An Australian in France

11 Nov 2009 by Clive Otto

As Australia's official wine organisations publish a report claiming that the country has a wine surplus equivalent to 75% of total production, and as British wine writer Andrew Jefford suggests some ways out of this dire state of affairs in an eloquent lecture delivered on Tuesday night at the National Wine Centre in Adelaide, the following account of exposure to French practices by award-winning Western Australian winemaker Clive Otto seems particularly timely.

The Otto family flew to London from Margaret River with excitement in knowing we were going to the 2009 World Decanter Wine Awards dinner and would be collecting the Regional trophy for the best Bordeaux Varietal wine for the 2007 Fraser Gallop Estate Cabernet Sauvignon. On the night of the awards we had good friends from Perth - Carla and Tom Love and our winery neighbours from Woody Nook, Peter and Jane Bailey - to share our table. I joined the other five finalists for the International Trophy on stage - France, South Africa, New Zealand, Chile and USA. They announced the winner, and with hoops of joy I leapt like Usain Bolt to accept the trophy from Steven Spurrier, the chairman of the Decanter World Wine Awards.

The next day we were on the plane to Bordeaux to spend a few days exploring this beautiful city on the Gironde and its brassieres, cafés and playgrounds.

We then commissioned 'Barry', the voice of our GPS on our mobile phone, to guide us down to Barsac and Langon to the wine and cheese festival there. It was the first of many festivals we experienced around Bordeaux, with fantastic regional foods and wine. Epicurean delights such as oysters from Cap Ferret and champagne were a good start to the day, along with Bayonne hams, Basque sausages filled with truffles, foie gras, duck confit , snails, mussels and amazing cheeses beautifully packed at the fromagerie stands. The wine négociants had selections that were from all regions of France, so we sampled from Champagne, Burgundy, Bordeaux, Alsace and the Loire.

We had an entourage of Australian friends to join us for a few days at our rural gîte within the confines of Château Dudon, an organic producer of Sauternes-style wines (very good and hard to find). This was to be home for Bridget, Harry (three years old), Amelia (six months old) and I for four weeks while I explored and observed the vintage techniques involved in Bordeaux white wines (oaked Semillon and Sauvignon Blanc) and Bordeaux reds (Cabernet Sauvignon/Merlot/Cabernet Franc/Petit Verdot).

My main contact in Graves was Domaine de Chevalier. Fraser Gallop Estate had struck up a friendship with the proprietor Olivier Bernard when we staged a tasting of Bordeaux whites against oaked styles of Australian Semillon/Sauvignon Blancs in November 2008 (see Will WA ever rival Pessac-Léognan?). Domaine de Chevalier's winemaker Thomas Stonestreet was very helpful and generous with his time, especially considering the busy nature of vintage time. I went out into the vineyards to watch the hand pickers bend down low to select only the golden bunches of grapes of well-exposed Sauvignon Blanc on trellises that were only as high as my waist. The pickers often went back over the same ground up to three or four times over the vintage to select the best bunches.

This is the main difference in quality between Bordeaux's and Australian grapes which are generally trellised on wider and higher vertically positioned trellis systems that can be managed by hand or mechanically. I would say that they are getting riper flavours arriving at lower sugar levels and higher acid levels because of the nature of these closely planted low trellis systems which require incredible amounts of labour to maintain and use. (This helps to explain why these wines are so expensive!)

Once the grapes are picked, the buckets are hand delivered to the press.The reductive use of carbon dioxide was interesting to see at the press. The next day oxidative techniques were employed on the pressed juices to barrels. This was never quite explained why they do this. Suffice to say, it works for Domaine de Chevalier. A close eye on their techniques was noted on juice turbidities, yeast types, barrel cooperages and press cycles.

I was then given contacts with other châteaux in the area, which over the next four weeks I visited. Visiting Laurent Le Brun at Château Olivier, I admired very much their wines, both white and red. I also had an opportunity to visit Châteaux Carbonnieux, La Louvière, Couhins Lurton, de Cruzeau and de Rochemorin. By this time the harvest of the red grapes had begun and it was interesting to watch the grape sorting machines, conveyors and the teams of people sorting out the

grapes by hand on their way to the fermenter. The 2009 vintage in Bordeaux was spectacular with regard to quality and many are hailing it as the finest one in 40 years. Not many berries were rejected at the sorting tables this year!

Towards the end of my time in Bordeaux I was lucky enough to see botrytised grapes come in for the production of Sauternes at Château Dudon. Again there was a very laborious process of hand selecting the right bunches of grapes in up to eight passes in the vineyard over the season. The botrytised grapes looked terrible and you didn't initially want to eat them. They had a wonderful flavour of marmalade, flowers, minerals and lime all mixed in. From my experience of Barsac and Sauternes, I would suggest that in Australia, we are picking our dessert styles way too sweet. By picking them slightly earlier than we do in Australia the Bordeleais achieve wines that are incredibly well balanced not too cloying, with fresh fruit and floral aromas, great oak/fruit integration and incredibly long flavoured palates.

The Otto family then moved on to Beaujolais and the Mâconnais - less adored than many other wine regions and very undervalued in my book. We caught up with our old friend Bill Weingart (a Californian who helped us for the 2008 vintage at Fraser Gallop Estate), who is working for the well-regarded Mâconnais producers The Bret Brothers. Their speciality is Chardonnay and Bill led us through a tasting of 30 Chardonnays from different vintages and vineyards. All this was the night before I had to get up at 4 am to fly to London and back in one day from Juliénas (thank God for Barry, as it was very foggy and finding my way to Lyon airport at 4am in the morning would have been almost impossible without him). The other wines of Beaujolais (Chardonnay and Gamay) were incredibly cheap given the high quality coming from bush vines planted on steep slopes in poor, bony soils. If the Beaujolais were allowed to plant Pinot Noir, I suspect Burgundy would be worried!

Our final week was spent in Switzerland, to catch up with an old friend Willi Frei, who used to distribute Vasse Felix Wines through his company Barossa Weinhandels. We had many a lunch and dinner with Willi, tasting the great wines of the world from his nuclear bunker wine cellar.

The trip was an invaluable experience for developing my knowledge about winemaking and understanding of what it takes to make world-class wines.