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BACK TO BASICS : WINE-MAKING IN ITS NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

by

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Overview

Wine-making is founded on age-old practices which existed well before science and oenology arrived. Stéphane Derenoncourt's approach developed as a result of a fascination for these practices, and because he wanted to revert to empirical practice at a time when formal practice encourages the standardisation of both taste and wine. Derenoncourt considers that wine is above all an expression of the soil, or a reflection of the style of a wine-grower who respects the soil. Based on this philosophy, and putting to good use the company's in-depth knowledge of soils and vines, he helps wine-growers to make 'inspirational' wines using long-term methods of 'restructuring' them. Because he has brought the practice of viticulture and wine-making back to life, his company is now recognised throughout the world as a leader in wines which reflect the characteristics of their soils, and as a champion of the diversity of wine.

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TALK : Stéphane Deroncourt

The advice that I give to wine-growers is based on my own particular empirical approach to wine. I think it is useful to mention my professional experience and how I was introduced to this area. In fact, I am self-taught, and I have been observing the business for thirty years. I am above all interested in how the character and identity of living matter such as vine plants, the soils in which they grow, the prevalent climate and the people who work in the vineyards, is expressed in wine. This is very different from a scientific and an oenological approach which I was never taught and which, in my opinion, runs the risk of making the taste of wine uniform.

A Northerner in the Bordeaux region

I grew up a long way from the vineyards, in Dunkerque in Northern France. After a rather eventful adolescence, I started working at an early age in a job which I did not like very much, making cogwheels in a nuclear power station. I decided to change completely, and by pure chance, I got a job picking grapes in the Bordeaux region. This is a very pretty area and I enjoyed living there and wanted to stay. I had a series of odd jobs with wine-growers, but I did not enjoy them. The work was difficult, especially for a town-dweller who was not used to the rural way of life. At the same time I made and sold wooden toys and spent my free time studying, compensating for my frustration at having left school too early.

A few years later, I got a job with a wonderful man who was a wine-grower in Fronsac (forty kilometres north-east of Bordeaux) and who was looking for someone to help him. I met an old vine-grower on this estate who introduced me to the most important and rewarding methods of wine-growing that I had ever come across. Most importantly – and this was a revelation for me – I took part in a wine-making process. This process seemed magical to me. How can one explain how a wine in one tank can be so different from the same wine in another tank ? I realised that in working meticulously with the vines, each action is part of a chain which prepares for the next action, and enables harvesting to take place up to a certain level. These experiences gave my job meaning.

Learning in the vineyards

I was in this job for some time. I was surrounded by people who trusted me. Because I am curious by nature, I spent a large part of my time visiting estates despite the relatively closed nature of this small Bordeaux circle. As I wanted to learn more about racking, I called the Domaine Petrus and asked if I could come to visit them. My audacity paid off : the Moueix family allowed me to spend a week with them observing their techniques. In Fronsac, I tried hard to put into practice the training and knowledge which I had acquired. As a result, the quality of our wine improved dramatically, and I made a name for myself locally. Unfortunately I was made redundant for economic reasons, as one of the two properties where my employer worked as a tenant was sold. Soon afterwards, I was hired in Saint-Émilion and given the task of restoring some of the former glory to a property then in disuse, the Château Pavie-Macquin, which made a *premier cru classé* using biodynamic methods in Bordeaux. I learned about biodynamic viticulture, and I always used these techniques. We achieved excellent results which was a further step towards recognition of my work.

I then met a German count, Stephan von Neipperg, who had been living in Saint-Émilion since the 1970s. He had two *crus classés*, the Clos de l'Oratoire and the Canon La Gaffelière, as well as a small plot near Pavie-Macquin where he grew quite a coarse wine, the Château La Mondotte. When the classifications by *appellation* were due to be re-examined, he wanted to use this opportunity to include this plot into the Canon La Gaffelière vineyard area. Therefore, I had to make this ordinary wine into an exceptional one. I was rather reluctant to be part of an organisation which was already perfectly structured and very well-known as I had always worked with small budgets. Furthermore, my style and appearance was out of place in this property which was quite upmarket. Stephan von Neipperg persuaded me, explaining that he was interested in my

