

VIEUX CHÂTEAU CERTAN GLIDING GRACEFULLY TO THE TOP

Margaret Rand meets Alexandre Thienpont, the charming, modest, but quietly driven man behind Pomerol estate Vieux Château Certan, whose beautifully balanced wines are widely regarded as some of the very finest in Bordeaux

You can always tell, during the spring en primeur tastings in Bordeaux, who has just been to Vieux Château Certan. They have a spring in their step, and they have smiles of mixed beatitude and smugness—the latter because they have tasted it and you, so far, have not. In the spring of 2011, with the 2010 newly spat (or not), there was something extra: Some of them were saying that it was one of the greatest wines—perhaps *the* greatest wine—they'd ever tasted.

Alexandre Thienpont's smile, when I tell him this, mixes pleasure with disclaimer. "It's not me," he says; "it's nature. The 2010 vintage was all made in the summer. I had nothing to do. There was no rot, no greenness. It was an academic year. It's something you see less than once in your life as a winemaker. My father never saw that in the '60s and '70s. You have to go back to the '40s—1945 would be the closest—or the '50s for the twin of 2010. It was a Merlot year, with black fruit and for long keeping. It's a different sort of wine from 2009 or 2000, but the only thing different was the summer, the weather conditions."

Of course, he's not telling the whole story when he says he had nothing to do with it. Some 2010s, especially on his side of the river, were monstrosities. They had too much oak, too much alcohol, too much of everything—it was as though St-Helena had been twinned with St-Emilion. But VCC was perfection: precisely balanced, yet reflecting everything that was good about the vintage. And Thienpont is unusual among winemakers in that not only does he say he wants lots of vintage variation in his wine; he means it, too. His 14ha (35 acres) of vines are divided into 23 different parcels. To divide them into ten parcels would minimize differences and give the greatest consistency year to year; fewer than ten would give greater vintage variation but less precision. In a perfect world, how many different parcels would he have in his vineyard? How far would he go? "You can be excessive. It's like life; there's an infinity of possibilities. It's like a piece of music played by two people or by a machine. The machine is perfection, but the human character makes it interesting."

A life in wine

Wine has been his life: not for him a degree in business management or an internship in a bank. "I'm lost in business," he says; "I'm not a businessman." His father died early, at the age of 60, at which point Thienpont left his job and settled at VCC. He'd been running Château la Gaffelière, which belongs to the Malet Roquefort family, having got there via studies in viticulture and enology and jobs at a property in Côtes de Castillon and at Château Taillefer in St-Emilion. His father encouraged him out, saying, "Learn, then come back," and that's what he did. "I was at Gaffelière for four years, and I have a lack of superlatives to say thank you to M Malet. Every day, at the age of 26, I was in front of 15 people, and some of them had been at the property longer than my age. I carried a map of Gaffelière with me to make sure that the vines I was working on were Gaffelière's and not the neighbor's. M Malet said, 'If you succeed with the 1982, I'll keep you on.'"

But in 1985, Thienpont *père* died. The family asked him to take over, and he's been there ever since, now managing the vineyards of neighboring (and also Thienpont-owned) Le Pin as well, until the moment of picking. Taking over a property is simple, he says: You just have to be smarter and do better. "I have to do a better job than my father; the son always must. And every generation has its own ways of thinking." Thienpont says he has to "give results" and keep the shareholders happy. "They can ask, but I need trust. If I'm wrong, I can be fired. But I need a green light." They must have trusted him from the word go, because he was pretty radical when he took over. The 1986 vintage produced double the normal crop, so Thienpont got busy with the *secateurs* and thinned the crop for, it seems, the first time. "The ground was green instead of brown. My uncle said, 'I do hope you know what you're doing.'" One can imagine his tone of voice. But, says Thienpont, 1986 was one of the best VCCs: a Cabernet Sauvignon year—one of the few on this side of the river.

"You can put dates to the revolutions in viticulture. At the beginning of the 1970s, there was the arrival of enology in the



(bordeaux portrait)

cellar, with temperature control and so on. The second date is the beginning of the 1980s, with a viticultural revolution. After that, at the beginning of the 1990s, enology came back to the vineyard with new parameters for picking dates, for example.” That means we’re due for a new revolution. Does he have any suggestions? “Authenticity. For 20 years I was preaching in the desert. In the 1990s the index of tannins was the parameter. Now authenticity is coming back. Balance is the next thing.” The thing that annoys him most about much modern wine is its lack of character, its lack of typicity. “I tasted Château Margaux 2005; That’s a *vin d’emotion*. And the 2008 and 2009 Margaux, too; they’re excellent but all different.”

Thienpont has made changes in the winemaking, but they may not sound much when put on paper. It’s not about recipes or marketing or cynicism, he says: “It’s the opposite of knowing the price of everything and the value of nothing.” His own instinct is always to use as few chemicals as possible in vinification—he tends to be too natural, if anything, he says. He always cleaned everything, of course, “but now we’re obliged to be antiseptic. You can’t leave a vat alone now; you must occupy the must with yeast. Not a very aggressive yeast, and we allow the indigenous yeasts to start the fermentation. But if you leave it alone, you get Brett.”

