



CHATEAU CLARISSE FROM BRISTOL TO RIGHT BANK

What made a couple of hoteliers and consultant Stéphane Derenoncourt collaborate on a new project in Puisseguin-St-Emilion, when they had recently turned down 30 other properties, and he 40 other clients? Ella Lister explains the crucial human and natural elements in the creation of exciting new wines made to enjoy

September 13, 2012, and heavy black grapes hung low all around. I pressed my foot to the floor of my hired Renault in an attempt not to lose the quickly diminishing form of Stéphane Derenoncourt's dark Audi A7 on the narrow Right Bank roads. Château Clarisse is one of the self-taught consultant's newer projects, which is perhaps why he seemed to have a little difficulty locating it. After a long pause at a T-junction, a left turn followed. Shortly after, Derenoncourt pulled into a parking lot, gestured for me to stop, and without flinching explained something through the car window about an errand in a nearby building that he would, on second thoughts, save until later...

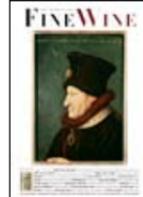
Not long after passing the same junction from the other direction, we drew up into another unprepossessing parking lot. I hesitated before switching off my engine, but we had in fact arrived at Château Clarisse. There was no château to speak of, as is often the case on the Right Bank, but I did not even register the house that I have since been assured flanks the winery buildings. Nonetheless, this house is not currently part of the winery holdings, since new owners Didier and Olivia Le Calvez decided to invest first and foremost in the vineyards and the cellars.

The Le Calvez couple are hoteliers by trade. Olivia runs the family's five-star Hôtel de Toiras on the Ile de Ré, while Didier is president and general manager of the equally stellar Parisian hotel Le Bristol. They purchased Château Clarisse in 2009, and up to now they have focused primarily on working the soil. Once as gray and lifeless as the

neighboring plots, the Clarisse earth has been transformed into a fine, rich, bronze-hued bed for the newly tended vines. The color change is thanks to the oxygenation of the soil—now a "couscous" texture, explains Derenoncourt—allowing the red of the iron to come through. Brightly colored soil aside, however, it was difficult at first to get very excited by "Château" Clarisse.

The modest demeanor of this Puisseguin-St-Emilion property was set in stark contrast by the four days I had just spent touring first growths in the Médoc, Sauternes, and St-Emilion. Instead of manicured rose gardens and grand reception buildings full of staff, Clarisse resembled an abandoned construction site. We were met by brand-new vineyard manager Xavier, leathery-skinned from the wind and sun on the Ile de Ré, where he had been tending vines in a less prestigious appellation until three weeks previously.

Neither the timid manager nor the laid-back consultant made much effort to "sell" Clarisse as we made the short walk through neighbors' vineyards toward the clayey plateau of the Château Clarisse vines. It didn't take long to traverse the 5ha (12 acres), comprising 85 percent Merlot and 15 percent Cabernet Franc. As we turned to head back, I desperately sought inspiration, showering the pair with questions and getting straightforward but somehow flat responses. Maybe I hadn't yet adjusted from the silky PR of the grands crus. I could appreciate the exposed aspect of the raised plateau, at 260ft (80m) altitude, and the advantage of the resulting wind that would keep rot at bay. I could see



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the vines looked healthy, and the grapes full and potent. And yet there was something heavy in the air that weighed down my mood, as well as the loaded grapes. My first impressions were of a quiet property lacking energy and focus.

Restrained but tangible zeal

I told myself not to prejudge, and I determined to try to understand why the much-lauded Derenoncourt had taken on this particular project. He had turned down 40 offers already in the nine months to September 2012—and that was before his success in the St-Emilion reclassification of September 6, where several of his better-established clients were upgraded, including La Mondotte and Château Canon-la-Gaffelière, to premiers grands crus classés.

For Derenoncourt, the answer was "the enthusiasm of the Le Calvez family," but it wasn't until a month later, on meeting Didier Le Calvez and tasting the wine for the first time, that this rationale was confirmed to me. His zeal was restrained but tangible, and more important still, his 2010s were surprisingly good—and made after only one year in which to turn around a flagging property and a set of unloved vines. "I didn't realize man could have such an impact on the grapes," exclaimed Le Calvez, adding, as an example, "It's obvious that if you have 15 bunches on a vine, [the wine] will be more dilute than if you have eight bunches."

Green-harvesting is just one of many practices introduced at Château Clarisse. Derenoncourt reels off methods of

"forcing the vines to dig deeper into the ground," from discontinuing the use of fertilizer for the new vines and then actively working the soil to loosen it. "The roots couldn't go down before," says Derenoncourt, "because the soil was so hard." Every autumn, cereal is planted between the rows—an organic method used widely by Derenoncourt to loosen tight soil. The cereal grows vigorously—up to 0.4in (1cm) per day—and makes lots of holes in the ground. It is then cut and left to rot, letting oxygen into the ground. "The life of the soil goes farther down," states Derenoncourt, leading to "strong, healthy leaves, more resistant to pests et cetera." The deeper roots are also less affected by dryness or rain, and crucially, they come into contact with the limestone substratum, which is around 2ft (60cm) deep across most of the Clarisse vineyards and visible at the edges, where the plateau drops away. According to Derenoncourt, this gives the wine "spicy, floral black-fruit and truffled" notes, as well as a "chalky texture and salty finish."