knowledge of chalky soils or *terroirs*. We agreed that if my method convinced him, he would give me *carte blanche*. This was the plan. We planted vines on this plot which followed very precise cultivation techniques, and we reviewed the entire wine-making process. I made sure that the bunches of grapes once they had been cut were no longer mishandled as they had been in the past, but treated with the utmost care. I chose small, wooden, open-top tanks, traditionally used in Burgundy, and I re-introduced the technique of the 'punching of the cap' which involves mixing the grapes in the tank to improve maceration. The Château La Mondotte, an unpretentious wine which used to sell at 5 Francs a bottle, was now almost raised to the levels of a great wine, the *primeur* wine costing 180 Francs. It was virtually a global success. One week after its commercialisation, the bottles were being traded for around 3,500 Francs each. Needless to say, I became quite well-known in Bordeaux. I received a large number of requests from owners asking me to come to help them improve their production. I often agreed in accordance with my employer.

During this entire period, the difficulty that I had encountered adapting to the closed Bordeaux society had prompted me to look at other regions which also greatly inspired me. I fell in love with the cabernet franc grape variety, and I met a number of vine-growers in the Loire region, in particular the Foucault Brothers at Clos Rougeard who introduced me to a new philosophy of production which, to some extent, could be adapted to Bordeaux. At this time, there was still a deep-seated tradition in the wine sector which did not take into account either the strengths or weaknesses of a vintage. Because I had a greater breadth of experience, I carved open a new way. Later, I was extremely interested in Burgundy wines, and I met enthusiastic wine-growers, such as Henri Mayer, who became my mentors.

Consultancy in the field

In the end, in 1999, I decided to become a full-time wine consultant. I was determined to do this job in a very different way to oenologists in Bordeaux, in other words not to use scientific or laboratory methods, but to go into the field and look closely at the vines and the soils. My new status allowed me to meet a number of young people who wanted to start in the profession, including a few that I would have gladly kept to help me. In order to do this I needed a place of work, work tools, and an estate where I could not only carry out my experiments, but also train people in my methods. In France, teaching in the wine profession is extremely specialised and traditional. One can train to become head of cultivation, soil manager or oenologist, but oenologists, for example, do not know anything about vines. On the other hand, I needed people who were able to implement a more global and more creative, sensual and spiritual approach. After their first year of work, I paid them a pittance, but they only had to work alongside me and observe my work.

Because I had no capital, it was impossible to ask banks for a loan to buy a wine estate. Therefore, I asked all the companies in the wine business in the Bordeaux region for 5,000 Francs to sponsor my project. In return, I promised to pay them back in the form of wine from four vintages. This worked, and I was given the million Francs necessary to start my venture. Today, I have fourteen employees. Because of the success of my venture, I have always been lucky enough to have the luxury of choosing my clients. I had no intention of becoming like one of these organisations which have two or three consultants and advise 250 estates. With time, orders started coming in from abroad. We were particularly popular in Tuscany and Spain. Because I love wines which have a unique character and which grow in chalky soils, I concentrated on parts of the world where such soils exist, and where vines originated such as in Turkey, where one can find traces of wine-growing which date back to 6,000 years ago ; in Syria which was already famous for its wines during the Roman Empire ; and in Lebanon. I did not have any interesting offers from South Africa, Argentina or Chile where we received more requests to sell wine rather than producing good *crus* there.

A passion for the plot

Consultants are often criticised for standardising taste. Some oenologists have a 'recipe' which works and which they reproduce here and there. As far as I am concerned, I want to understand why a wine which has been grown in a particular place has a different style to a wine which has been grown a few kilometres away. At present, my company advises 25 estates in the Saint-Émilion area. Even though two-thirds of them have soils which are quite similar (clay/chalk), each one produces a wine which has its own unique taste. My work consists of using the qualities of the soil even in the wine-making process in order to develop products which have a specific character. I had to convince estate owners that wine blends were a puzzle the pieces of which were the plots of land, and that we had to work on these plots. For some, these ideas represented a cultural revolution.

