Tim’s Wine Market

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By Tim Varan

My first trip to France was in 1993, and I have returned many times. However, as the plane approached Bordeaux–Mérignac Airport in April 2018, my excitement level was near that of a schoolboy. To my surprise, the airport was nothing special. One might even call it drab. There are some motifs of vineyards and winemaking, but aside from the nearly afterthought nature of their inclusion, the airport reminded me of Pittsburgh’s in the 1980s. I met my travel companions, and we spent a few minutes conversing with Peter Kwok, a billionaire Vietnamese businessman who owns seven châteaux in the area. Afterwards, we headed to the car rental to pick up our doomed commuter van. (More on that later.)

During the forty-five-minute drive into the city, I was slightly underwhelmed by the appearance of the buildings. I have known for years that most were built using limestone quarried from the “right bank” areas around the village of St. Emilion. To me, they all need a good pressure washing, but that also drives up property taxes, so no one does it. Still, I was expecting a bit more grandiosity; after all, this is the center of the wine universe. Or is it?

When I started selling wine in 1989, customers were crazy for Bordeaux. At that time, the wine world was less complicated, and Bordeaux wines were basking in the spotlight of the great 1982, 1983, and 1985 vintages. It was also a time of economic awakening in the U.S., and many yuppies—remember that term?—were suddenly “into” wine. There was not much competition back then. Burgundy was suffering from years of excessive fertilizer and making wine with old, bacteria-laden barrels. If you found a drinkable one, it was purely by luck. Italy? Non-existent. Sure, there were a few examples of tired, spoiled Barolo around (see the prior comment about Burgundy and old barrels), but no one took those wines seriously. Spain was also not on anyone’s radar, with only a few commercial examples of Rioja available. Even Napa was still in its infancy, as the Judgment of Paris put the region on the map in 1976; however, developing vineyards is slow work, and there were still only a few dozen wineries in commercial production. The thirty years since my early experience at the Wine Merchant saw a very different landscape, and perhaps the drab appearance of the city of Bordeaux reflected the wine industry.

My trip to Bordeaux was to attend the Union des Grands Crus (UGC) event, which is the châteaux’s opportunity to present the most recent harvest wines for tasting in advance of their futures campaign. In 2018, nearly 20,000 people descended on the region, making for some epic traffic jams and crowded restaurants. For the next five days, I crisscrossed the region with my two friends, tasting nearly 300 wines per day and visiting all of the elite châteaux of the area. This only stoked my enthusiasm even more, as I consistently tasted wines that offered great value and quality. Even now, eight years later, the value of Bordeaux remains unparalleled. This quarter, you will crisscross Bordeaux with me and discover that you can drink older wines at bargain prices without sacrificing quality at all.

2020 Chateau Canon-la-Gaffieliere St. Emilion Les Hauts de Canon-la-Gaffeliere | $55

The journey from the center of Bordeaux to St. Emilion should only take 30 to 40 minutes, but during UGC, it takes at least an hour. Most of that time is spent weaving through the narrow streets of Bordeaux, where we sheared off the passenger-side mirror of our van on day two. Remember I told you the van was doomed? Eventually, you get on the N89 highway that runs along the Garonne River, passing warehouses and factories that look like any other port city. Once you leave the N89 and head towards St. Emilion, the scenery takes a decided turn for the better. While there is no doubt this is wine-growing country, with acres of grapevines and trellises, there are also beautiful hills and woods that break up the monotony.

To reach our first destination, Château Canon-la-Gaffelière, you drive around the base of the ramparted town of St. Emilion, then head south for three minutes before you see their beautiful château on the hill, surrounded by vines. While you may not realize it, you are encircled by many of the elite Premier Grand Cru estates of St. Emilion, which lie over the hills of this property on three sides. This is the real heart and soul of the large St. Emilion region, with a vast divide between the haves and have-nots.

St. Emilion was not included in the Grand Cru Classification of 1855, so in 1955, they established their own classification system. Originally, there were two classes: Premier Grand Cru and Grand Cru. There have been updates in 1969, 1986, 1996, 2006, 2012, and 2022. However, the 2006 classification was declared invalid following a series of legal actions, and the 1996 version of the classification has been reinstated for the vintages from 2006 to 2009. Today, the classification has four tiers, with two properties classified as Premier Grand Cru Class A and 12 properties listed as Premier Grand Cru Class B, which includes Canon-la-Gaffelière. It is important to note that the two most esteemed châteaux of the region, Cheval-Blanc and Ausone, decline to be included. There are also more than 70 châteaux that carry the basic Grand Cru Classé designation and more than 200 that carry the basic Grand Cru designation. In this region, it pays to read the label closely.