The cereal between the vines also serves to contain their vigor, allowing close pruning without the vegetation running wild. This, in turn, helps bring yields down to below 30hl/ha, whereas in Puisseguin-St-Emilion people generally aim for around 50 in Derenoncourt's experience. It is "all these little things together," enthuses Le Calvez, that lead to a quality vineyard. Despite Derenoncourt's biodynamic leanings and encouragement by Le Calvez, he has not introduced any biodynamic practices at Château Clarisse as yet, counseling not to "put the cart before the



The color of the soil at Château Clarisse reflects not only its high iron content but the priority that its new owners have been giving it ever since they took over

Photography courtesy of Ella Lister

horse.” Clarisse benefits instead from simple, organic principles, such as the disuse of herbicides and reducing sulfur levels.

Romain Bocchio is the consultant assigned by Derenoncourt to advise Château Clarisse on a day-to-day basis. Previously based at Derenoncourt’s own Domaine de l’A, this is Bocchio’s first external assignment. “The challenge is to work with the owner,” says Bocchio, who seems delighted that Le Calvez is an owner who wants to take risks, in 2012 waiting until the very last minute to pick the grapes. For Bocchio, three factors make the project exciting: First, the “partially abandoned” nature of the property; second, the “clear potential of the terroir”; and third, “the dynamic, energetic owner” and his willingness to invest for quick results.

Letting terroir speak for itself

Since 2009, Didier and Olivia Le Calvez have not shied away from necessary investment to turn around the property. They have doubled the vineyard parcels, replanted 18 percent of the vines, refurbished the office building, and were halfway through rebuilding the cellar when I visited, which by now should be a shiny new air-conditioned barrel room ready to receive barrels from their current location. This, in turn, will mean that the current vat room can be enlarged to make space for the replacement of existing large concrete vats with more smaller vats, allowing further selection for the next vintage.

That is not to say that the past three vintages have not been subject to careful selection processes. The grapes are handpicked and transported in small baskets to the first sorting table under a tent outside the vat room, where leaves and other detritus are removed. Then, a second sort sees all green or spoiled grapes removed, leaving perfectly ripe grapes to be poured into the vats and fermented whole, for a longer, gentler extraction. Then comes pumping over, or punching down for the Vieilles Vignes cuvée—“It’s both gentler and more homogenous,” explains Derenoncourt. Alcoholic fermentation lasts between ten and 15 days, and then the skins are left to macerate for about the same amount of time again, adding glycerol to the wine, or what Derenoncourt fondly terms a *prise de gras* (fattening up).

Malolactic fermentation for the Vieilles Vignes cuvée takes place entirely in barrel, while for Château Clarisse only around 30 percent takes place in (mostly new) barriques; any more, and the wine would be too woody, says Derenoncourt, who “prefer[s] to taste fruit, not wood.” After malo, both wines are aged for an average of 14 months in barrel, depending on the vintage (30 and 50 percent new wood for the standard and Vieilles Vignes cuvées respectively). Clarisse uses barrels from two coopers: Ana Sélection, which produces small amounts of highly selected wood, and Taransaud, on whom Derenoncourt says you can rely for high-quality barrels that add structure but very little flavoring. There is no fining, but a light filtration at bottling.

Derenoncourt has developed a “philosophy of production adapted to the [Clarisse] terroir,” reminding me that “Didier is not a winemaker” so “needs guidance.” In Derenoncourt’s experience, “consulting is, before all else, a human adventure,” one that he sees as an opportunity to build “solid, complex, and touching relationships.” He concludes, warmly, “I like that.” At first, Derenoncourt wondered whether he could work with someone he thought of only as Le Bristol’s PDG (president) but was pleasantly surprised by Le Calvez’s passion for the project, musing that “Didier is a different man here.”

Didier Le Calvez concurs. “Being among the vines relaxes me,” he says, and he visits from Paris every six weeks. “Wine has to be a passion if you are going to make it,” he adds. Xavier sends a daily progress photo to Didier and Olivia Le Calvez, as well as to Bocchio. “It’s the highlight of my day,” admits Didier frankly, his fervor palpable. While he is more involved in the day-to-day management of the vineyards and the “human contact,” Olivia runs the commercial side of the business.

Château Clarisse is sold in Relais & Châteaux hotels around France, as well as in the Brasseries Flo, the Plaza Athénée, Guy Savoy, Drouant, and Ladurée—oh, and Le Bristol, *bien sûr*, confirms Didier Le Calvez. They focused on being showcased in the right places. “We drew upon our networks,” he says. Elsewhere, Clarisse is sold in ten different countries across Europe, the USA, and Asia, in “restaurants with very good food but not necessarily with three Michelin stars,” he says.



