

## Alliance Française

12 Feb 2009 by Jancis Robinson/FT

A small reception committee hopped from foot to foot. As the winter sun set behind the century-old avenue in front of Château de Sales in Pomerol, the temperature fell sharply. Most unusually, there was snow on the ground in the lee of the handsome stone balustrades. Then a small white bus drove up the avenue, disgorged a gaggle of (mainly) blondes, and both temperature and decibel level rose.

This was the start of the return match of an initiative that saw a group of women in the Bordeaux wine business travel to California in January last year to spend a week with their counterparts in the Napa Valley. The groups and the get-togethers have no name and no first in command; one might say they are truly female in both these respects. Yet they have been exceptionally well organised and fruitful from the point of view of the participants, who are generally the younger, more dynamic winemakers, proprietors, wine publicists and educators in their respective regions.

On both sides of the Atlantic, ongoing tasting groups have been formed as a direct result of the Napa trip last year, although they are revealingly different. In California all tastings are at lunchtime to allow mothers to spend maximum time with their families whereas the Bordeaux women's tasting group meets in the evenings. The organiser of the California tastings has a theme and a budget of \$350 for the wines whereas Bordeaux participants tend to raid their own cellars.

But most importantly, the visits have fostered not just an understanding and affection for the vinous opposition, but have engendered a healthy re-examination of their own attitudes and practices. The Bordeaux women were particularly struck by how good their California counterparts are at selling and marketing not just their wares and their wineries but themselves. 'They showed us that you have to show more than your faces. And how important it is to communicate and sell using the internet and blogs', I was told.

And as Nicola Allison of Château de Seuil in Graves (extreme left in the complete picture below) put it, in her strong New Zealand accent, 'I was amazed at the openness and friendliness there.'

'More than in Bordeaux?' I asked. No letters could do justice to the snort she gave in reply.

'Great food', was another common Bordelais reaction to the Napa Valley visit.

For German-born Barbara Engerer of Château Paloumey (and, incidentally, wife of the director of first growth Château Latour), it was the frankness that was most noticeable in California. 'They're very dynamic and find it easy to speak about every subject. In Bordeaux there are so many things that everyone thinks about but we would never mention for fear of shocking people. In California they're very, very frank. Even about the sort of hick hacks that every family has.'

In California the Bordeaux group learnt about such unBordelais concepts as selling by mailing list, custom crush facilities and how best to entertain and sell to wine tourists.

Laurence Ters, the talented winemaker at Château Franc-Mayne in St-Émilion, was struck by how much more important women are to the California wine business than in France and how there was no suggestion there that they might be second-class citizens. As for the Napa Valley and its wines, 'I realised that this was another great wine region like Bordeaux – a Little Bordeaux if you like – with the same vine varieties and many of the same techniques, but with much more freedom and a very different climate.'

The women, who all pay their own way, and in some cases leave decidedly grumpy men at home in charge of their children, have Sharon Harris to thank for this Franco-American alliance. Owner with her Texan husband of the appropriately named Amici Cellars in Napa Valley, she first fell in love with Bordeaux as an au pair and a few years ago brought her family back for an extended visit of a more than a year. Taking a course at the oenology faculty at Bordeaux university provided her with a network of contacts in the Bordeaux wine business and the transatlantic exchange visits were her idea. She now has a chambres d'hôte in St-Émilion ([www.winevillas.com](http://www.winevillas.com)), which came in handy for accommodation for the Napa group.

For celebrated California consultant Heidi Barrett, whose winemaking triumphs have included Screaming Eagle and Dalla Valle, this was only her second ever visit to Bordeaux. Her principal impressions were of 'warm and welcoming women, cold weather, tasty wines, rich food, grand and beautiful Châteaux. I have a better picture now of the different appellations and their distinct flavour profiles.'

The questions the California winemakers asked Pomerol producers at an introductory tasting at de Sales were illuminating. Pam Starr of Crocker Starr was keen to identify every clone planted. 'I'm afraid I don't know', confessed the first château owner to be interrogated, 'I will ask my maître de chai to send you an email.' As he got up to present his Château Gazin, Nicolas de Bailliencourt began, 'Please don't ask me about clones – I won't know'. He went on to observe airily that, unlike the sophisticated French, Americans like jammy wines. This did not go down well with the visitors from Napa Valley.

They were surprised for different reasons by Bruno de Lambert's description of how he sells Château de Sales: each year all of it goes to the same five merchants in Libourne on the basis of an unwritten agreement that has persisted for 30 years. 'The only problem is finding the right price', he said with masterful understatement.

Carissa Chappellet had been brought up on Bordeaux first growths but her wine-loving father had always made much of the legendary hauteur of those who produced them. This trip shattered that myth for Carissa, who instead found their Bordeaux hosts 'welcoming, generous with their time, open, warm and gracious'. The rockiness of the soils made a particularly big impression on her too, as well as the 'earthiness' of the bouquets of these wines that, while being made from the same grape varieties, tended to be distinctly less alcoholic than those produced in the Napa Valley.

Perhaps the thing that most impressed the visiting Californians was Bordeaux's history. The châtelaine explained that Château de Sales' origins date from 1464. 'Pre Columbus', hissed Sharon.

A return match in California is scheduled for early next year when the women plan to ask some prominent women in wine from other countries. My observation is that these meetings result in a new-found respect on all sides.