

Derenoncourt - the new Michel Rolland?

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The man who is being described as the next Michel Rolland, the ubiquitous Pomerol-based winemaking consultant with clients from Seattle to Bangalore, was born in Dunkirk the son of a steel worker and came to Bordeaux as a teenage hitchhiker only because of a girl.

He liked the climate and the easiest way to stay there was to work in the vineyards - however much he was to come to disapprove of them. He is entirely self-taught and loves burgundy. Much of Stéphane Dereroncourt's story runs against the current orthodoxy.

Dereroncourt's first vintage was the 1982 which he picked in Fronsac, one of Bordeaux's less fashionable appellations. For the next 10 years he scratched a living as a guitar-playing, itinerant agricultural worker, barely conscious of the fact that 1982 was such a significant vintage in Bordeaux. It was not until he moved all of seven miles east to the little wine town of St-Emilion in 1990, coincidentally the next 'great' Bordeaux vintage, that he began to be drawn in to the rarefied world of winemaking.

Offered the chance to work in the cellar at Château Pavie Macquin through one of his old employers in Fronsac, he felt something click. "At last I understood why I'd been asked to do what I'd done in the vineyard." Considering that some reckon Dereroncourt is now the most sensitive vinifier in the whole of Bordeaux, the world's largest fine wine region, we might now wonder whether toiling in the vineyard should not be a pre-requisite for any ambitious winemaker.

The 1993 vintage at Château Pavie Macquin was such a notable success (most bordeaux 1993s are less than inspiring) that it drew attention to the long-haired 30 year-old responsible for it. Probably the most significant meeting in Dereroncourt's professional life was with Comte Stephan von Neipperg, the neatly-moustachioed German owner of the smart St-Emilion Château Canon La Gaffelière, who was clever enough to see Dereroncourt's potential and asked him to take over as his winemaker.

"I was scared," says Dereroncourt. "I thought I wasn't up to it. But after a year I finally accepted his offer." Perhaps most significant of all for Dereroncourt was that von Neipperg was planning a new super-cuvée, La Mondotte, from a small plot of limestone near Château Pavie Macquin. La Mondotte has since become one of Bordeaux's most expensive wines and was launched to huge acclaim with the 1996 vintage. Because of this proximity, Dereroncourt felt comfortable about interpreting La Mondotte's terroir, the defining physical environment of the vineyard, and translating it into a truly expressive wine. It was Canon La Gaffelière, on another, unfamiliar sort of St-Emilion terrain altogether, which gave Dereroncourt sleepless nights.

"I started as a consultant in 1997 but at the beginning I refused lots of offers, partly because I didn't feel confident enough of my knowledge, partly because of back problems. Cellar work is very physical. But the more I saw, the more misgivings I had. The way that so many vineyards have been spoilt with too many chemicals."

Dereroncourt is really a child of the sixties. Biodynamics are made for him and his whole mentality is idealistic. He is particularly keen on the Terra Burdigala range of inexpensive wines, devised with wine merchant François Thienpont with the aim of providing an outlet for some of Bordeaux's hard-pressed vigneron in less glamorous areas. "This is not so much a business project. There are good social reasons for launching it now."

How did he know how much to charge when he was beginning his consultancy business? He shrugs. "It was a catastrophe. For 10 years I worked for a minimum wage and even now I'm far from a businessman." Perhaps you need a manager, I suggest. "I need nothing. It's all ok. From the beginning I realised that the real problem is time. I don't want to be one of those consultants who visits the property just twice a year. I want to be really involved with the vineyard all year round, so I put together a team." He now has a stable of five like-minded young wine fanatics, including his wife Christine, all based in Bordeaux, who somehow manage to keep an eye on all the properties listed here.

Is it not difficult, I asked, to grasp somewhere as different from Bordeaux as the Tuscan coast where he is overseeing L'Argentiera, one of several new projects there involving Piero Antinori, Italy's best-known wine ambassador. "Yes, but I love it. I've had five years of holidays in Italy. I've tasted everything - though Piedmont with its tiny properties is my real

love."

With his increasing international profile Dereroncourt has been invited to work in the New World of wine too but has always refused. "I like wines that go from generation to generation." Harlan Estate of the Napa Valley is the New World wine that has impressed him most so far.