Photography © Roméo Balancourt

CHÂTEAU CLARISSE

Château Clarisse 2010

Deep maroon, with a black center. The pure, fresh nose of currants entices while promising richness and power. On the palate, there is again a refreshing vein throughout, which gives elegance to this hefty, succulent wine. The tannins are strong but fine, and already well integrated. After time in the glass, a spicy, peppery note evolves on the nose. Already quite approachable.

Château Clarisse Vieilles Vignes 2010

The vines for this cuvée are more than 50 years old; co-planted with the newer vines, they are harvested separately one by one. The cuvée is Merlot only, “but at this age, the vines develop

complex aromas, and to taste it’s hard to imagine it’s 100 percent Merlot,” marvels Derenoncourt. It is even darker than the main wine, and redder more than purple, showing a more developed robe. Intense aromas of sweet baked plums and cherries, as well as brambles, herbs, and chocolate. On the palate, inky and luscious, with the chalky texture of the tannins, alongside superb acidity, lending a mouth-filling complexity. A striking mineral backbone reminds of both owner and consultant emphasizing the depth of the roots. This is at once fresh and complex. After two hours in carafe, the tannins felt more integrated, and a licorice scent developed, adding an almost Piedmontese edge to the bouquet. An exciting wine.

The parallel between food and wine is one that runs through Le Calvez’s career. As he admires the accomplished dish in front of him at Le Bristol’s Epicure restaurant—their signature *poularde de bresse* poached in a bladder—he compares his relationship with Derenoncourt to that with the head chef at Le Bristol. “I’m hardly going to tell Eric Frechon how to cook,” he declares. “I don’t know how my chef prepared this dish,” he wonders, explaining that, with a chef, as with his consultant winemaker, “we give them all the means to succeed and then trust in them.” Similarly, he has “total confidence in Stéphane.” Le Calvez goes as far as asserting that Derenoncourt is a director more than a consultant. In fact, he chose Derenoncourt before he chose Château Clarisse and turned down 30 vineyards, including one in Lalande de Pomerol and another in Puisseguin-St-Emilion before his consultant-director gave the nod to Clarisse after more than a year’s searching.

“We hadn’t predetermined what we wanted our wine to be like,” states Le Calvez, clarifying that “the wine will be what the terroir gives.” He believes this is a novel approach and was drawn to Derenoncourt because his wines are not all the same: “He lets the terroir speak for itself.” Le Calvez had, however, decided on Bordeaux, with family in Périgord, the Ile de Ré, and in Bordeaux itself. What is more, “Bordeaux is a name around the world,” which is helpful commercially, especially with a small property, says Le Calvez, allowing Clarisse to be “artisanal” in size, while benefiting from an “exceptional international brand.”

Le Calvez loves Burgundy but dismissed it as too expensive to invest in a vineyard there. The “price explosion of the big Bordeaux wines,” on the other hand, presented an opportunity that Le Calvez could not refuse, he says, because of the comparatively “good price-to-quality ratio in the smaller appellations.” Château Clarisse costs around €12–16 (\$16–22) per bottle, and the Vieilles Vignes more like €20–30 (\$26–40) en primeur. “I didn’t raise the price for 2011, and I won’t for 2012,” Le Calvez assures me, preferring to achieve growth by gradually increasing his vineyard holdings. “Even well-off people have trouble opening a bottle over €100 [\$130],” sympathizes Le Calvez, “and I don’t want people to be scared of opening the bottle; I want them to enjoy it.”

Despite his modest pricing aspirations, Le Calvez nevertheless seeks to make a perfect wine. He is, as he himself says, “always in search of a perfection that is never achieved.” After only four vintages at Clarisse, he boldly declares, “Every year, we get closer, and every year we raise the bar.” The first, 2009, was sold in bulk, explains Le Calvez, “because we hadn’t started with Stéphane, and it was not up to the standard we’re aiming for.” The soil had not been worked, and the grapes were machine-harvested and vinified in bulk, rather than by parcel. He admitted this was “sad” in such a good vintage, but a poor wine wouldn’t have fitted his image: “People expect high quality from someone who’s run the Georges V” (his five-star domain for seven years before Le Bristol).

Since Derenoncourt has come on board, there has been a “metamorphosis,” raves Le Calvez: “The grapes are not the same ones we bought; they have a thicker, more solid skin,” and “the leaves are greener.” On the viticultural side, Derenoncourt brings “a lot of common sense,” essentially applying “very, very great gardening.” Le Calvez believes that the quality of a wine is due 80 percent to the grapes and only 20 percent to the winemaking, although he recognizes the importance of the latter. He doesn’t ever plan to take over from Derenoncourt and Bocchio, but he is involved enough to observe that “when you become a bit of a winemaker, you drink wine differently—you understand and appreciate all the effort that’s gone into making a good bottle.”

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