the states like to think of Merlot as the wimpy side-kick to the super hero Cabernet Sauvignon, in Bordeaux it is considered the other way around. Merlot almost always ripens and delivers the power, while the later ripening Cabernet Sauvignon is used more for grip and aromatics. The climate is cool enough on the right bank that Cabernet will often not ripen, so it makes up just a small amount of vineyard land, typically around 10%. The favored variety to complement Merlot on the right bank is Cabernet Franc, which ripens earlier than Sauvignon, but delivers the same level of grip and aroma.

Chateau Fombrauge has the distinction of being the largest estate in St. Emilion, at more than 150 acres. The chateau, which is the most regal on the right bank, dates to 1679, although vines were propagated on the property as early as 1599. The estate is named for Dumas de Fombrauge, who owned the property in the 1700s as a member of the French royal class. For most of its history, this property was not considered particularly special, until it was purchased in 1999 by Bernard Magrez, one of the wealthiest men in France. Magrez also owns Chateau Pape-Clement, in the Pessac-Leognan, and Clos Haut-Peyraguey in Sauternes. As soon as he purchased Chateau Fombrauge, he hired Michel Rolland as consultant, and rebuilt the cellars. Today, the winery uses a combination of oak, concrete, terra cotta jars and stainless steel tanks for fermentation, and primarily new barriques for aging.

Although this is very large property, it is not one contiguous piece of land. It is divided into three sections, with the majority of the vineyards around the winery planted on clay and sandstone soils. There is another good size piece adjacent to Chateau Pavie, on the Cote de St. Emilion, where the soil is primarily limestone. All of the grapes are hand-harvested and sorted before fermentation. In the classic style of Rolland the grapes are allowed to "cold soak" for four to eight days before fermentation begins. Once they start, the grape skins are hand punched down for several days, and the wine is left on the skins for up to twenty-eight days before racking to a combination of 45% new barriques, 45% second pass barrels and 10% in concrete. The blend for the 77% Merlot, 14% Cabernet France and 9% Cabernet Sauvignon. This is the last vintage with any significant Cabernet Sauvignon in the blend, as the vines have been mostly ripped out and replaced with Malbec.

When you are ready to serve this wine, decant it for up to an hour before serving. Once you do, it reveals a complex, classic St. Emilion combination of gardenia, dried cherries, dried plums, fresh red cherries, new leather, milk chocolate and chalk dust. On the palate, it is quite plush and soft for a moment, then the tannins of 2014 push in, framing this wine into a long, but relatively compact finish. Good now, this wine will improve for up to 15 years.