In his much-admired book *The New France* Andrew Jefford devotes a special section to Dereroncourt and notes that he has never seen him in a suit. I have to report a sighting at this year's en primeur tastings of Dereroncourt, now neatly coiffed, in pinstripes, looking at 41 dangerously like one of the businessmen he so despises as currently ruling Bordeaux, "seeking only points and high selling prices". But he is certainly no statesman.

When I asked him whom he admired in Bordeaux he paused not a nanosecond before saying "No-one". (Later he worried that this sounded a bit arrogant and said he used to admire the owner of Château Tertre Roteboeuf but now finds "a certain violence in his vinification - he doesn't adapt enough to the particular vintage character".) In Burgundy? "Henri Jayer I adore. I go to Burgundy three times a year to meet with a group to speak of terroir. In Burgundy the notion of terroir is much more advanced than in Bordeaux. I'm proud of being the only Bordelais in this group."

And what does he think of Michel Rolland, with whom he works at several châteaux and about whom he admits he would like to follow in his footsteps? "I like and admire the man very much even if I'm not a great fan of his style of wine and consulting. He doesn't have the time to follow the vines of his clients. My method of consulting is very different. I like to define the potential of a terroir and try to adapt the winemaking to express that to the maximum. The problem comes when people want to make huge wines from slight terroirs."

And how does Dereroncourt see the future? "I have no ambitions. I am very happy. But it looks as though there will be a big purge in Bordeaux. All the bad wines and bad management will disappear. There's too much wine in the world. There will be some dramas but it's necessary."

I ask if he is prepared to name any names but he gives one of his naughty, toothy smiles and says "you know better than I do".

So what sort of wine does Dereroncourt make? I do not necessarily admire every single wine he has made but overall he does seem to me to bring a particularly burgundian sensibility to the current rather monotone, monolithic tendency in Bordeaux. "I make wines to last", he maintains. "I want to make wines with a certain lightness but very good balance and very good extraction. There is a big difference between concentration and power.

"That's why wine is so great. It's not just a drink but after time it becomes an expression of place and vintage and no longer, for instance, a Dereroncourt wine."

It is fashionable nowadays for winemakers to talk of putting terroir into the bottle but the instinctive Dereroncourt is more convincing than most that he actually does it.

Dereroncourt wines

Bordeaux

Ch Canon La Gaffelière, St-Emilion (from 1996)

La Mondotte, St-Emilion (from 1996)

Clos de l'Oratoire, St-Emilion (from 1996)

Ch Pavie Macquin, St-Emilion (from 1990)

Clos Fourtet, St-Emilion (from 2001)

Ch Larcis-Ducasse, St-Emilion (from 2002)

Ch Bellevue, St-Emilion (from 2000) Ch Rol Valentin, St-Emilion (from 1998) Ch La Tour Figeac, St-Emilion (from 1997)

Lucia, St-Emilion (from 2001) La Bienfaisance/Sanctus, St-Emilion (from 2001) Ch Cantenac, St-Emilion (from 2002) Ch

Ferrand-Lartique, St-Emilion (from 2003) Ch Cadet Bon, St-Emilion (from 2004) Domaine de l'A, Côtes de Castillon (from

1999) Ch Aiguilhe, Côtes de Castillon (from 1999) Clos Puy Arnaud, Côtes de Castillon (from 2000) Ch La Prade,

Bordeaux Côtes de Francs (from 2000) Ch Puygueraud, Bordeaux Côtes de Francs (from 1997) Ch Les Charmes

Godard, Bordeaux Côtes de Francs Blanc (from 1997) Ch Richelieu, Fronsac (from 2003) Ch La Rousselle, Fronsac

(from 2001) Ch Gree Laroque, Bordeaux Supérieur (from 2000) Ch Le Pin Beausoleil, Bordeaux Supérieur (from 1998)

Ch Jean Faux, Bordeaux Supérieur (from 2003) Ch Smith-Haut-Lafitte, Pessac-Léognan (from 2001) Clos Marsalette, Pessac-Léognan (from 2002) Domaine de Chevalier red, Pessac-Léognan (from 2002) Ch Prieuré-Lichine, Margaux (from 1999) Ch Preuillac, Médoc (from 2003) Terra Burdigala range

Elsewhere

Ch Monastier La Tour, Côtes de Bergerac (from 2003) Villa Symposia, Coteaux du Languedoc (from 2003) Domaine de la Soumade, Rasteau (from 2002) Alonso del Yerro, Ribera del Duero (from 2003) L'Argentiera, Bolgheri (from 2003) Podere Forte, Castiglione d'Orcia (from 2003)