What else? More sorting tables in the winery at harvest time and a sorting table that follows the pickers in the vineyard. “I don’t believe in *cagettes* [the small plastic boxes commonly used for picking]; they mean the pickers are not involved in the quality chain. They pick everything, because it will be sorted in the vat room. But if you have a sorting table, moving with the pickers and at their rhythm, and with someone able to shout a little if they’re not picking the right thing, it’s very important.” (Alexandre says his sister-in-law, Fiona Thienpont, alias Fiona Morrison MW, particularly relishes this task.)

In the winery, he has got rid of grills in the tops of the fermentation vats and has gone back to floating caps—not a sartorial choice, but a preference for pumping over rather than the previous system of pushing the cap back into the wine by way of said grills. If you push down, you just get tracks left in the cap, he says. “It’s a big improvement, and we’ve done it since 1995. In the 1950s, they used to put a piece of wood across, and somebody would walk on it very fast. This changed the density, and the cap would turn over.” Reverse osmosis he finds “interesting intellectually, but I don’t understand it. In some specific years, like 1992 or 1993, it could be interesting.” But if necessary, he bleeds the vats, which he reckons is just as good. “M Delmas [of Haut-Brion]

said to me, Do you bleed your vats? You must bleed the vats if you thin the crop. The berries increase in size, so you have three times the juice but double the amount of skins, so you must bleed by eight to 12 percent.”

Not about techniques

None of these techniques is exactly state of the art, of course, but VCC is not really about techniques. “We make a lot of microvinifications, whether it’s to choose a clone or to try a different way of destemming or for an infinity of different things. And I always prefer the untreated sample, even if it has some wrinkles around the eyes.” This begins to sound as though he may favor natural wines, however you choose to define them. But not too natural. “An *enfant naturel* is an *enfant sauvage*. It’s a question of balance.”

When it comes to picking, he takes chances. “I immerse

myself in the vineyard; it’s crucial. I prefer to risk loss through rot rather than pick too early.” In 2006, for example, he’d started picking when 4in (100mm) of rain came down in 12 hours, and the vineyard looked like a swimming pool.

“We stopped picking, and started again seven days later. We lost 20 percent, but if we’d picked earlier, it would have been a bit green.” Does the benefit outweigh the risk? That, he says, is always the

question. “Our 2004 was ripe, but we picked early because the risk was so great. It was very difficult to make ripe 2004 [...]. The great difficulty, even now, is picking grapes ripe. I’m amazed when I hear people say they picked at perfect ripeness. It doesn’t exist. It does not exist. It’s an eternal subject. It’s either too ripe, or too unripe, if you pick to save the harvest.”

This brings to mind the old chestnut that the best wine comes from a blend of ripe, or even overripe, grapes with underripe ones. Not true, he says, unsurprisingly. Nor does it give you homogeneity; if you want homogeneity, plant clones. But “there are years for clones and years for massal-selection vines. Hot, dry, sunny years are years for clones: 2000 and 2009 were clone years. Complexity comes with a larger spectrum of ripeness—but not too large. The year 2004 was a massal year, which is the opposite of what is normally thought.”

Another change Thienpont has introduced recently is a reduction in the amount of new oak. The last time he used 100 percent new oak was 2006. In 2009, it was 80 percent; in 2010, 75 percent. “Alcohol was high in 2010, and high alcohol catches too much oak.”

Thienpont does, finally, accept that the winemaker can take some credit for the quality of the wine; but when he does so, it’s to pass the credit to his son. Guillaume, having





Vieux Château Certan, whose slightly asymmetrical towers seem to reflect Alexandre Thienpont's conviction that character is more interesting than perfection

done as his father did and worked elsewhere first, is now installed at VCC and is, says Thienpont, “much more intelligent than me. He has a degree in enology, and he's done internships in different countries [...]. He will be different from me: He's better, more precise, and the wine will change.” He ascribes the measures to avoid Brett to Guillaume, who's also evolved a method of more precise investigation of the vineyard. For example, there's a strip of vines about 66ft (20m) deep, which is about 15 vines, surrounding the house and garden that is always more vigorous; this is now handled as a separate parcel.

Thienpont, as you might infer from all the above, is happy talking about his work but not happy talking about himself. The man himself you have to catch when he's not looking—as when I admired a piece of furniture and he said that in his office he wanted things with “*âme*”—with soul. But he's also a glider pilot—he has been since 1988—with his own 84ft- (25.5m-) wingspan Open Class glider.

“Gliding is a fight,” he says. “It's a false idea to think it peaceful and relaxing; it's not at all. You have to make three decisions every minute, and it needs 100 percent concentration. It's a four- or five-hour struggle against the

elements. The fight is to stay in the air, because a glider is always coming down. But you go to interesting places, you see the landscape, you have freedom—it's aesthetic.

“A glider has large wings like knives, and you fly with maybe two or three other pilots [in their own gliders], and the cockpit is closed, and you're joking together, and then it's war. It's exciting like viticulture; it's natural. You're dealing with the weather, and it can't lie. “It's truthful: if a pilot is not good, you're in the ground.” It only looks easy from a distance. Like VCC. ■

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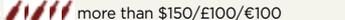
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