The M□doc Outsider

11 Nov 2010 by Jancis Robinson/FT but this is longer

See my tasting notes below.

On the day last June when Bordeaux second growth Château Cos d'Estournel announced the opening price for its 2009 vintage of 150 euros a bottle, I visited a wine producer less than 10 miles north west of this famous St-Estèphe property. Adrien Tramier, owner of the very much more modest Château St-Saturnin had not yet decided on the price of his 2009. This was hardly surprising since, instead of being plugged into the rapacious rhythms of the Bordeaux *place*, he sells when he feels like it. His average price per bottle from the cellars is under 10 euros a bottle and he was sure that he would not be asking more than 15 euros even for the most sought-after vintage ever, the 2009.

Tramier is unusual in so many ways that it is hard to decide in which order to list them. He uses no oak from choice. He still has some wine in tank from the first year he was proud of. That year was 1975 - yes, the village of Begadan in the northern Médoc harbours some 35-year-old wine in bulk, in extremely appetising condition. In fact I'd say that Château St-Saturnin 1975 is much fruitier, more interesting and delicious than most of the much more high-flown 1975 red bordeaux I have tasted in recent years.

It perhaps goes without saying that he is extremely idiosyncratic. His long-suffering oenologist partner Catherine rolled her eyes when he claimed never to be stressed, and sighed, 'It's very demanding to work his long hours. He may suddenly decide to do some winemaking operation at 11 pm.' He admits himself that he sleeps for only four or so hours a night, restlessly essaying new techniques and improvisations. 'I can't help always looking for something different. I've done it ever since I was a child', he told me, eyes sparkling above his Father Christmas white beard. Certainly I cannot remember meeting another Bordeaux wine producer who received me in an open black silk shirt and carefully pressed jeans, nor one who wandered off in the opposite direction when I arrived at what he calls 'my modest farm'.

His property in the under-populated northern Médoc looks more like a hillbilly encampment than a conventional wine château. There are breeze-block sheds, cylindrical tanks on their sides rusting at one end, larger steel upright tanks in the open air casually jacketed with what looks like silver foil blankets. But there are certainly precedents for excellent wine emerging from such unsophisticated settings. Sean Thackrey's California wines and Château Rayas in Châteauneuf-du-Pape spring immediately to mind. And I couldn't help noticing the hygiene-conscious footbaths next to the front door.

Tramier landed in Marseille from Algeria in 1964 and went initially to study in Montpellier, where his sister lived. He came to Bordeaux to look at a possible little wine property in the far east of the Entre-Deux-Mers region that a fellow pied noir, a lawyer, had found for him but threw dice for it with another potential buyer and lost. Further pied noir contacts found him three hectares of vines in Begadan (he now has 37 around this village and the next), which he worked half and half with the previous owner to begin with. By 1975 he had established his very particular way of working but, he added wistfully, 'I'll never be integrated here. I'd like to return to Algeria one day, and I wouldn't view it through the eyes of today but with all my childhood memories. I'm ill at ease here.'

I suspect he'd be ill at ease wherever he was. He seems determined to question the status quo and is one of those rare wine producers who really does seem to be making wine for himself rather than for the market or the wine critics. Although he is constantly fiddling with it, his basic recipe is to grow the grapes - mainly old, small-berried Merlot with about 35% Cabernet Sauvignon and 5% Cabernet Franc, predictably the reverse of the usual proportions in the Médoc. For the last 15 years he has averaged only three sprayings a year in the vineyard, a record low for the damp climate of Bordeaux. And, while for most of his neighbours the harvest is usually over by the end of September, he rarely picks (by machine; he had one of the first back in 1980) before the end of October. The picture below shows him, and his mechanical harvester and dogs, in the vines on 26 Oct this year.

He somehow manages, however, to keep these extremely ripe grapes completely healthy. He then keeps the fermenting juice on the skins for months rather than days or weeks, exposing the young wine outside to the cold of winter and the warmth of summer. Last June he had only just taken his spicy 2009 off the skins.

As you may imagine, his wines taste very unlike the rather austere, light-bodied norm for the northern Médoc - the flavours are all bumptious, frank, tail-wagging fruit without any oak make-up. This has caused a certain amount of friction with the local wine authorities, who have apparently told him, 'Monsieur Tramier, there are 900 growers here. There is only one that disturbs us: you. Your wine is good but it does not belong in the Médoc.' It caused quite a stir locally when his 2005 won a gold medal.

I asked Tramier how he decides when to bottle. He frowned. 'Some vintages I keep, others I bottle. There are no rules here.' The director of the official laboratory in Pauillac, who introduced me to Tramier, told me later, 'he sells only when he needs the money. Then he tends to contact me, always in a hurry: "can I meet you by the roadside somewhere so you can analyse my samples and then I can start bottling".'

I see that currently his 2001 vintage is being sold at Auchan supermarkets in France, and his other label ('*mon petit chou chou*') Ch Lafitte-Tramier is also available according to Wine-searcher.com, so there is clearly some commercial process involved, but when I asked how he sold his wine, I was told, 'Money is not my aim. Harvests I like, money not so much. *Fric*? I live very modestly. When you arrive in France with nothing, you learn to do that. I don't lack anything, which is why I allow myself these fantasies of making wine.'

Bordeaux is too often seen as exclusively a region of grand wine, high prices and predictable people, but there are vivid exceptions too.

Ch St-Saturnin 2009 Médoc 16.5 Drink 2015-25
First cuve: Rich yet perfumed nose – less exotic and sweet than the 2005. Very sultry and almost Californian in its ripeness. Amazingly sweet and luscious, with masses of alcohol. Quite a hot finish. Very spicy.
Second cuve: Gentle and fragrant, very sweet but with more acidity than the first sample and perhaps a little more structure. Fine and firm.

Ch St-Saturnin 2005 Médoc 16 Drink 2008-18
This is the wine that won Tramier his gold medal. It is SO rich, almost over the top, and spicy that I thought it had some bizarre oak element. Prunes and chestnut notes with massive ripeness.

Ch St-Saturnin 2000 Médoc 17 Drink 2007-20
Quite rich and dense, yet beautifully balanced – more intense than many 2000s.

Ch St-Saturnin 1975 Médoc 17 Drink 1990-2015
From tank. Dark and bright with a vibrant yellowing rusty rim. This has been kept, with minimal sulphur, exposed to cold and heat over the years, in a 2,000-litre tank under a roof outside. ‘As long as the tank is full,’ says Tramier, ‘it’s just like a big bottle.’ Lovely stuff, much livelier than most bottled 1975s! Only very slightly aged, just drying a little bit on the end but with great intensity on the mid palate.