Apart from Burgundy, where the soil is the most important factor, the story of Bordeaux wine-making is characterised by the culture surrounding what Bordeaux wines are supposed to be like, as if they were a brand. Brokers established the classification in a very practical way in 1855 for the Médoc and considered that the most expensive wines were necessarily the best. In reality, it was just a classification of the wine estates. My approach emphasises the importance of the plots in order to rank the style of wines and produce a specific form of wine-making for each plot. This is my approach to the *terroir* which is a very French concept and is difficult to grasp. My approach incorporates aspects as diverse as the nature of the soils, the plant material, the role of man, the climate, the orientation, the altitude, and so on.

The taste of the soil

I think that the most efficient approach is to develop a very detailed knowledge of the soil. Soils have a direct influence on the character of wine. The nature of the bedrock and the clay is decisive. At Saint-Émilion, for example, a merlot which grows in sandy soil produces wines which taste of cherries, are not very complex, have quite a round mouth, are dissipated, and relatively empty. These wines are attractive but they lack depth. In plots where the sand is mixed with clay, the merlot has acidic, fruity tones which taste vaguely of raspberry. They have consistency and a good finish. On a soil of fine clay, the wines are more structured and have black fruit aromas. They have a silky, wide mouth and they are quite regular. The greater the amount of clay, the greater the degree of bitterness in the final tones. These soils are cold and do not allow the grape seeds to reach full maturity. In this case, these wines attack the palate with a very broad mouth, but a total lack of depth. Wines which grow on clay/sand soils notably in Saint-Émilion are more subtle and have quite precise and complex aromatic ranges of taste. They may even have a smoky taste. The heat of the soil gives a flavour of natural torrefaction. The taste is fine and elegant. Finally, I consider that the finest wines are those which grow in clay/chalk soils, and produce a complex aromatic mixture of wild blackberry, black truffle, violets and irises. The clay brings a sweetness and sensuality, and at the end of the mouth a refreshing taste with a sensation of acidity or even saltiness from the chalk. The tannin texture is silky, but quite complex with its touch on the palate, and quite powdery.

In conclusion, the nature of the soil determines the type of wine, not one which one wants to grow, but one which one can achieve in order to reflect the *terroir* reasonably.

The necessary suffering of the vine

Wine reflects society and its aspirations as well as its quirks. We are currently enduring the consequences of production-based policies from past decades, as well as an excessive speculative surge.

One must not forget that at the end of the 1970s, people in the Bordeaux region could not make a living from wine, and they had to supplement their income with mixed farming and livestock farming to compensate for bad harvests. The arrival in 1982 of Robert Parker, an American wine taster and critic who set the tone for the world wine market, gave a mythical and speculative dimension to wine. Vines live between forty and fifty years, so today, we are working with vines

which were planted in the 1970s which were the worst in the history of wine-making as they were created with the sole purpose of producing wine and erred on the side of abundant vegetation. We must increase our efforts and understanding in order to regulate these vines. New vine roots are normally planted by soil specialists (who try to prepare a soil which is too fertile) and plant nurserymen (who want to supply a 'good vine' which unfortunately does not make for good wine). Neither realise that they should make the vine suffer to a certain extent so that it assumes its primitive character as a creeping plant and produces an abundance of branches, leaves and fruits. Grapes which grow without any difficulty produce wines which are rather ordinary. The art of a wine-grower is to make the vine suffer so that by the end of July, out of pure exhaustion, it stops its growth cycle and starts a long period of maturation. When viticulture is not harmonious, maturity is inharmonious : in such cases, wines increase their alcohol content, but their tannins do not mature. However, when one pushes the grapes to their maximum possible maturity, one obtains mature tannins with appropriate levels of alcohol.

DISCUSSION

Knowledge : a path between intuition and science

Question : *Even though you distance yourself from oenologists, you clearly have an in-depth knowledge about soils, vines and wine. To what extent is scientific knowledge important in your approach ?*

Stéphane Derenoncourt : I have made use of my unusual ideas in the wine sector for a long time. This has made it easy for journalists to portray me as a trendy oenologist which often resulted in warnings from the profession for misuse of title. My business card is very clear : it reads 'definitely not an oenologist'. Having said that, I realise that this science has progressed enormously and as a result, wines have never been better than they are today. In Bordeaux, for example, some *crus* smelled like leather (which is more polite than saying horse manure). People were happy to see some trace of real *terroir* or authenticity until scientists identified and removed the molecule which caused this smell, a yeast agent which makes ethylphenols. As a result, the fruity aromas of these wines could then be released.