The soils of St. Emilion are diverse, with the village and nearby vineyards sitting on a deep ridge of hard limestone, called calcaire à astéries, where most of the famed châteaux, like Canon-la-Gaffelière, are located. This limestone has been quarried since Roman times and is the same stone used to build many of the structures in the city of Bordeaux. Closer to the appellation of Pomerol to the northwest, there is gravel, while closer to the river, vines thrive in sand. While both of these soils can produce excellent wines, it is the faint chalk-dust taste and texture of the limestone that defines the character of St. Emilion.

Records show that Château Canon-la-Gaffelière began producing wine in the 1700s. However, until the 19th century, it was actually two separate properties: Canon Boitard and La Gaffelière-Boitard. At that time, they combined to make marketing easier, but little is known about their quality or status. In 1971, Count Joseph Hubert von Neipperg purchased Canon La Gaffelière from Pierre Meyrat, a one-time race car driver and mayor of St. Emilion. The von Neipperg family had been producing wine in the Württemberg Valley of Germany since the 1300s and has owned the property since before the wars. In 1983, Joseph's son, Stephan von Neipperg, assumed control of the family estate, expanding their holdings in Bordeaux to include six other châteaux, as well as properties in South Africa and Bulgaria.

One of the unifying themes across all of the von Neipperg estates is their commitment to the environment and organic viticulture. Owning land in several diverse terroirs, their goal is always to allow the unique character of each site to be expressed without excessive intervention in the vineyard and cellar. Château Canon-la-Gaffelière has been certified organic since 1988, as has Château Mondotte since 2014. The vineyards of all their properties are divided by soil type and exposition, harvested and fermented as individual lots. At Canon-la-Gaffelière, all fermentations are conducted in large oak casks, with pneumatic punchdowns for slow extraction of color and flavor.

For this estate's second wine, Les Hauts de Canon-la-Gaffelière, the selection is made in the vineyard first. Plots higher on the slope above the château ripen more slowly and achieve slightly less alcohol, so they are earmarked for this bottling. In addition, parcels of young vines are included, although the average age of the vines at this estate exceeds 50 years, so they are not new plantings. The makeup of this vintage is roughly 80% Merlot, 15% Cabernet Franc, and 5% Cabernet Sauvignon.

As a second wine, this is produced to be a more approachable version of the Grand Vin of the estate. Decant for half an hour, and the majesty of the great 2020 vintage unfolds with notes of cherry and black raspberry jams, caramel, vanilla pastry cream, and clementine peel. While generous at first, there are some tannins that evolve in the mid-palate, providing a dusty frame for the finish. Drink from 2026 to 2035.

2018 Clos Marselette Pessac-Leognan | $55

Wineries in the communes of Pessac and Léognan are a short drive from the city of Bordeaux, lying just to the south. For those watching the news, this area is just east of where the fires are threatening the city. The communes of Pessac and Léognan were part of the Graves appellation until 1987, when the producers in these villages made a convincing argument that they were distinct enough for their own designation. There are actually ten small villages encompassed in the Pessac-Léognan AOP, all within a short drive of each other.

What defines the wines of this area is the deep bed of gravel in which the vines are planted, the result of the shifting of the nearby Garonne River, accentuated by the melting of receding glaciers during the last Ice Age. In some areas, the gravel can be up to ten feet deep, providing excellent drainage and heat retention. It is for this reason that most châteaux are evenly planted with both Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon. The latter used to struggle to ripen in much of the Bordeaux region, but the changing climate has helped. This is why nearly 70% of the plantings in Bordeaux are Merlot vines. I have covered this before, but I will reiterate: in Bordeaux, Merlot is the power grape while Cabernet is used for finesse. Only in New World vineyards is the narrative different; this is because Merlot is more expensive to farm than Cabernet Sauvignon.

Our feature wine comes from Clos Marsellete, located south and slightly west of the center of the appellation, near the village of Martillac. This part of Pessac-Léognan is farther from the river, so the large stones that mark vineyards to the east are less prominent. Here, the soils are a mix of gravel and sand, with exposed layers of limestone as well. This allows the estate to grow both Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, as well as Sauvignon Blanc and Sémillon. While less known to consumers, the white wines of Pessac-Léognan are among the greatest in the world. They represent a style of rich white that aligns with White Burgundy while showcasing the tautness of Sauvignon Blanc. If you're curious, check out the Everything-But-Red club, as I try to feature one every year.

