Farewell Paul Pontallier

See also these heart-rending Tributes to Paul Pontallier.

There are many reasons why this year's Bordeaux primeurs tastings will be very different from usual for us scribes. Some of the more prosaic ones are outlined in Bordeaux primeurs tastings shrunk but one of the saddest omissions will be that there will be no Paul Pontallier at Ch Margaux. He has just been felled by the cancer that dogged the end of his particularly illustrious life. He would have been 60 this year.

From a local wine-growing family, Paul arrived at first growth Ch Margaux in time for the property's famously successful 1983 vintage, virtually straight from the oenology faculty of the University of Bordeaux, where he did valuable work on the influence of oak. Managing director of the property just seven years later, he was always one of the more academically minded of Bordeaux's winemaking elite (see Richard on Discovery and disclosure at Ch Margaux, for
instance).

Denis Dubourdieu is another but, unlike Dubourdieu and a host of winemaking consultants, Paul Pontallier was faithful to one property and one proprietor. The relationship between him and Ch Margaux's owner, near-contemporary Corinne Mentzelopoulos, was a perennial pleasure to behold. Instead of any trace of social stratification was enormous mutual respect. He did no toadying; she took (takes) a more active part in presenting the primeurs than any first-growth proprietor other than Prince Robert of Luxembourg at Haut-Brion. But so little does she throw her weight around that Richard mistook her for a tourist when he went to taste the 2013s. (There are signs that the relationship between the Philippes at Mouton may follow the same admirable pattern.)

Initially Paul Pontallier worked closely with the Mentzelopoulos's advisor Professor Émile Peynaud – indeed it was probably Peynaud who recommended Pontallier for the job. But Paul grew into the shoes of the public face of Ch Margaux, being responsible not just for making the wine but also for presenting the property around the world – always neat, debonair, polite rather than pushy, with impeccable English and indomitable enthusiasm.

Indeed such was his enthusiasm for each vintage that we tasters in the Spurrier-Robinson team used to measure the quality of the vintage by how high he rose on tiptoe when describing it. For him, no vintage was ever a disappointment, and the quality of Ch Margaux's old Cabernet Sauvignon vines beyond compare. See, for example, this video of Paul describing the white wine harvest of 2009 and these notes from a 2008 masterclass at Christie's in London presented by Corinne and Paul. But if you put Pontallier in our search box, you will find a host of references.

Paul was one of the more direct communicators in Bordeaux. He may not have dwelt on the vicissitudes of the growing season, but he was not a gossip and I never heard him criticising others. I was always delighted if placed next to him at a table. You knew the conversation would be interesting but without any hidden agenda.

One of my earliest memories of him was when he and his first wife presented an array of vintages of Ch Margaux at one of the winter wine weekends I hosted at Gleneagles Hotel in Scotland in the 1980s. I think it was his wife whose notion of Scotland included quite so much sports gear; it certainly resulted in record amounts of luggage. I have a vision of them striding off over the heather in tweed knickerbockers.

Tweed played such an important part in Paul's wardrobe that I cannot help visualising him in a neat tweed jacket, as witness this portrait of him by Jon Wyand. He was handsome, boyish, and always impeccably dressed - just as he was when we were all together at the Cool Climate Wine Symposium in Auckland in 1988. I have particularly fond memories of a sunny day together on Waiheke Island.

Travel was an important part of Paul's work and I'm glad he had his own foreign adventure - with partners Bruno Prats, Felipe de Solminihac and Ghislain de Montgolfier - in Viña Aquitania in Chile. He was able to apply his winemaking sophistication and expertise to some completely unknown terroir – which doubtless taught him a thing or two too.

He did his bit for Bordeaux generically. I remember his spearheading a small group from Bordeaux at the end of the 1980s deputed to explain to us world-weary UK wine writers just how much winemaking techniques in Bordeaux had improved over the previous few years. I think he was rather miffed when we pointed out that the same thing had happened in virtually every one of the world's important wine regions too.
Ch Margaux is nothing if not a family business. Alexandra Mentzelopoulos is now very much part of the team, as is Paul's son from his first marriage Thibault, who did a predictably memorable job of representing the property in Asia. He will keep our fond memories of Paul alive, I'm sure.

Corinne Mentzelopoulos will surely feel Paul's absence particularly keenly – not least because of the relatively recent departure of Paul's deputy Philippe Bascaules for the Napa Valley. For once, I am not looking forward to our appointment to taste the latest vintage at Ch Margaux next week.