On the other hand, oenology is unfortunately frequently a standardisation of taste. As the famous wine-maker Henri Mayer said 'The only way to avoid practising oenology is to know the profession very well.' I rigorously apply his advice. I hire oenologists but I 'deform' them. I prefer spending an hour walking through the vineyards than reading a file about soil analysis which tells me nothing about the character of the wine. Science is an essential element in marking out my path, but it does not determine my course.

I do not denigrate the scientific approach at all, but I notice that it gives people power especially over life which I think is loathsome. As a result of scientific progress in agriculture, we can feed ourselves today with tomatoes which were never planted in soil. As far as I am concerned, I have respect for the living component of wine : I need to touch the vines and chew on the grapes. On the other hand, I know many oenologists who, during the grape harvest, receive grape samples which they press and analyse in their offices. They make recommendations based on this, without knowing the nature of the plot where the grapes were grown.

Q. : *To what extent do you take advantage of technological innovations applied to treat vines ?*

S. D. : Nowadays there are very sophisticated tools, some of which have resulted in considerable qualitative progress, especially in grape-sorting techniques during harvesting. There was a time when, at harvest, bunches of grapes, pieces of wooden posts and snails were all crushed together. Luckily since then, sorting tables have appeared. Improvements have been such that now laser optical sorters exist which only select the grapes which are the right shape and colour ; any others are ejected with a blast of compressed air. Many of these machines are French. This demonstrates that the wine industry is dynamic and export-orientated.

Some vine-growers prefer other machines, but these unfortunately do not reflect the specificities of the *terroir*. This applies to rotary tools intended to work the soil which are

appreciated for their 'clean' work. Such an example is the famous Rotavator which is very popular. It digs into the soil producing a powder under which is a compact and oxygen-impermeable slab where roots cannot survive. Consequently, the roots grow and live in this powder. However, they start to die as soon as it gets warm, and rot when it rains. This shallow root system produces the opposite of character wines. When the soils are bad, I like to treat them with plants and I encourage vine-growers to buy seeders.

Consultant in character

Q. : *As a consultant, how do you manage to identify the vine-grower's aspirations regarding the aromas he wants his wine to have, as aromas are for the most part indescribable ?*

S. D. : I do not promise the vine-grower that I will do everything he wants irrespective of anything else. My work is to analyse his estate and *terroir*, and to let him know, in my opinion, what sort of wine he could grow and what characteristics he could highlight.

When an owner contacts me for help, I visit every plot on his estate. I look at the plant material and I find out about the history of the land as well as the way in which the soils have been prepared. I also study the architecture of the vineyard and question whether it has been well planted in terms of irrigation, slope, orientation and row direction. I then examine the material which is used to work the vines. This gives me precise information about the quality of the rootings. Then I visit the cellars, and finally I taste the wines. I draw up a report which includes an overview of the situation, recommendations about the wine which could be produced, suggestions for change, and a financial assessment of the necessary investments to optimise the management of the estate. If these suggestions are accepted, we start working with the estate's team, and work on the basis of a yearly contract which is automatically renewed.

When I choose my clients, I take into account three criteria : the *terroir* which is capable of producing a wine which has character ; whether there are sufficient means, essentially human means, which can be expressed in the enthusiasm and level of involvement of the people involved ; and a good relationship with the vine-grower. My smallest client is a 3-hectare estate in Bordeaux. The owner, who is a breeder and a farmer, pays me in kind ; a sheep and eight baskets of vegetables every year. At the other end of the spectrum, I have a well-paid contract to take part in the creation of an estate in India which has between 500 and 600 hectares. I have a soft spot for the right bank of the Gironde river and Saint-Émilion in particular, because this is where there are small family estates, 5 hectares on average, and the owners are approachable. The left bank, on the other hand, has estates which are built like large companies, the average estate consisting of 50 hectares per producer, and the owners sometimes live on the other side of the world. This social dimension has a considerable effect on the way in which the vineyards are managed, and consequently on the degree of creativity which we can bring to them.