A close examination of the label of our feature wine reveals a connection with the von Neipperg family, who jointly own this estate with Didier Miqueu. I am a huge fan of the von Neipperg family, and we currently stock wines from four of their Bordeaux châteaux, as well as their estates in Germany and Bulgaria. Unlike many of the châteaux in the area, Clos Marsellete is not historic, having opened in 2002. It was originally created by Francis Boutemy, a scion of a Bordeaux family with deep roots in the region. Stéphane von Neipperg was a silent partner in the venture who assumed control with Miqueu later that year. The property spans roughly 30 acres of vineyards, with 90% dedicated to red grape varieties and 10% to white. This wine is a blend of 58% Cabernet Sauvignon, 40% Merlot, and 2% Cabernet Franc, aged in 33% new French oak for 20 months.

This wine is an excellent example of why I am such a fan of the wines from Pessac-Léognan. They categorically display a richness of fruit and smooth, balanced tannins that I find enjoyable. This one shows a nice interplay of cooked red plum, blackberry, lingonberry preserves, wet red clay, violet, and rose petal. The texture is rich and smooth, with exceptional depth and modest tannins that hide behind the wave of fruit. Drink this wine from 2026 to 2035.

2019 Sarget de Gruaud Larose St. Julien | $60

For the final wine of this offering, we leave Bordeaux and drive through miles of warehouses on the north side of the city to reach the Médoc Peninsula, home to the most famous wines in the region. Floridians are often surprised to learn that the Gulf Stream, which runs around our peninsula-shaped state, flows north along the North American seaboard, turns east north of the Canadian Maritimes, and splits in three directions around Iceland. The southern fraction then turns south and runs along the coast of the British Isles before running out of steam off the coast of France. It is the warm water of the Gulf Stream that tempers the air during the winter and prevents the temperature from dropping so low that grapevines cannot survive. So yes, the success of Bordeaux relies on Florida!

The Médoc Peninsula is a remarkable piece of land, and the reason world-class wines can be made there is the result of its unique geology. The foundation was formed when the ancient sea bottom that covered Western Europe 300 to 500 million years ago was pushed up by continental shifting. The rivers that flow from the east then deposited millions of years of gravel and sand on top. At the end of the Ice Age, the region was further buried under more gravel as the melting glaciers created a carved Central Massif in the center of what is now the country. Finally, in the 17th century, after the Hundred Years' War, the Dutch became significant trading partners with the French and used their expertise in managing lowlands to drain the swampy peninsula. Even today, you can see the levees and dykes as you drive, making the land suitable for grapevines.

Our feature wine comes from the esteemed Second Growth Château Gruaud Larose in the commune of St. Julien. It was founded in 1725 by the knight Joseph Stanislas Gruaud and expanded by his family and heir, Joseph Sébastien de Larose. It remained in family hands until 1917, when it was purchased by the Cordier family, prominent Bordeaux négociants. They owned it until 1983, at which time it was sold in succession to a couple of corporations, causing a decline in quality. In 1997, it was bought by the Merlaut family, who made significant investments in the vineyards and cellars, returning the estate to its former glory.

When you visit this property, the first thing you notice as you drive through the vineyards is a 50-foot tower just north of the château. There is an old saying in Bordeaux: "You cannot make great wine unless you can see the river (Gironde)."

Jean Merlaut finds this statement inaccurate, so he built the tower to allow visitors to climb up and take in 360-degree views of the entire Haut-Médoc, including a commanding view of the Gironde. If you ever visit, make sure to go to the top; on a clear day, the view is breathtaking.

Historically, the wines of Château Gruaud Larose are quite powerful and age-worthy. They began producing their second wine in 1979, named for Baron Sarget. During a period in the mid-1800s, this estate was divided into two properties within the family, one owned by Sarget, who built the château at the center of the estate. As a result, the wine is named in his honor. It is crafted, like all second wines, to be an approachable example of the house style that can be consumed years before the Grand Vin. Produced exclusively from vines within the 200-acre estate, this wine is a blend of 60% Cabernet Sauvignon, 29% Merlot, 7% Cabernet Franc, and 3% Petit Verdot. The vineyard has practiced organic viticulture since the early 2000s, and 2019 marks their first vintage with certification for biodynamic and organic practices. The wine was also aged for 20 months in 80% new French oak.

Even as a second wine, this is a big boy, so make sure to decant it for at least half an hour before serving. It exudes the Haut-Médoc qualities of dark fruits: currants, blackberries, and dark cherries, accompanied by classic aromas of fresh parsley, sage, leather, black truffle, and cocoa powder. It is surprisingly dense and earthy on the palate for a second wine, with well-integrated and polished tannins. Drink from 2028 to 2040.