

Cru to themselves - winemaking philosophies are not so far apart
South China Morning Post, by Jane Anson

The handwritten sign hanging over the wooden beams on the winery ceiling says: "Wines are like women. You have to cherish them before they open up to you." Looking at it, Edouard Labruyere shrugs with a smile. "That's Burgundy for you."

I'm hoping to better understand one of the enduring clichés of French wine, and Labruyere is one of the few people who can help me. As owner of both Domaine Jacques Prieur in the Côte de Beaune town of Meursault and Chateau Rouget in Pomerol, Bordeaux, he has an active stake in both of France's flagship wine regions - something that is surprisingly rare. I hope he can shed some light on why it's so often a sport to pit one against the other.

It usually goes like this: everything about Bordeaux and Burgundy has been designed to be opposite, from geographic position (Bordeaux west, Burgundy east), grape varieties (100 per cent varietals in Burgundy, blends in Bordeaux) to classifications (awarded to individual chateaux in Bordeaux, to individual plots of vines in Burgundy). On top of this, Burgundy supporters decry Bordeaux's corporate culture, and Bordeaux champions dismiss Burgundy's "rustic" wines. Are both sides willing to work to achieve an entente cordiale?

"It's certainly a different intellectual challenge, making wine between the two places," says Labruyere. "The challenge in Bordeaux is the blending. It's a precise process that takes real skill. I would be comfortable making a 100 per cent merlot in Pomerol, but it is clear the cabernet franc adds a perfume and elegance that is essential. The challenge in Burgundy is respecting the terroir of so many different plots of land. We have nine grand crus and 14 premier crus all vinified in our cellars at Domaine Jacques Prieur, and each needs to be treated differently."

Labruyere is joined by a few highly prestigious names.

The first is Francois Pinault, billionaire industrialist and owner of Domaine d'Eugenie in Vosne-Romanee and Chateau Latour in Pauillac. Frederic Engerer is director of both estates, farming both biodynamically and working rigorously to ensure he produces exceptional wines that respect the nuances of each region. He points to the structural differences between the two - where Latour is 78 hectares and Domaine d'Eugenie comes in at a little under 7.5.

"The size alone has a huge impact," Engerer says. "There is a safety net in Bordeaux because of the tradition of producing a second and third label [to save only the best grapes for the first wine]. If certain plots don't respond as I would like, I have the option of Les Forts de Latour, or our third wine, Pauillac. There can be no plan B in Burgundy, because we have such tiny plots and every grape is needed. It means winemaking in Burgundy can be like walking a tightrope without a safety net."

The third member of this highly select group of owners/directors is Englishman Christian Seely. He is the man in charge of the portfolio of wines belonging to AXA Millesimes, a French insurance company, and oversees operations at Domaine de l'Arlet in Nuits-St-Georges and Chateau Pichon-Longueville Baron in Pauillac (by chance, directly opposite Chateau Latour).

All three show that the caricature of "corporate Bordeaux versus artisanal Burgundy" is outdated. "Both regions reflect a profound truth about wine," says Seely. "The best examples are a true and honest reflection of the land where they are grown. Burgundy may be a more obvious expression of that, but it is no less true for Bordeaux."

Seely has introduced a few Bordeaux touches in Burgundy, including a Petit Arlot second wine for the young vines of the estate.

"For me, the difference between the two regions comes down to image," he says. "Bordeaux can suffer from the fact that some of its greatest wines are produced by fairly large estates, in contrast to the hundreds of small owners in Burgundy. But in the end, what matters is what is in front of you, in your glass, and whether it has been made by people who are passionate about staying true to what nature has given them."