Passing on my philosophy

Q. : *How do you pass on your very personal approach to your team ?*

S. D. : From the very beginning, I anticipated that my company would grow by training young people who, for the most part, have remained with me. They started with a negligible salary in exchange for training, and then progressed with higher salaries because my aim is to reward good work. This method worked well for a time, before the company became too large.

In 2009, there was a slump, ten years after I had started the company. This was because I did not realise that my name had become a brand and that my team has not been given any recognition. Yet it was clear that I could not be the only person to advise sixty clients. To solve this problem, I did not abandon the principle of the brand, but I took inspiration from the model used by head chefs : when one goes to Ducasse for lunch, one knows that Ducasse is not necessarily in the kitchen. Why not say loud and clear that I worked with excellent professionals whom I had trained ? Without them, regardless of the circumstances, my company would not exist. This is why I changed the company's name from Vignerons Consultants to Derenoncourt Consultants. I also integrated my original employees into the company, and they in turn are now the new generation. The team is gaining in experience and has a growing degree of autonomy,

including the ability to advise an owner on the style of wine which would be beneficial for him to produce.

Q. : *Do your colleagues hope to have their own estate one day, like you ?*

S. D. : I hope that they do. These young people have lots of good intentions, but if they were to have their way, they would be tempted to make romanée-conti everywhere ! They had to agree that we cannot be as demanding with an estate which sells its wine at 4 Euros a bottle as with an estate whose bottles sell for 300 Euros. One must have an overview of the technical and financial possibilities of a property in order to adjust the recommended investments. To make this very clear to my team members, I rented an estate and let them run it. With this first-hand experience, they realised that this was a complicated exercise : we lost 100,000 Euros every year for six years.

When wine becomes a financial product

Q. : *How does one apply your approach to the frenetic speculation which exists with Bordeaux wines ?*

S. D. : The increase in the *premiers crus* in Bordeaux is having dramatic consequences because it is destroying the structure which the system needs. In Burgundy, there are *grands crus* and *premiers crus* which are named after the villages where they are grown and the appellations to which they belong. This used to be the case in Bordeaux : the first *grand cru* ranked above the classified *grands crus* and the ordinary wines, and the system worked well. Today, this logic has been shattered. People no longer sell wine ; they sell financial products. The first *grands crus* have become luxury goods and are no longer a driving force for the rest of the production.

Bordeaux has always taken advantage of opportunistic markets. The arrival of Robert Parker opened up the Bordeaux vineyard to the American public, and caused the first speculative wave. This was followed by the arrival of the Japanese market, and new speculation which was still bearable. When the Chinese market opened up, the boom in prices was unprecedented. By moving into these Asian markets, Bordeaux abandoned its cultural and historical clientele which was predominantly French, Belgian, Swiss and German, and instead sold wine very expensively to markets which had no established wine culture. China is already starting to turn its back on Bordeaux.

Another part of the drama which is currently taking place is that estates are no longer being passed down from generation to generation in families, and so there is a predictable disappearance of small vineyards in Bordeaux.

Finally, the *appellations* are not being used correctly. Until recently, the classification of wines on the right bank was reviewed every ten years. This meant that it was possible to maintain a level of quality while leaving some hope for producers to upgrade their estate. The last classification unfortunately questioned the logic behind the land registry and that of *terroir* which had existed previously. For the first classified *grands crus* classés, for example, the part which corresponds to the quality of the wine in the rating grid decreased from 70 % to 30 %, and the rest depended on secondary criteria such as the quality of the welcome at the estate.

Q. : *Would it be possible to produce another Bordeaux wine which would satisfy the public's palate at a more affordable price ?*

S. D. : This is what I am fighting for, but the problem is deep-rooted. When I started to become interested in wine tasting at the age of twenty, despite the fact that I had very little money, I bought myself a *premier cru* once or twice, such as a Mouton or a Lafite. A bottle of either cost about 300 Francs which was a fortune, but I was able to live out my dream. A very good bottle now costs more than one month's minimum wage, and as a result, the dream has become intangible for young people. In a few years when this generation will have greater purchasing power, it will drink what it will have tasted elsewhere. Small appellations have gained unprecedented recognition in Gaillac, the Roussillon area and the Côtes-du-Rhône region. We can find 'small wines' which are very good but the survival of their producers is being threatened. In the Bordeaux region, they have not increased their prices for fifteen years.

Q. : *What about the so-called 'natural wines' which are currently on the market ?*

S. D. : They are an aberration, an offence to wine culture. It has taken centuries to master wine-making using processes which are not natural at all. When we let nature do its work during the fermentation process, all we end up with in the end is vinegar.

Vines without frontiers

Q. : *Over the past sixty years, countries which lacked any wine-making culture such as Italy drew inspiration from France and greatly improved their production. Is there a limit to this expansion ? Are there a never-ending number of possible new combinations of soils and climates to create new wines ?*

S. D. : French wine-growing is known globally for its quality. Numerous foreigners study in universities in Beaune, Bordeaux and Montpellier, and they then use this training to their advantage in their own countries.

Tuscany has adapted the philosophy of Bordeaux wine-makers. Its production has grown, but in so doing it has turned its back to a certain extent on its true identity which is the sangiovese grape variety, which is wonderful but quite difficult and acidic. The Antinori family which owns numerous properties in Tuscany prompted a cultural shock in the early 1980s by creating the category of typical geographical indications (TGI). The family decided to work with the Bordeaux grape varieties such as cabernet sauvignon, merlot and cabernet franc. They enjoyed worldwide success. The Italian wine takes its strength from the solidarity of its producers. As a united group they represent their wines throughout the world whereas the French remain camped in rival positions. There is a similar model in California where the vineyard in the Napa Valley created its own history in one hundred years, particularly due to improvements in wine-making and irrigation. The vine can take many forms.

Wine-making is developing in southern India, China, Angola and even Ethiopia. We have even been asked to create a vineyard in Sri Lanka. As for Argentina, I cannot deny that there is a *terroir*, but I was not interested in the projects I was offered there. Under the guise of a limited premium production, it was in fact a pretext to make ordinary wines in large volumes. From an economic point of view, it would be a good idea to have a base in the southern hemisphere because all the estates which I advise have their harvests in September, apart from India.

Q. : *Do you fear the effects of American influence where grape variety is more important than blending wines ?*

S. D. : It is not necessary to consider the American wave of grape varieties like a fashion trend. The United States have made grape varieties a tradition, and this is their strength. The consumer finds it easier to understand the concepts behind grape varieties than those related to *terroir*. Over a few years, the United States has been developing a marketing plan for wine which is more and more precise and detailed, claiming to base itself on Burgundy wines with their varieties.

Q. : *What is the importance of unknown or forgotten grape varieties in Bordeaux ? Do you encourage their use ?*

S. D. : There are practically none in France because the appellations forced the vine-makers to use grape varieties which were already recognised. On the other hand, I can revitalise the forgotten grape varieties abroad. When helping Kavaklidere, a Turkish company, which had planted syrah and cabernet grapes, we rediscovered grape varieties very well adapted to this *terroir* which come from the Kurdish part of Turkey, and have been cultivated for thousands of years. This was where the true character of the wine had its source and needed an outlet. It was a great success, and was recognised throughout the world. There is a place for this type of wine. There will also be a place in France, especially because at the present time, given environmental concerns, consumers are hoping to find some reassurance in deeply-rooted and age-old production.

Presentation of the speaker :

Stéphane Derenoncourt : a self-taught wine-maker and consultant based in Bordeaux who advises about one hundred wine estates throughout the world. He is the owner of the Domaine de l'A in Castillon Côtes-de-Bordeaux, and is an atypical consultant. He is very enthusiastic about *terroirs* and the character of wines. He prefers to let the soils take credit for the wines and does not put himself forward. He is a follower of the wine-making philosophy in Burgundy, and has developed his own work methods in his consultancy. He is considered to be one of the most influential wine-makers in the world.

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